

The Almighty Dollar **Luke 16:1-31**

This week's sermon focused on the two main and contrasting accounts in the chapter: (a) 16:1-9, the parable of the shrewd manager; and, (b) 16:19-26, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The chapter also contains some intervening and concluding material that commentators struggle with. Ultimately, though, all this material coheres.

Day 1: Luke 16:1-9 You can buy your way into heaven (*well, almost*)

Contemporary readers struggle with the notion that Jesus would draw a positive lesson from a negative example: a corrupt business manager is terminated but, given a few days to clean out his desk, he uses the time to cheat his boss in order to secure his own financial future. How is such a character a positive role model?

Of course, Jesus does not commend the initial corruption which got the man fired: he calls the servant 'dishonest'. Nor does Jesus commend the later embezzlement by which the manager secures his financial future. Instead, he commends only the manager's forward-thinking and the strategic planning: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted *shrewdly*" (16:8). In fact, in English, 'shrewdly' carries an unfortunate negative nuance: Jesus uses this same word – *phronimōs* – just a few chapters earlier, of a household manager who successfully plans and carries out his duties, so that he is found responsible at his performance review (Luke 12:42-43).

So Jesus does not commend the man's dubious ethics, but his long-term planning, his ability to anticipate a coming crisis, and his implementation of a successful strategy to address it. This, Jesus urges, is what we should imitate. We all face a performance review before we enter heaven (16:9). So we should ensure that we manage the resources under our care – including the financial resources – in such a way as to gain entrance into heaven. The old adage says about money, 'You can't take it with you.' Jesus says, in effect, 'But you can send it on ahead.' How much of your income goes toward securing a prosperous future, and how much toward securing a prosperous eternity?

Day 2: Luke 16:10-13 Caveat one

Jesus – and Luke – guard against drawing the wrong message from the

parable of the shrewd steward, by attaching this brief additional saying. It is united to the preceding through similar vocabulary and themes. It balances the preceding by warning against the corruption of the steward. The steward's corruption meant that the rich man would never entrust greater wealth to him. So, too, if we are unfaithful in handling money, God will not entrust us with matters of eternal significance. The steward's corruption meant that no patron would ever set him up in business for himself. So, too, if we are unfaithful in handling the money that God has entrusted to us, God will not give us eternal reward. These principles are commonsensical in the business world; Jesus asserts that they apply no less in the spiritual world.

How do these principles apply in the current context? First, as already noted, they guard against our inferring from the preceding parable that we can be dishonest in our handling of money, and still be commended by God or get into heaven. Secondly, they reinforce the lesson of the preceding parable that judicious use of money facilitates our entrance into heaven. If we handle money properly, God will entrust us with eternal responsibility. If we are trustworthy in handling his investments, God will grant us eternal rewards. How might you use your money for eternity?

Day 3: Luke 16:13 Caveat two

For Jesus to draw a parallel between money management and spiritual service of God gives rise to another potential misapplication: that we can simultaneously pursue both money and God. Jesus here makes a pun on his preceding parable to preclude this misunderstanding.

In the ancient world, household manager's were often trusted slaves, as was the manager in this parable ('master' or 'lord', 16:3,5[2x],8). So, Jesus warns his followers – and us – that in reality, one cannot serve two masters; we cannot devote ourselves both to money and to God.

This clarification prevents a potential misunderstanding, as though business managers can devote their full efforts to producing profits, while at the same time serving Jesus. Management, like any other career, is not the goal of life, but only a secondary function. The goal is to serve God, with both the time and the funds that he has entrusted to our care. We cannot serve both God and money: devotion to the one breeds low regard for the other. We have to make a choice; let us make the good one.

Day 4: Luke 16:14-18 Interlude: Regime change

At first glance – at least in English – these verses could seem to introduce a new topic altogether, but four factors link them together: (i) the characterization of the Pharisees as ‘lovers of money’ (v14) recalls the preceding; (ii) their description as ‘justifying’ themselves (v15) comes from the same root as ‘righteous’ and ‘unrighteous’ in the parable (vv8,9,10[2x],11); (iii) after this interlude, Jesus tells a second parable on the topic of money (vv19-26); and (iv) after that second parable, Jesus resumes discussion of the Law and Prophets (vv27-31). So Luke clearly intends these four passages – parable, interlude, parable, interlude conclusion – to interact with each other.

The issue here is religious authority: the Pharisees sneer at Jesus, and he picks up their challenge. His rebuttal consists of three points: (a) he challenges their motives (they love money, and others’ approval; God knows their hearts, and his values are different than theirs, v15); (b) the former age of Law and prophets finds its fulfillment in him (vv16-17); and, (c) employing a maxim from divorce and remarriage, they have so wed themselves to the old age, that it would require a metaphorical divorce and remarriage to wed themselves to the new.

What does this have to say to us, who are no longer enamored with Pharisees and do not take our spiritual cues from them, at a time long after they have ceased to exist? If we cared about the Old Testament (!), it would matter. But for most of us, a more relevant parallel is the attempt by every age to critique Jesus, and either disregard or reshape whatever meets their disapproval. This goes on both outside the church, with his opponents, and inside the church, with those uncomfortable about some of what he said (mostly, in the current climate, his teaching about the final judgment). If Jesus had little regard for first-century opponents whose objections derived from the Law (albeit improperly interpreted or applied), how much less regard he would have – and we should have – for twenty-first century opponents whose objections derive from personal subjectivity.

Day 5: Luke 16:19-26 You can hoard your way into hell

The parable of Lazarus (not the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11) and the rich man portrays a desperately poor man, begging alms outside the estate of a filthy rich anonymous guy. (Luke shows his feelings toward both classes, by providing a name for the beggar, but not for the rich man!) The poor man died and went to the blessings of heaven;

the rich man died and went to the sufferings of hell. Yet both were children of Abraham (i.e., Jews, God's people)! Why? Because (in a theme which scholars call 'eschatological reversal'), heaven redresses earthly imbalances: the selfish rich reverse places with the spiritual poor; the latter make it into heaven (not simply because they were poor in this life), while the latter are consigned to hell.

What does this say to us? It reassures us that justice will come to the Wall Street mugs who pocketed millions in bonuses while driving the country and the world to the brink of financial ruin. It warns executives, who often make 60-100 times as much as entry-level workers, of impending danger, if they spend all their money on themselves. And it reminds us to be generous – albeit also wise – in caring for the poor. (By the way, social concerns conference is coming up in another month.)

Day 6: Luke 16:27-31 Postlude: Regime continuity

After this second parable, Luke – or Jesus – returns to the theme of his interlude after the first parable. Earlier, the Pharisees represented the old regime, now superseded by the reign of God and the coming of Jesus. But, Jesus hastened to point out, though the Pharisees claimed the authority of the Old Testament, the Law and Prophets actually witness to him. Now he returns to that same notion, or its obverse. Just as the Old Testament pointed toward him, so his teaching on money and on final judgment merely recapitulates the Old Testament. "Send someone back from the dead to warn my family, so they can escape hell!" the rich man pleads. "They have Moses and the prophets," Jesus retorts, "and that is enough." "If they do not heed Moses and the prophets, they will not heed some resurrected beggar" (15:27-31). And, true to his prediction, most of the religious leadership did not believe in Jesus, even after his resurrection.

While this principle – if they do not obey Moses and the prophets, they will not obey someone risen from the dead – applies broadly to repentance from sin and conversion to Christ, in this context it must also apply as well particularly to repentance for greed and to apathy toward the poor. While few of us are wealthy in comparison to the top 1% of Americans, we are spectacularly wealthy by the standards of many countries. Jesus does not call us to impoverish ourselves, but he does call us to consider how we might live more simply, so that others might simply live. And he does warn that if we are extravagantly comfortable in this life, we may be equally miserable in the next.