

February 5, 2023

THE OPPORTUNITY AND DANGER THAT MONEY PROVIDES

Luke 16

*(1 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)*

We've been going through Luke's gospel over a number of months, taking a break after the seventh chapter and then again after the fifteenth chapter, and so we come back to it today. But we've not been going through the book only looking at a paragraph at a time, but taking larger sections—as we're doing today, looking at all of chapter 16. One reason that's been our approach is because I've wanted us to see Luke's organizing pattern. After all, Luke tells us in the opening verses of his gospel that he's writing an orderly account of Jesus, his life, and ministry. And we've noted throughout that in saying "orderly," Luke doesn't necessarily mean chronological. Mainly, it seems that Luke means that he's ordered Jesus' teaching and events in his ministry in a thematic way—grouping certain stories and teachings together that all have a similar theme. And it is oftentimes only when you back up from the small details a bit and look at some larger sections of the book that you see this ordering pattern that Luke intends.

Let me show you what I mean. When you look at chapter 16 at first glance, you can think to yourselves, "Why would we look at all of these paragraphs together?" After all, they seem greatly disconnected. The chapter starts out with a parable about a shrewd money manager, and then some instruction about serving God rather than money. But then, we have Jesus rebuking the Pharisees, teaching about the law and the kingdom of God, giving instructions concerning divorce and adultery, and then telling another parable.

It can feel like these issues are all separated and you should probably spend a minimum of four sermons on this chapter: one each on the parables, one about the Pharisees and the nature of the law, and another diving into the details of divorce, remarriage, and adultery. But if you back up a bit, you can see an organizing theme that Luke is working in this chapter. The first parable begins in verse 1 with Jesus saying, "There was a rich man," and the last parable begins with Jesus saying, "There was a rich man." So, already we see Luke bracketing this section with parables that begin the exact same way, speaking about a man with great wealth. Then, in the middle section—right before Jesus addresses the Pharisees—Luke once more introduces us to them, which is odd. After all, we know the Pharisees well by this point in Luke's gospel. They've shown up repeatedly. But this time he describes them saying, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (v. 14). In other words, he's saying that Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees because they're an object lesson for us of what happens if you love money. Therefore, the entire chapter is about money.

Over and over again we'll read the terms: rich man, unrighteous wealth, riches, money, and on and on. Luke doesn't want us to miss what Jesus is focusing on in this chapter. What is it then that Jesus is showing us as he speaks of money in this chapter? I think he's showing us two things: the opportunity money provides for us and the danger that money presents to us. But I

want to first start by looking at the opportunity money provides for us because that's where Jesus starts. So, first, we'll see that money provides for us an opportunity for eternal blessing.

### **Money provides for us an opportunity for eternal blessing**

This chapter begins with Jesus telling a parable about a rich man who had a money manager. This guy would handle his master's money by loaning out money, collecting debts, and the like. Well, one day the rich man heard that his money manager was wasting his funds. We don't know what he was doing precisely, but apparently the rich man believed the report because he called his money manager in, telling him to get the books ready to hand over because he was being fired.

At that moment, the money manager found himself in a difficult place. How in the world would he provide for himself? He felt he was too weak to do manual labor like digging. He could beg, but he was too proud to do that, and knew he would just feel shame if he went that route. But then an idea came to him. While he still had the books—right before handing them over to his master—he would go to those who had borrowed from his master and write off some of what they owed.

The reason this move would be successful is that there was a principle in that culture where if someone gave a gift to you, you were obligated to show that measure of grace in return. Therefore, he thought that if he reduced their debts by a good bit, then they would feel obligated to provide for him when they found out he'd lost his job and was in need. And so that's what he did. While he still had the books, he went to his master's debtors one by one. Now, Jesus is only going to report about two debtors he went to, but the phrase "one by one" (v. 5) communicates to us that he went to all of them (or at least a great number of them). But Jesus gives an example of what he did with each of them by showing us two examples. He went to one man who owed a hundred measures of oil and told him to write down "fifty" on his bill, cutting the man's debt in half. And to another who owed a hundred measures of wheat, he told that man to take his bill and write "eighty." And so on and so forth.

Now, at first glance, my guess is that we hear that and think, "Well, even if that created an obligation from the people to help take care of the man after he got fired, surely it wouldn't be for long." I mean, how many nights do you have to let the guy stay in your guest room and eat meals with you for writing off fifty measures of oil? So, perhaps it's helpful to see exactly what this reduction in their debts amounted to. According to one commentator,<sup>1</sup> a hundred measures of oil was equivalent to over three years' worth of salary. Therefore, to reduce that by half would buy you a year and a half of housing, food, etc. And the hundred measures of wheat was equivalent to about eight to ten years' worth of salary, so that could buy you another two to three years in housing, food, etc. In other words, this man was calculated and apparently calculating how much he needed to reduce each person's debt to accumulate the obligatory return of housing and food to take care of himself for the rest of his life. This was shrewd.

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1331.

And Jesus said that when the master found out, he commended this dishonest man for his shrewdness. This isn't to say the master was happy with him; he's simply impressed. You can imagine the master saying, "Well played, you devil." In that short amount of time while he was getting the books together, the manager had used his master's money to make friends who would feel obligated to care for him for the rest of his life.

Therefore, Jesus uses this story to make a point. He's not going to commend the manager's dishonesty or the like. But he does commend the man's shrewdness. To figure out how he could use the wealth of another (his master) to provide for himself was as brilliant as it was wicked. And though Jesus doesn't applaud the man's wickedness, he does note that we should use the money that we're stewards of to the same end in making sure we're providing for ourselves in eternity. Specifically, Jesus says, "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (vv. 8-9).

Now, let me note a few things as we apply this teaching. First, by the term "unrighteous wealth," Jesus isn't saying it's money someone received by doing unrighteous things like stealing. He simply uses the phrase "unrighteous wealth" to contrast it with eternal, real wealth. It might be like saying "worldly wealth" to speak of the wealth of this age which will eventually go away as opposed to heavenly wealth which lasts forever. Second, Jesus is speaking of our worldly wealth as that which belongs to another. Jesus will make that explicit when we get to verse 12, but he tells that all the money we have actually belongs to our God who is merely letting us steward it during the days it's in our hand. Therefore, Jesus is telling us to use our worldly wealth that the Lord is allowing us to steward in this age to create blessings for ourselves in eternity. That's what he means by using our unrighteous wealth to make friends for ourselves who can receive us into eternal dwellings.

Let me give an example. When we take money and give to the church, some of that money goes to fund the salaries of the vocational pastors—Tom, Aaron, and me. The church has requested that each of us not pursue a full-time job elsewhere but give those hours of full-time labor to the ministry of the church. Therefore, valuing this work, we all give in order to compensate for the time these pastors labor. Well, one thing we've spent time laboring for is the training of our pastoral interns. One of those interns was Timothy O'Day, whom (with his wife, Haley) we sent out to Salt Lake City to plant a church. Now, let's say that this church plant sees an unbeliever come to faith, be baptized, and join the church that has been planted out in Salt Lake City. Then, after years of faithful obedience to Christ and growing in the faith, that person dies. Then, soon after that, you die.

Well, by saying that we should use our wealth to create friends to receive us into eternal dwellings, Jesus seems to picture you and me dying and that person (who came to faith and was disciplined through Christ Fellowship Church in Utah) receiving us into heaven as if to say, "I'm here because you gave unto the Lord. Your giving of money enabled ultimately me to come to

know and obey Jesus and be in eternity.” We used our worldly wealth to make a friend who would receive us into our eternal home. And that’s just one picture of the blessing that can happen as we use God’s money that we have temporarily in our possession to give unto the Lord.

Jesus pictures our money as a small thing. But despite being small, it does provide us a great opportunity. So, Jesus says in verses 10-12, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”

In other words, Jesus allows you and me to have his money so that we might prove ourselves faithful. If we are willing to use it to show our faithfulness to him—by giving to the church and the Lord’s work—then he will give us greater riches in his kingdom that will last for eternity. That is to say, money provides for us an opportunity. And every time we clinch our money tighter and tighter, refusing to allow it to be used in the Lord’s work, we’re missing an opportunity to get lasting treasure in the age to come. To use the imagery C. S. Lewis has used, we’re like a kid refusing to leave the sandbox when his parents are trying to take him to the beach for vacation. Why would we hold on tightly to what we have now—when it is going to go away eventually anyway—when we could use it to secure for ourselves riches that can last forever?

So, I want to encourage you to use your money to give unto the work of the Lord. Under the old covenant, the Lord required the people to give ten percent of their income to his work at the tabernacle and temple. In the new covenant, the training wheels have come off, and the sky is the limit. So, I think ten percent is a good baseline number. But the Lord loves a cheerful giver, and so I want to encourage you—especially as the Lord puts more money into your hands to steward—to try to increase that percentage over time. After all, by putting money into our hands, the Lord is giving us an opportunity to accumulate more and greater wealth than anything we could gain in this age. That’s the opportunity money provides. But there is also a danger money presents to us. Money presents to us the danger of pulling us away from obeying the Lord.

### **Money presents to us the danger of pulling us away from obeying the Lord**

Just as money provides an opportunity for us, it also presents a danger to us. Jesus implies the danger money presents in verses 10-12 as he suggests that we can be unfaithful with the money we have, but then he makes it explicit, saying in verse 13, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” In other words, money can be a powerful force that wants to master you and pull you away from devoting yourself to the Lord. So beware—when you have money—not to let it master you. And beware—when you don’t have money—of longing for it too deeply.

Then Luke gives us an illustration of the dangerous path money can take us down by showing us the Pharisees. In verse 14 we're introduced one more time to the Pharisees. But this time we're told that they "were lovers of money." Luke is, thus, telling us to see their love of money as a key to their thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Being lovers of money, then, they ridiculed Jesus. So Jesus, in turn, exposed them. They liked to present themselves as holy men, but really they just focused on trying to look good before men, when what looked good to men can be an abomination in the sight of God (v. 15). They loved money, and they weren't willing to serve the Lord. They are a picture of the very warning Jesus gave about not being able to serve God and money.

Now, the evidence that they weren't obeying God is seen in their denial of Jesus. I think this is the point of verses 16-17. Jesus says, "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void."

When Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets were until John, what he's saying is that the Law and the Prophets had a prophetic function of pointing us forward to the coming of Christ that culminated with John. John is the final installment of that, if you will, in that he gets to be the one who not only says, "He's coming," but "There he is," as he points to Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

And now that Christ has come, God's king has arrived. God's kingdom is here as Jesus reigns as the God-man over this world. And everyone is "being pressed to enter" this kingdom or "insistently urged to enter it," which I think is the best translation of "forces his way into it."<sup>2</sup> The king is here, and everyone is urged to bow the knee to him. That's the point. But the Pharisees won't do it. They claim to love the Law and the Prophets, but they're denying them by their refusal to believe Jesus—the one the Law and the Prophets pointed to. They're making the Law void, in essence, by denying Jesus. And Luke wants us to know that one key element in their denial of Jesus is found in their love of money.

Now, verse 18 could function one of two ways. It could function as an illustration of how they deny the intent of the Law and the Prophets by divorcing their wives to go after another and thinking they're ok. Jesus tells them that if they leave their wives to go after another woman, they need to realize that they're committing adultery. They may show a divorce certificate they handed their wife, but they need to realize that without biblical grounds the divorce is not recognizable, and so when they take another woman, they're committing adultery. So Jesus could be using this as one example of how the Pharisees aren't pursuing holiness. Or, verse 18 might serve a figurative function of showing how just as a man cannot leave his wife and go after another without committing adultery so, the law can't be divorced from its fulfillment in Christ without one denying the intent of the law altogether. Either way, Jesus' point is that the Pharisees, who love money, have denied what the law pointed to by denying Jesus and serving their worldly interests instead.

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<sup>2</sup> See David Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 661.

And then he tells them a parable to illustrate that they're like this rich man who had all that he desired and lived well in this life, while a poor man (named Lazarus) suffered in his life and was ignored by the rich man. In the story they both die, and the rich man goes to a place of torment while Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom—a picture of blessing. Now, this isn't suggesting that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven automatically. There is much left out of this story, but obviously Lazarus believed, even though he suffered in this life, and the rich man rebelled against the Lord in his unbelief, despite being really blessed in this life.

Well, as the story goes, the rich man can see into the paradise where Lazarus is with Abraham, and so he calls out to Abraham to dip his finger into water and drop it on his tongue to relieve some of his anguish. But Abraham refuses, telling him that there is a chasm between the two of them that cannot be crossed. And so the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to tell his family members so that they might repent and avoid this place of torment. But Abraham refuses, telling him, "They have Moses and the Prophets" (v. 29). Yet the man notes that this is insufficient, but they would believe if they saw someone rise from the dead. But Abraham again answers, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (vv. 29-31).

The point is obvious in regard to the Pharisees. Just as in the story Abraham tells this rich man that if one won't believe the Law and the Prophets, then they wouldn't believe even if one were to rise from the dead, Jesus is telling the same thing to the Pharisees. The Law and the Prophets point to Jesus, but they won't believe him. Nor will they believe him when he rises from the dead. They are hardened in their rebellion. And their hardened rebellion is rooted in part in their love of money.

So let this be a warning to us. Money can have a powerful pull in our lives. The desire for more and greater riches can lead us to serving money instead of serving the Lord. We see it every time someone decides he wants to work on Sunday to make a bit more money instead of gathering with the Lord's people in worship. We see it when someone refuses to be a cheerful giver unto the Lord so that they might gain greater worldly blessings for themselves. And we could use a multitude of examples of how money can turn us away from serving the Lord. But let's make sure that money isn't doing that in our lives.

And so this morning, let's take an evaluation of our lives in regards to money. Are we using money as an opportunity to make friends who'll welcome us into heaven by giving our money to the Lord's work? Or, are we allowing our love for money lead us to pull back from obeying Jesus so that we might pursue more of what this world offers us? Let's handle our money as those who know that God first gave to us by sending his Son to live, die, and be raised. And if he's given to us so fully, let's make sure that we're using what is already his anyway to pour into his work and prepare eternal blessings for ourselves. And let's proclaim our intention to that now as we come to the table. Amen.