

Luke 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 16. He also said to the disciples, There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.

And the manager said to himself, What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management people may receive me into their houses.

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, How much do you owe my master? He said, A hundred measures of oil. He said to him, Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.

Then he said to another, And how much do you owe? He said, A hundred measures of wheat. He said to him, Take your bill, and write eighty. The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, for 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. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.

[1 : 2 0] 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?

No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. 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. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

[2 : 2 1] There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things.

But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets.

[3 : 38] Let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

The parables of chapter 16 of Luke are some of the trickiest of all. There is a lot here to reward closer attention, though. Jesus is still speaking in the context set by chapter 15 verses 1 to 2, where the scribes and the Pharisees grumbled about the fact that he was eating with sinners.

And he will continue to speak into that sort of context until chapter 17 verse 10. While he is more directly addressing his disciples, as we see in verse 1, the Pharisees are also listening in, as becomes apparent in verse 14.

In the parable of the unjust steward, it is important to keep in mind that Jesus is praising his shrewdness, not his morality. This steward would have been responsible for managing his master's estate in his absence, sorting out rents and the like.

Reference to squandering might suggest some connection with the parable of the lost son that's proceeding. The steward hasn't been faithful to his master, and now he faces the crisis time, imminent removal from his position.

[4 : 52] What is he to do? And the steward comes up with quite an ingenious scheme. While he is about to lose his position, apart from his master, no one else knows this yet. So he goes around all his master's debtors and reduces their debts.

This would make him a hero in the neighbourhood, and his master would appear to be generous and good. The master is also now put in something of a bind. He can't easily remove the steward from his position or recover full debts, without appearing grasping or courting public disfavour.

Even if he removed the steward from his position, the steward would be welcomed by people in the neighbourhood, who appreciated that he had taken a concern for their interests in their debts with his master.

The steward was accused of wasting his master's goods. So there is a distinct possibility that he was raising the rents. Perhaps the reduced rents were largely taken from his unjust cut.

He had been placing heavy burdens upon the people. What is the point of this parable? I believe the Pharisees and the scribes are in view here. The Pharisees and the scribes are unjust stewards.

[5 : 56] They have been squandering God's riches, not managing his house well, laying heavy burdens upon the people, and the time for their accounting to their master is just about to come. They are now faced with a choice similar to that of the unjust steward.

Will they double down on their injustice? Or will they use that brief remaining window of opportunity of their stewardship to take emergency action to prepare for their future? And the action that Jesus implies that they should take is that of getting on the right side of their master's servants and debtors before it is too late, using the remaining time and authority that they have to give to the poor and take concern for the burdens that are placed upon the poor and the vulnerable of Israel.

In this parable, as in the parable that comes later in this chapter, the rich man of Lazarus, the relationship between rich and powerful religious leaders and the poor and indebted of the population is really highlighted.

Of course, unlike the shrewd steward, the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers were oblivious to their predicament and they remained unjust. The scribes and the Pharisees have not been faithful with the old covenant least, and so God will not entrust them with the new covenant riches.

He will remove them from their office. Jesus is clearly accusing the money-serving Pharisees of abusing their power for the sake of dishonest gain from the poor. There is a change in the world order afoot, and people are pressing into the kingdom, and the Pharisees must hurry or be left out.

[7 : 22] And the use of money is especially important as a theme here. If, as a matter of urgency, they gave to the poor, they would be lending to the Lord and building up treasure in heaven before they are to be finally removed from their position and their power.

Investing their money in such a manner would make it possible for them to be welcomed into eternal dwellings. And Jesus draws our attention to the importance of money in this picture. Money has become a master to these people.

It's a sort of idolatry that they have committed themselves to. Our powers place us under their power. Our liberties take liberties with us. Our technologies can often render us subject to them.

We can think that the economy makes us rich, while enslaving ourselves to the cause of its continual growth. It preoccupies our attention. We become fixated upon it. Jesus wants his disciples to see the danger of money, the way that money can become a master of people, and the way that ultimately that master can lead people to destruction.

Jesus directly rebukes the Pharisees. They present themselves as righteous before men, but God knows their hearts. And the testimony of the law and the prophets led up to John the Baptist. But since John the Baptist, the gospel is being proclaimed and people are pressing into the kingdom.

[8 : 37] The Pharisees need to recognise what is happening. The law is not going to be overridden by the kingdom, but will be validated, confirmed and fulfilled. Why is there a reference to divorce here?

It seems to me that the implication is that the religious leaders were abusing their role as guardians of the law, to exploit the poor and to gain wealth, but also to loosen God's standards of marital faithfulness and sexual sin in their favour.

As we see elsewhere in Jesus' challenging of the scribes and the Pharisees, they use technicalities to undermine the intent of the law. For instance, people divorcing in order to marry someone else.

That is quite manifestly a form of adultery. But yet, being able to do it under the guise of legality dulls people's sense of the sin that is taking place. In contrast to the Pharisees' nullification of the law by their tradition and their practice, Jesus is going to fulfil and confirm the law.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, with which this chapter ends, should probably not be read as a literal account of the post-mortem state. Rather, it is using a particular picture of the post-mortem state as a parable of something else.

[9 : 43] The rich man in the parable is clothed in purple and fine linen. This clothing should probably remind us of the priesthood, as we see in Exodus chapter 28 and elsewhere. Lazarus, on the other hand, is like the leprous outcast.

Lazarus and the rich man are sharply contrasted in their dress, in their food, and in the place where they live. And the deaths of the rich man and Lazarus possibly refer to the end of the old order and the bringing in of the kingdom, or at least they anticipated on the near horizon.

Lazarus is now welcomed, and the rich man finds himself excluded and seeking the mercy of the poor man. Lazarus, however, is not the centre of this parable. He's someone who doesn't really do anything at all.

He's passive for most of the story. Whereas Abraham and the rich man are the active parties. Lazarus mostly serves as a foil against which the reversal that the rich man experiences and the utter finality of the state that he ends up in can be described more aptly.

He also addresses Abraham directly, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to do something for him. Some have suggested that this gives a clue as to the importance of Lazarus as a figure.

[10 : 52] Lazarus is a form of the name Eliezer, and Eliezer was the chief servant of Abraham. And the rich man addresses Abraham as if Eliezer was his servant, to be sent to do particular tasks, whether to quench the fire of his tongue, or whether to bring the message to his brothers.

If this reading were accurate, the son of Abraham, the one who addresses Abraham's father, finds himself excluded from paradise, whereas the servant of Abraham finds himself in Abraham's bosom, as one inheriting the blessing.

When the rich man finally realises that there is no hope for him, he begs for Lazarus to be resurrected to warn his brothers. But Abraham makes clear that that is not going to help the situation.

They already have Moses and the prophets. The word is not far from them. It doesn't require someone to come back from the dead to bring it to them. It's in their mouths, and it should be in their hearts. And indeed, if they don't accept what they already have, someone coming back from the dead won't change anything.

Why does the rich man have five brothers? Why are we given a close description of the clothes that he wears? I believe it's because he's the high priest. He represents Caiaphas. Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, has five brothers, all of whom became high priests.

[12 : 08] The high priesthood of Caiaphas and his five brothers would lead all the way up to the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, they did receive the witness of one come back from the dead, and they rejected that witness.

And as a result, they faced destruction. This fits in with the parables that we've had to this point, the parables of the preceding chapter in chapter 15 are about the religious leader's failure to welcome in the lost sheep, to welcome the returning lost sons, and the way that they are excluding themselves from the father's table, and the renewed fellowship of the family as a result.

The parable of the unjust steward with which this chapter begins is about the need for dishonest managers to be removed from their office, and the urgency of them overcoming their love of money, and using their money to give to the poor in a last-ditch attempt to secure a future for themselves when they are removed from their post.

The parable of the rich man of Lazarus, then, presents us with a stark image that culminates this larger body of teaching, challenging the religious leaders for their failure to welcome and serve the poor.

The rich man, symbolising the priesthood, will be cast out into torment, while Abraham, the father of Israel, welcomes the poor Lazarus as his child. The lines of the family of Abraham are being redrawn in surprising ways.

[13 : 27] A question to consider. This chapter presents us with images of the very rich relating to the very poor, and of people with power relating to those with debt.

Jesus' teaching around these parables makes clear that the riches cannot just be spiritualised, nor can the poverty. The relationship between rich and poor, between the indebted and those who have the power over their debts, is a matter of spiritual consequence.

How might Jesus' teaching here on these points relate to teaching elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke?