

In Luke 16, the Lord raises the subject of our attitude to money and wealth. The chapter is made up largely of two stories. Clearly the Lord regards the way we handle our money as a serious matter. He does not claim money is evil or sinful in itself, but, in both stories, stresses that possessions and money bring with them great responsibility. On the one hand, **the use of our money opens up the possibility of eternal reward and blessedness**; on the other hand, **it exposes us to great danger and peril**. Both stories start with exactly the same expression - 'There was a certain rich man', vv. 1, 19.

But the stories are very different.² They differ in : (i) **their nature**. The first bears every mark of being a parable. The second does not. Not only because one of the characters has a name – 'Lazarus' – which you find in no parable, but because it is not - as a parable *is* - an earthly picture of heavenly and eternal realities – as is the case, for example, with the stories of the sower, the shepherd, the prodigal and the steward which come before. This is anything but an earthly picture – for no less than 10 of its 13 verses take us into realm of the after-life.

The stories differ also in terms of (ii) **their audience**. The first was spoken chiefly for the benefit of the disciples, v. 1. The second was spoken for the benefit of the Pharisees, who had overheard the first story, vv. 14-15.

And, finally, differ in terms of (iii) **their substance**. The first is concerned with a rich man and a steward, with the focus on the actions of the steward. The second is concerned with a rich man and a poor man, with the focus on the destiny of the rich man. The first tells of the benefit and gain which people can secure for themselves if they use their wealth properly. The second tells of the disastrous consequences and loss people can suffer if they abuse their wealth. The first ends blissfully in eternal habitations/tabernacles, v. 9. The second, for all the rich man's flamboyant lifestyle, ends horrendously in torments and flame, vv. 23-24.

Parable, vv. 1-8a.

Verse 1. *Disciples*. The words 'He said also' suggest the parable was spoken at the same time as the parables of chapter 15; ie that our Lord's audience included tax-collectors, 15. 1. And the lesson Jesus taught was perhaps particularly appropriate and relevant to them because they were exposed more than most to temptations of covetousness, dishonesty and the hoarding of possessions. Remember that it was a newly *converted* chief tax-collector, Zacchaeus, who said, 'the half of my possessions I give to the poor', 19. 8.

Although not directly addressed to *them*, the Pharisees were present throughout our Lord's telling of the story. And if the parable(s) of chapter 15 condemned their **exclusiveness** and **self-righteousness**, this parable condemned their **covetousness** and **self-indulgence**. *A certain rich man* – probably an absentee landlord – and his *steward* - one who handled his affairs; who managed his business and household for him – much as Joseph ruled over the house and goods of Potiphar. *Was accused* – the word indicating that 'the charge was brought – the complaint was lodged – with malice and hostile intent. *Wasted* - 'scattered abroad' (the word of Matt 26. 31; smite Shepherd, sheep) his possessions; ie he had squandered them. Indeed, literally, the tense is 'that he was wasting'; ie still going on at time he was accused.

Verse 2. *Called* - not as v. 5, where the steward 'called' each of his lord's debtors. Here the word means 'summoned, shouted for'. You can detect the rich man's tone of surprise and shock; 'What is this that I hear about YOU' - 'you, the one I trusted' – who I trusted so much - and with so much. He is told to close the books. 'You may be - you are not able to be steward any longer; 'you can no longer continue as steward'. The man was fired.

Verse 3. '*What shall I do?*' This is a key question in several parables in Luke; cf 'he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?', 12. 17 (foolish farmer, resolves build larger barns) and, 'then the owner of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son', 20. 13 (long-suffering vineyard-owner, resolves send beloved Son, reverence). At first, the steward was at a complete loss how to deal with the most unpleasant situation. Clearly, he knew himself to be guilty – I note that he doesn't deny the charge or complain, even to himself, of any injustice in his master's decision. Although the process of dismissal was not complete until he had drawn up the final accounts, the writing was clearly on the wall! Those accounts would serve only to confirm his dismissal. There was no question - he was being relieved of his position. There was no state help available – an clearly he had not stashed away any ill-gotten gains. Either, then, the 'wasting' of his master's goods was due to simple carelessness, incompetence and mismanagement, or, more likely, he had spent (had wasted) all that he had misappropriated 'in riotous – in prodigal – living'. That is, whereas in the previous parable, 15. 13, the son 'wasted his property' – ie his own – here the steward 'wasted (same word) his possessions' - ie his masters.

And both his present situation and his future prospects were grim in the extreme. He needn't even think about obtaining some comparable job/position elsewhere – given the circumstances of his dismissal who would ever trust or employ him?. '*My lord is taking away*' – in some ways this is the key to much of parable. His lord was in the process of doing it; ie there was short interval before he was actually out on his neck – but it was very short!

Briefly, the steward reviewed his options : *To dig?* - 'I cannot' – 'I don't have the strength' (lit). He was what we would call a white collar worker - perhaps in business life he had been happy enough to *call* a spade a spade but he certainly didn't regard himself as built to use one! Physical work and the steward simply did not agree. And *to beg?* - never. He couldn't bring himself to do that. He was in good health and so had no good reason to beg. It was not for him to stoop to be a Lazarus³. In other words, to dig was too strenuous; to beg was too humiliating. Nor it seems, did he find the prospect of starving to death particularly attractive.⁴

Verse 4. But then, he had a sudden brainwave, a great flash of inspiration. 'I've got it; *I know what I will do*'. He couldn't change the past – but he could prepare for the future. And the clever rascal hit on a most ingenious scheme which would see him all right when he was finally shown the door. But there must be no delay. He had absolutely no time to lose - hence the 'quickly', the 'hurry up' of verse 6. he had only a brief time left to him – a small window of opportunity. The steward had a few more hours in office in which to draw up the accounts - and for that terribly short period he remained his lord's legal representative – and, as such, had full power over his lord's affairs. Hence the actions of verses 5-7, although unscrupulous and under-handed, were within his legal rights. He wasn't guilty of either forgery or fraud – and he didn't expose either himself or his lord's debtors to criminal charges.

Verses 5-7. But time was of the essence. So he '*called everyone*' - lit 'each one of'; ie one by one. Jesus referred to two cases by way of example. And these transactions were clearly to be understood as representative of many more. ***The rogue had hit on a clever scheme to put his lord's debtors into his debt - and that by reducing their debts to his lord.*** His lord had sold goods to these men on credit. These men were merchants, who had given promissory notes in their own handwriting to the steward as his master's legal representative. He now proceeds to hand back to each debtor his own bill or bond - inviting him to change, to alter, the amount shown – or (just possibly) to write a new bill, which he (the steward) would then substitute for the original – higher – one. He may never have heard the sayings, 'one good turn deserves another' and 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' but he knew full well that he could rely on his favours being returned at the time he needed this - which was not very far away! And the more so if he saved the debtors significant amounts. Which he was careful to do.

And we should note that the amounts owed to his lord were far from small. Indeed, the two examples quoted by Jesus are identical to the quantities of oil and wheat which, according to Ezra 9. 22, King Artaxerxes of Persia authorised Ezra to claim from the treasurers in Palestine to defray the expenses of the temple in Jerusalem – 'one hundred measures of wheat' and 'an hundred baths of oil'. I understand that the wheat represented the rent for 100 acres – 10 times the size of an average family plot. And the oil equalled the annual yield of an extremely large olive grove. That is, the debtors in the story were large scale business clients – not ordinary individuals. These were large business debts.

Based on information from Josephus, the oil totalled 8.6 gallons, and was worth about 1,000 denarii. That is, the steward's action saved the debtor some 500 denarii, about 18 months salary. The second merchant owed one hundred measures (cors, homers) of wheat. I gather that this would have been worth between 2,500 and 3,000 denarii. In which case, he saved this debtor between 500-600 denarii. We can hardly miss the differing discounts in verses 6-7 ; namely, 50% and 20%. But, although the percentage reduction was very different, the value of the reduction was about the same in both cases. Presumably the steward took into account each debtor's circumstances - and therefore his ability to repay – not only his lord – but himself in due course.

His action was unscrupulous, devious, dishonest – but *it was ingenious*. There is no doubt the rogue had his head screwed on. This was certainly the way to make friends! This was certainly the way to feather his nest for the time when he would be out of a job!

We note for now his aim – that by the careful use of his lord's goods in the short interval remaining to him, to place each of these men under obligation to him, so that in due time they would see him alright – so that they would *take him in* when his master *threw him out!*

Verse 8a. 'The lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely' – 'the *Lord*' – ie the servant's master, as in vv. 3, 5 (twice). The crook was '*commended*', ie complimented, praised, applauded, because he had showed himself wise, shrewd, astute. The master in the story had at least to respect his steward's commendable foresight and prudence.

It may seem hard to believe that the master should commend the man in such circumstances. But I have read that, more recently, after the English civil war in the seventeenth century, Irishmen were given large estates in Ireland by Parliament. But when Charles II restored to throne, they lost everything. One of these, Colonel Thomas Blood, managed to gain the confidence of the man who guarded the crown jewels in the Tower of London. And on 9 May 1671, Colonel Blood overpowered the man and stuffed the royal crown and sceptre into a sack. He managed to get out of the jewel house but was stopped before he was able to leave the Tower. He was convicted of his crime but manages to secure an audience with King Charles. The King was so impressed with Colonel Blood's initiative and enterprise that he not only pardoned him but gave him back most of his land in Ireland. Here too, Jesus says, the rich man was suitably impressed by his servant's wisdom.

And I note that Jesus makes it very clear that the praise was reserved for the steward's shrewdness and wise use of his opportunity, and that the commendation did not extend to his unfaithfulness and dishonesty; both of which Jesus roundly condemns later – 'He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much', v. 10. But before we rush on, we need to remind ourselves that ***the steward's wisdom consisted in taking advantage of the resources and means which belonged to someone else - and which were at his disposal for a short time only - to accomplish his own end and purpose - to secure some long-term benefit for himself when the inevitable day of reckoning came.***

The Lord's comments, vv. 8b-13.

Verse 8b. '*Children of this world* = Sons of this age' (in contrast to the sons of light – a description of Jesus' followers). These are those who David describes in Psa.17. 14 as 'the men of the world, which have their portion in this life'. The Lord was clearly deeply saddened that such men were considerably wiser in seizing their opportunities and using their wealth to secure their own ends ***in this world***, than were His own followers in seizing their opportunities and using their wealth to further their interests ***in the world to come***. 'In their generation' by which I understand the Lord to mean 'in their dealings with one another', the men of the world are very quick to adopt the best way of attaining their earthly objectives.

Men who have no interest in heaven or in God are foolish enough in the choice of their goals – but they are sharp and wise enough when it comes to achieving their goals - to getting what they want, just as the unjust steward did. We who claim to aim for higher things have so much to learn from them.

Verse 9. The verse is couched throughout in the language of parable. '*I (emphatic) say to you*' – in contrast to the words of the earthly lord He had reported in verse 8. '*Make yourselves friends*' – don't use your wealth to build larger barns as the rich fool, 12. 18, or to build some sumptuous palace as the rich man later in the second part of the chapter, 16. 19. Invest your riches rather in works of mercy - in providing aid to the poor - in helping the Lazaruses of this world. '*Of*' - ie 'by means of', 'out of', 'with the help of'. '*Unrighteous mammon*'; ie riches, money – perhaps described in this particular way because it is often acquired *unjustly*, and hoarded in an *unjust* manner by *unjust* men.

'That when *it fails*' - not 'when you fail'. For our riches and our money will one day fail each one of us; 'for we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we will take nothing out', 1Tim. 6. 7. And the Lord requires that we put to good use now that which will one day necessarily fail us - that we might one day reap the benefit in heaven. That is, to turn to our own and eternal advantage the same wealth which the unrighteous use - in the very same way as the wise steward. '*That they may receive*' - to be understood and interpreted, I suggest, as 'that you may be received'. Compare, for instance, Luke 12. 20 where 'God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you', is literally, 'this night they shall require your soul of you'. '*Eternal habitations*' = eternal tabernacles or tents. 'Eternal' - in contrast, I suggest, not so much to the temporary homes of the debtors in the story which the prudent steward secured for himself, as with our earthly goods which we have available for a short time only.

I do not doubt that some of you at least are familiar with the saying of Jim Elliott, one of five missionaries martyred in Ecuador about 50 years ago – 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose'. But I guess that few if any of you know of very similar words written by Augustine some 1,600 years before – 'Give those things to the poor which you cannot keep, that you may receive those things which you cannot lose'.⁵

Verse 10. Jesus states a general principle or maxim; 'He who is faithful in what is least ... ' ie in that which is of relatively little value or importance in itself. In the context, he says this perhaps to meet the possible objection that the use of one's money is far too trivial a matter to be of interest to God in the day of reckoning and account. Not so, says Jesus. His words also guard against any possible misunderstanding - He was certainly not commending the *unfaithfulness* of the steward. The steward's shrewdness was demonstrated in his unfaithfulness and unrighteousness (he is characterised by the Lord as 'unjust', v. 8, probably in sense of dishonest) ... our wisdom is to be demonstrated in our faithfulness and righteousness in the use of our wealth and goods.

Verse 11-12. Bring us to the specific application of verse 10 as far as our use of our money is concerned. Make no mistake - the improper (in this context, the selfish, the self-indulgent) use of earth's possessions and wealth will disqualify us and unfit us for heaven's riches (called here the 'true' riches, in the sense of the real, genuine riches). Again, our Lord says, 'if you are not trustworthy with someone else's possessions, who will give you possessions of your own?' And I need to be reminded constantly that all that I have, I have on loan and on trust only.

It is true that, in one sense, what I have is mine. I am thinking of the words of Peter to Ananias in Acts 5, 'While it remained, was it not your own; and after it was sold, was it not in your power?', Acts 5. 4. But in another – and deeper – sense, all I have now belongs to the Lord. Remember the prayer of David, when he and the princes of Israel gave most liberally to support the work of God, 'who am I, and who are my people, That we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come *from you*, And *of your own* we have given you', 1 Chron. 29. 14. In the final analysis, nothing I have in this temporary and passing world is my own – it is only lent to me by God on trust for the time being. I shall certainly take none of it with me when I leave this world. And I have to ask myself, just how much *heavenly* wealth I laid up for myself in 2006 – and how much am I going to lay up in 2007?

Verse 13. Jesus finishes by sounding a loud and solemn warning – by drawing attention to the very real danger that riches - which *can* be a very good servant, v. 9 - can equally be a very bad master. The key issue He raises with me this morning is, Do **I** possess **them** or do **they** possess **me**? Referring to 'mammon' – the Aramaic word for riches – the Lord insists, '**You can serve God with mammon, v. 9, but you cannot serve God and Mammon, v. 13!**'

And I note the two different words He used which are here translated 'serve'. The 'household servant', He says, cannot 'serve **as a bondservant or slave**' two masters. Yes, he *can* be **a domestic servant** for two masters (working part of his time for each) but he *cannot* be absolutely at the disposal of two masters, which is what is implied by 'serving as a slave'. He will, necessarily, love one more than the other - or will, at the very least, be more devoted to the one than the other.⁶ We can no more serve two masters than we can walk in two directions at one time.

Let's not fool ourselves – our stewardship of our money doesn't mean simply giving God a tenth of our income and then doing as we please with the rest! I was arrested sometime ago by something I read in a book by Warren Wiersbe – 'The only thing some of us know about sacrifice is how to spell the word!'⁷

Make no mistake, God demands the undivided loyalty of His people. At a conference between the Northern and Southern states of America during the war of 1861-66, representatives of the Southern states explained what concessions they were prepared to make by way of territory, provided that they could secure the independence of the rest. More and more offers were made but each met with steadfast refusal. Finally, Abraham Lincoln placed his hand on that portion of the map which covered all the Southern states and delivered his ultimatum, 'Gentlemen, this Government must have the whole'.⁸ He knew that the constitution of the United States was at an end if any part, no matter how small, was allowed to be independent of the rest. That constitution allowed for no exceptions. It was either kept in its entirety or it was not kept at all. Such is the claim, my brothers and sisters, which God makes on us. He *will not* share us with mammon. His Government must have the whole!

Verse 14. It is clear that Jesus' teaching hit the Pharisees hard. It touched a raw nerve and they 'derided Him' – they 'turned up noses at' Him, lit. They sneered and ridiculed His teaching that His followers should be benevolent and generous with their wealth. But then they were 'money-lovers' – not the normal word translated 'covetous'. Indeed this word occurs only once again in the entire New Testament. [Of the qualification of elders in 1 Tim. 3. 2 – 'not money-lovers', translated in the KJV as 'not covetous'.] Alas, the Pharisees utterly failed to use their money to make friends of the poor and disadvantaged. And our Lord proceeds to portray them as the rich man in his *next* story – as a rich man who does not rob or mistreat the poor man – nor even drive him away from his ornamental gate, but who stands condemned for his indifference and neglect.⁹

In Luke 16 then, our Lord raises a very solemn issue with each of us, and, frankly, we shut our eyes/ears to our Lord's teaching at our peril. The Lord has given some of us much wealth ... may He give us the wisdom and the will to make the right and proper use of it – to use our money with an eye on eternity.¹⁰

Footnote

¹ Fuller and tidier notes can be accessed at http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2843 and http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2868.

² The idea common to both is that of the relation between the use made of earthly goods and man's future beyond the tomb. The steward represents the owner who is able to secure his future by a wise use of those transitory goods; the wicked rich man, the owner who compromises his future by neglecting this just employment of them. (Godet)

³ Although it is a different word in v. 20.

⁴ Of the two courses which present themselves to his mind, the first, digging, and the second, begging, are equally intolerable to him, the one physically, the other morally.

⁵ Source : Thomas Watson, 'The Beatitudes', under heading, 'Blessed are the merciful', fourth paragraph under 'Dives denied Lazarus a crumb of bread, and Lazarus was denied a drop of water'.

Interestingly, Philip Henry, who lived back in the 17th century, was credited with a very similar saying. In the biography which he wrote of his father, the notable Bible commentator Matthew Henry recalled his father's acts of charity, adding that he used to say, 'He is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep, when he is sure to be recompensed with that which he cannot lose'. (Quoted from 'The Life of Mr. Philip Henry', included in 'The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry', published by Joseph Ogle Robinson in 1833, page 35. (Available online at Google Books.))

Augustine (the so-called 'Church Father'), clearly with Luke 16 in the background, had written not dissimilar words: 'Give those things to the poor which you cannot keep, that you may receive those things which you cannot lose'.

Was Jim Elliot, I wonder, familiar with either (or both) of these earlier sayings? Certainly his linked quotation of Luke 16 verse 9 suggests most strongly that, when he penned his now-famous saying, he (in company with both Augustine and Philip Henry) had in mind particularly the eternal benefits to be 'gained' by the believer from giving to the poor.

⁶ Bleek justly observes, that the absence of the article before ἕνα in the second proposition seems to forbid our taking this pronoun as the simple repetition of the preceding τὸν ἕνα in the first; he therefore gives it a more general sense, the one or the other of the two preceding, and places the whole difference between the two parallel propositions in the graduated meaning of the different verbs employed, holding to being less strong than loving, and despising less strong than hating. Thus: 'He will hate the one and love the other; or at least, he will hold more either to the one or other of the two, which will necessarily lead him to neglect the service of the other'.

⁷ Quoted in 'Be Courageous', Luke 14-24, by Warren Wiersbe, page 39.

⁸ See ... <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=AS18950323.2.49.24&l=mi&e=-----10--1----0-->

⁹ In the world to come, Jesus says, there is a great gulf fixed between the rich man and the poor man, but in the present world the poor man is so near that the rich man almost tripped over him every day on way in and out of his house.

¹⁰ 'Treasures in heaven are laid up when treasures on earth are given up'.