

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 16

God and Money...

The parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16 v 1 to 13)

“There was a rich man who had a manager” (v 1) – this man was a ‘manager’ of the rich man’s money or property. The manager’s boss (“the rich man”) hears that his manager is cheating him (“wasting his possessions”), and he calls him to account (v 2). “What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me?” (v 3) – when the manager realises that he will be called into account, he knows that he can never pass the scrutiny of his master. He also knows that other options are unattractive to him (“I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg”).

“So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one” (v 5) – the manager makes friends with his master’s debtors by settling their accounts for less than they actually owe. The manager, knowing he will be called to account, used his present position to prepare him for the next stage of his life. “The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness” (v 8) – while not approving of his dishonest conduct, the master did commend the manager for his shrewdness.

- What does this parable teach us about ‘the wisdom of the world’? How can money be used to provide ‘spiritual capital’ for the future? See 1 Timothy 6 v 17, 18.
- How do verses 10 to 13 show that Jesus was not condoning the manager’s dishonesty? How should material possessions be seen in perspective?

This is one of Jesus’ most controversial parables. How could Jesus use such an obviously dishonest man as an example to his disciples? It seems that God uses evil things we are familiar with to illustrate a particular point, without commending the thing itself. Other examples of this principle are when Paul used war and slavery as illustrations of the Christian life of conflict and service. Yet the dishonest manager is a praiseworthy example on several points. First, he knew he would be called to account for his life, and he took that seriously. We should similarly take seriously the idea that we will be called to account, and that idea can be a joy if we are about our Master’s business! Second, he took advantage of his present position to arrange a secure future for himself.

Jesus’ assessment is still true: “the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light” (v 8). If we pursued the Kingdom of God with the same vigour and zeal that the children of this world pursue profits and pleasure, we would live in an entirely different world. “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth” (v 9) – Jesus transfers the principle illustrated by the story of the dishonest manager to us: we need to use our present resources to plan ahead for eternity.

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much” (v 10) – in these words of Jesus, money is considered to be a ‘very little’ thing. If a person cannot be faithful in managing ‘very little’ things, how will they ever be faithful in handling great things? In verses 11 and 12, Jesus suggests that those who are leaders of God’s people must be good managers of their own money. If a person cannot be faithful before God with the money he has given them, how can they be faithful with the care of people? “No servant can serve two masters” (v 13) – Jesus is saying that serving two masters is a simple impossibility. If you think that you are successfully serving two masters, you are fooling yourself! One can *have* both money and God; but one cannot *serve* both money and God.

[MORE OVER...]

The Law and the Kingdom of God (Luke 16 v 14 to 18)

“They ridiculed him” (v 14) – the derision of the Pharisees was based on their own self-interest: they were “lovers of money”. Often we reject Jesus’ message because it’s too close to home. “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts” (v 15) – it is one thing to justify ourselves before men, because smooth words and a ‘loving’ smile can deceive people. But God knows our hearts: when we serve another master, it is impossible to be justified before God. God judges our hearts with a different set of values, “for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God”. People may honour us because of our wealth or our public display of spirituality, but God sees who we really are.

Verses 16 and 17 – the ministry of John the Baptist marked the end of the Old Testament dispensation. People from every race could now force their way into God’s kingdom – yet God’s Law remains unchanged, including the sanctity of marriage (v 18).

The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16 v 19 to 31)

“There was a rich man” (v 19) – significantly, Jesus does not present this story as a parable, and in no other parable does Jesus actually name an individual (as Lazarus is named here). We have every reason to believe that Jesus is giving us an actual ‘case history’, that he knew, because he is the man from heaven. It is also significant that most of what we know about the afterlife, about ‘Hades’ and ‘Abraham’s side’, and about ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, comes directly from the lips of Jesus, in stories such as this.

- Why did the rich man go to Hades, instead of to ‘Abraham’s side’? In what way does this story reinforce the lesson of verse 9?
- What does this story teach us about the reality of future judgment and the means of avoiding it? What should we be doing now, and why?

“The poor man died” (v 22) – Lazarus was so destitute that he did not even get a burial, but because of his devotion to God, he ends up with Abraham and all the righteous in the afterlife. We should never think that Lazarus was saved by his poverty, any more than we should think that the rich man was condemned by his wealth. Lazarus must have had a true relationship of faith with God.

“Being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side” (v 23) – now the rich man is the beggar, pleading with Lazarus for a drop of water. Again, the rich man was not in torment because he was rich. If it were so, then it would be a contradiction for Abraham to be shown as righteous, because he was far richer than the rich man could ever have been: Abraham was one of the wealthiest men of his time – see for example Genesis 13 v 2. The only sin charged to the rich man was selfishness – he lived for himself. He could say, ‘I never hurt anybody,’ but living purely for yourself is enough to condemn you. This story is in contrast to the parable of the dishonest manager: the rich man did not use his wealth to prepare for his eternal future.

Jesus describes Hades (called ‘Sheol’ in the Old Testament), which was the common abode of the dead. Some who are in Hades rest in comfort (‘Abraham’s side’), while others are in fires of torment. Hades is not the ‘lake of fire’, or what we usually think of as ‘hell’, referred to in Revelation 20 v 15, what Jesus referred to as ‘outer darkness’, and called ‘Gehenna’ in the Old Testament. Instead, Hades is a ‘waiting place’ until the day of final judgment (Revelation 20 v 11 to 13). But since Jesus’ finished work on the cross, there is no ‘waiting’ for believers who die – they go directly into the presence of the Lord (see Luke 23 v 42, 43; 2 Corinthians 5 v 6 to 8).

“If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (v 30) – the rich man thought that if someone came to his brothers from the dead, it would be more convincing than the God’s word (“Moses and the Prophets”), but faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10 v 17). Of course, Jesus *did* rise from the dead, yet even then many did not repent and believe the gospel.