

A BAD MAN'S GOOD EXAMPLE

Luke 16:1–18

Dr. George O. Wood

Luke 16:1–18 (NIV)

“Jesus told his disciples, ‘There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’ The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg—I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’ Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’ The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.’ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this

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and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight. The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery’”

Anytime we open Luke’s Gospel, between 9:51 and 19:27, we find Jesus on the way to the cross in those ten chapters. Beginning with 9:51, Luke says, “He set His face to go to Jerusalem.” And so our natural question would be, “What’s on the Lord’s mind as He heads toward the destiny of the cross?”

Luke 15, the passage we looked last week, helps us see what’s on the Lord’s mind. It’s what we would expect to find on His mind. He’s concerned about things that are lost: the lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. Namely, us.

When we open to Luke 16, however, we’re somewhat surprised at what’s on the Lord’s mind, because framing Luke 16 are two great stories. They both have to do with the use of money. We would least expect to find, as Jesus goes to the cross, that He’s thinking about the right uses of money. But Jesus is a real “this world” kind of a person, who knows that our true decisions of life often do not come out of our creeds but come out of our daily contact with material things. So today we’ll look at the parable of the dishonest manager. Then, next week we’ll look at the later part of chapter 16—another parable about money—the rich man and Lazarus.

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In the passage which we have read today, there are three matters for us to share. First, there is the story that Jesus tells. Second, there are lessons derived from that story—verses 9–13. And third, there is a sequel to the story and the lessons—verses 14–18. Let's look at each of these in turn.

I. First, the story of the dishonest manager or the unjust steward.

In Bible days, wealthy landowners had slaves that filled various ranks on the estate. The slave at the very top of the ladder would be the equivalent of a CEO (Chief Executive Officer), someone to whom the total power of delegation had been given, and he had the responsibility to manage the owner's business or his estate, whichever the case might be. The owner typically gave this slave a very high standing—a wide berth in making management and business decisions.

This particular manager—or administrator or CEO—had not been an embezzler. He had evidently not been a thief of the owner's assets. If he had been that, he would have been sent to jail and not simply dismissed. But he evidently is wasting the master's assets. That is to say, he's not managing them so as to bring the highest yield or profit. So the owner calls him in and, without even letting the man defend himself, fires him. But before issuing him the final termination, he tells him, smart owner that he was, that he wanted all the ledger books, all the accounts. You don't want to fire a person and then have them take the computer tapes with them. He says, "Bring it all in and then you're dismissed." The owner probably did not act justly towards his administrator. And the administrator's actions certainly aren't just either. One writer has said that everybody in this story is a rascal. It's somewhat surprising that the Lord even uses it. We'll see why in just a moment.

But when the administrator goes off to collect his ledgers, his books, his computer tapes, he's pondering his future and saying, "I've always had the good life and the soft life. I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm too proud to beg." Those were his two options. He could take a job low

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down on the social scale but he said, “I’ve got a bad back from sitting in the chair and I won’t dig and I’m not going to beg.” So he comes up with a solution. In the Greek it’s very dramatic—verse 4. In English, it comes across as something like this, “As he’s pondering his future he says, ‘I’ve got it! I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to call in the accounts of those who owe the owner some money and I’m going to change the original loan documents and make the loan payoff a lot easier. They’re going to turn around and thank me for my generosity, and when I’m fired, there’s going to be some mother-in-law apartments that are unoccupied in these various people’s homes that I’m going to be able to live in a few months at a time. I’ll be able to get by without either working hard or begging.’”

So he calls in a guy who owes eight hundred gallons of oil. Olive oil. This may not be spiritually edifying to you, but I’m told that this was enough olive oil to reflect the produce from one hundred and forty-six olive trees. There was another man who owed one thousand bushels of wheat, which was wheat off one hundred acres of land. So we’re talking about a considerable debt. He tells the one who owes the eight hundred gallons, “Here’s your original loan document. Why don’t you just erase the eight hundred and we’ll put four hundred and we’ll call it a deal.” You’d like a deal like that if you had a mortgage that was ninety thousand dollars and the banker called you in and said, “I’m going to make you a deal to take your mortgage down to just forty-five thousand dollars. Just sign this document.” We’d all jump at that chance, wouldn’t we? And this man jumps at that chance.

To the other man who owes one thousand bushels of wheat he says, “I’m going to write you down to eight hundred.” You might say, “Why did he write the one down eight hundred to four hundred and the other from one thousand to eight hundred? That’s only a 20 percent write off.” Probably the reason is that oil could be more easily diluted than wheat. You could put water in

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the oil. So when money was put out and an interest rate was charged, you would charge a higher rate of interest in the commodity of olive oil, because you weren't guaranteed to get the right stuff back.

There are some commentators who look at this passage and say the steward here was really doing a good thing because the owner was charging interest and, according to Jewish law, you were not allowed to charge interest to a fellow Jew. The way that people got around that was, if you borrowed the equivalent of four hundred gallons of olive oil and the owner wanted you to pay eight hundred back, he would simply write out a legal fiction, namely, that you had borrowed eight hundred gallons and that's what you would have to repay. He would get his interest, but the deed or the particular transaction would never reflect the word "interest" on it. It was just an agreed-on sum. So there are some who suggest that what the steward was really doing was calling the owner's bluff. The owner had to kind of eat it because he couldn't legally charge interest and the steward is acting morally and righteously. The problem with that point of view is that Jesus Himself says, "This steward was dishonest."

If indeed this was a dishonest kind of deal, why then does the Lord commend him? Is the Lord commending him for feathering his own nest? Or is He commending him for shrewdness? It's the latter—shrewdness. Jesus does not commend his action as something to be imitated, but He says he looked at the future and he saw what was going to happen, so he acted wisely. It's like today, looking at a dishonest, wrong act and admiring the way it was pulled off. I suppose you can do that, can't you? Jesus isn't putting His stamp of approval on the way the man unjustly made money, but said the way he pulled it off was a joy. He was shrewd in what he did.

So that, in a nutshell, was Jesus' story.

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II. What are the lessons that flow out of it? There are four lessons that come out of this story from Jesus' perspective.

A. The first lesson is the lesson of reality. That is, the shrewd manager squarely faced the issue that his job was ending. He did not live in a fictional world that somehow he could hang on. He knew that it was up and he had to face things the way they were. He couldn't hide from them. So he took the necessary steps as a realistic person to face the day when he would be out of work. Jesus says, "You need to imitate the reality of that dishonest steward or manager because you, as the children of the light, ought to know that there is a day coming when your tenure is going to be up on this earth. There is a day appointed for you when you likewise are going to be called into account. Therefore, be as realistic about that day as the shrewd manager was about his day. Be as wise in your reality—as you face spiritual issues—as this man was as he faced financial issues.

G. Campbell Morgan tells a delightful story. Morgan was a great preacher of a generation ago. He visited a home and since he was such a famous minister, he was at that time traveling in his ministry, it was quite an honor to entertain him. He was staying in the home of a person with considerable means. At the breakfast table, for family devotions that day, the gentleman that was the owner of the home—Dr. Campbell Morgan's host—prayed a rather eloquent prayer, which included a beautiful appeal for God to help the missionaries. His little ten-year-old boy, when the prayer was done, said to him, "Daddy, I sure liked your prayer." Of course, he was very happy that his son would commend him in front of Campbell Morgan. But he thought well of himself too quickly. Because the son wasn't done saying what he had to say. He went on, "I especially like to hear you pray for the missionaries. But I was thinking if I had your bankbook I would answer half your prayers."

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As I saw that little story, I thought about reality. It's one thing to be spiritually concerned about people and say, "I sure wish I could do something or something could be done." It's another thing to say, there's a famine and I'm going to help. There's a need, and I'm going to put myself to it. There's a call to be involved in intensive care and God wants me to do that. That's why Jesus says that the children of this world are wiser than the children of light, because the children of light—that is, the Christians—often say, "That's a marvelous thing. I'm glad somebody's doing something about that!" But, the believer has not sufficiently reckoned with the reality of their own involvement in the issue.

Jesus says that when it comes to money in this real world, people pay serious attention to what they're doing. Sometimes, they pay more attention to earthly things than God's people do to things that really count. So face reality.

B. The second lesson out of this story in verse 9 is foresight. The man, again, saw that there was coming a day when he was going to be laid off. Jesus is saying, "Knowing that that day is coming, there are some things that you need to do in preparation." So he gives this very strange phrase, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that, when it's gone, you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Is this a statement in which Jesus is throwing away the whole doctrine of grace and salvation and saying, "Give your money to people and that will buy you a ticket to heaven?" We know that God doesn't set the Scripture against itself. What Jesus is saying, however, is that one of the things we need to be doing with our handling of money is to look at it and say, "Knowing that a day is approaching in which we're going to stand before God and give an account for what we've done, how are we handling the money?"

You might say, as you listen to this message, "What money?" But how are we handling what God has given us? Are we using it for His kingdom? Are we using it for other people? Are there

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going to be people that we will see in heaven who will come up to us and say, “Thanks for everything you did for me on earth”? Or are we just spending it for ourselves?

A great German preacher said, “We will stand before the throne of God without title, without money, without home, without reputation—in utter poverty. And in that place, where there is neither marrying or giving in marriage, where money is neither received nor spent, and where all the values have been turned upside down, in that place, God will ask, ‘Who can testify for you?’” Jesus has taught us that we should be especially attentive to the needs of the poor—the widow and the orphan. It was one of the saints of the Church, I believe Saint Ambrose, an early Church Father, who said, “The bosoms of the poor, the houses of widows, the mouths of children, are the barns which last forever.”

Place your priorities there in meeting need—foresight.

C. Then a third thing Jesus gives, by way of application from this story, is faithfulness. The unrighteous servant had not been faithful in little, and therefore the master relieves him of his responsibility. Jesus then goes on to ask, in verses 10–12, if we have been untrustworthy in handling worldly wealth, how will God trust us with true riches?

Jesus does something—here in this section on faithfulness—which is, I think, somewhat surprising. He links our handling of physical things with our treatment of spiritual things. He’s saying there’s a connection between the two. How you handle the real world in which you live, of dollars and bank statements and income tax returns and the like, is very much linked with how you handle true riches. That is the spiritual world.

I have found that there is a connection in my life and in the life of the church between how we handle physical things and how we handle spiritual things. Let me cite some illustrations.

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I'm ashamed to admit this, but when I visit other churches, I can—I think, oftentimes—tell by two rooms in the church what the spiritual vitality of the church is. The two rooms are the restroom and the pastor's office. I can tell you an awfully lot about a church by walking into those two rooms. I won't tell you what I can tell you about the church, but I can tell an awful lot. A church that is concerned with out-of-the-way places like the restroom, and a pastor who is concerned about an area in which he spends most of his time, are going to be suggestive of how that church itself may be operating.

We had a terrific experience when I first came to this church, where we had a lot out on the side which was kind of a mud hole. We weren't doing anything about it at all. I was praying one day (we were praying for growth in the church) and I felt the Lord saying to me, "You're praying for growth, but you can't take care of physical things. Here you've got a lot out there that desperately needs some landscaping. Just go plant some grass on it. That's basically all it needs. If you can't take care of your lot, how do you think you can ever take care of people? Go take care of the lot."

So Wayne and our minister of youth went out and planted grass. Notice I didn't do it. I had the revelation and they did the work! A few weeks later, a guy came along and said, "I saw you've got beautiful green grass out here. I've passed up and down this street for years and it looked bad, but you're trying to improve it. I want to give you some trees. Is it ok if I plant some trees on the perimeter of this lot?" He planted trees all along the sides of the lot. Then we got our property tax bill a year later and it was one thousand dollars less. I asked why. They said, "You had a lot out there that had nothing on it. Now it looks like a playground and young people and the like must be using it, so that would be property that's excluded from tax because you're a

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non-profit corporation.” Simultaneous with all these events, real growth began to occur in the church. I drew a connection between that and our care for the environment.

The reason I'm telling that story is that lately I've been watching this vast lot we have out here.

The more I look at it, the more convicted I get. We've set some steps in motion to get that in focus and to sharpen that up out there. There is a relationship, I believe, between physical things and spiritual things.

I know in our financial life in our family we were in debt and were a mess for the first seventeen years of our marriage. One of the little tip-offs to that is that one day I was talking to someone and I said, “I never really take the time to balance my checkbook to the penny. It's not worth the effort. If I come within twenty-five dollars, that's ok.” They kind of looked at me askance. I thought, “Why am I doing that?” I looked and saw that I was paying the bank that I was banking with four dollars a month for the privilege of keeping a checkbook open. If I'd go across the street, they'd pay me interest on the money I had in my account and wouldn't charge me anything as a service charge. Suddenly, I was saving four dollars a month, forty-eight dollars a year, plus I was making money in interest off the little bit I had in there. You say, “That's such a little, inconsequential thing.” But three years later, God has helped us do more in the area of stewardship and giving to the Lord's work as well as getting free of these 18 percent credit card kinds of things. We began being concerned with the penny that was lost in the latticework of our life. Getting concerned with the little.

Really, our life, the quality of it, is made up so much by the mundane things that somehow we don't ever look at them theologically, because “that's not spiritual.” But how we keep our home is a spiritual matter, how we keep our bank accounts, how we structure and order our life. Jesus says, “Make a connection between the two. Be faithful in the little and I'll give you more.”

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D. Then the fourth thing that comes out by way of application in this story is the matter of loyalty. Jesus, continuing to talk about the matter of slavery and finances, says in verse 13, “No servant can serve two masters. Either he’ll hate the one and love the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” In Jesus’ day, a slave could not take a part-time job. He was at the fulltime disposal of his master—twenty-four hours a day. So you can’t serve two people. You can’t serve God and money any more than you can turn right and left at the same time.

Is this to say that we’re to be without money? No, Jesus is not saying that you cannot have money. He’s saying you cannot serve it. You must serve God. It’s a question of whether you own your money or your money owns you.

I like the story I ran across this week of a guy who truly owned his money and his money didn’t own him. He was a sheepherder in Montana. And they struck oil on his land. He became fabulously wealthy. He, of course, had this lifelong habit of taking sheep to the marketplace. But when he got all this money, the one thing that he wanted was a Rolls Royce limo, the kind with the window in it and a driver who would sit up in front. He went out and got this beautiful machine. After he had it for a while, it needed to be serviced. He drove it into the garage and the mechanic, upon seeing it, was properly impressed with the stature and the beauty of this limo. When the mechanic had finished looking at it, he said to the sheepherder, “That’s a marvelous machine. What do you like most about it?” The sheepherder thought a moment and drawled back, “The thing I like best about it is that I can now take my sheep to the market without them licking me in the back of the neck.”

The thing I like about that little story is that the sheepherder owned his money and his money didn’t change him. It didn’t make him a different person. There are some people whom money

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changes. It changes their priorities. It changes their friendships. It changes their loyalty to God. It changes their usefulness to God.

If our money is drawing us away from God, it's time to get the ownership back and time to serve God with the physical things that we have. Verse 13 does not say, "You *should not* serve two masters," but "you *cannot*." Loyalty to Jesus must come ahead of anything else: job, money, or whatever. Loyalty to Christ must be first.

III. But then, as a sequel to this story and these lessons...

The sequel is found in verses 14–18, and it tells us about the Pharisees who are listening to Jesus talk about money, and literally in the Greek it says "they turned up their noses." The New International Version says "sneered." But they make a facial expression. They have body language that expresses their attitude toward Jesus' teaching on the use of money.

So the Lord turns on them and tells them that it's possible to enter the kingdom of God since John the Baptist began preaching. Prior to that, in the Old Testament, the kingdom of God in the reign of the Messiah, Jesus, wasn't yet open. But now it's open. But those who will go in must want to go in. They must force their way in. There must be earnestness about getting into God's kingdom. He is, in effect, saying, "Pharisees, you're not going in."

Then comes verse 18, which doesn't seem to even fit in the chapter. The chapter deals with stories on money, the story of the dishonest steward and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, but right in the middle of the chapter—between those two stories—is this verse 18, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery. And the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Before we examine why it happens at this moment in Luke 16, we need to note that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 says that there is one exception to this principle, and that is, where there is

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unfaithfulness in a marriage, there may be divorce and remarriage. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, adds a second exception, where an unbelieving person refuses to live with a believing partner. But other than that, this is the law of marriage and divorce as set down by Jesus, giving attention to all the prophets.

Why does Jesus say that here? Some people look at this and say, “This doesn’t even fit. This is a chapter on money and here Jesus is dealing with marriage and divorce. It doesn’t belong here. It must have been a mistake.” But it’s not a mistake. I think what explains it is Jesus looked at those sneering faces of the Pharisees and saw some of the Pharisees who had trod, not only upon others—through their pursuit of wealth and not ministering to others with their finances—but upon marriage. He saw some who were sneering at Him who had violated God’s law of marriage. I think He singled one of them out, because the Pharisees of that day were divided into two schools of thought on divorce and remarriage. One school taught that the person could divorce his wife—the woman had no rights but the man had the right of divorcing his wife if she burned his food or if she raised her voice to a level that could be heard in the next house, or if she criticized her husband’s relatives. One rabbi even went on to say that he could divorce his wife with cause if he found another woman prettier than her. So Jesus catches the eye of one of these religious Pharisees, who He knows has had a record of immorality and easy excuses out of marriage. This guy is sneering at Jesus’ teaching on money. Jesus snaps right back, “You’re in danger.”

When we look at our lives, the problems of Southern Californian Christians really have all come down to these two issues, because we live in an affluent society. We also live in a society where relationships are very disposable. If our marriages aren’t working, we go for what’s easy rather than working through the problems. We even justify ourselves for decisions that we make that

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will not square with what God tells us in His Word. Jesus is saying to us in this passage, “Look, there is coming a day when you’re going to stand before Me and you’re going to answer for everything.”

How are you handling your life? How are you handling money? How are you dealing with your marriage? Are you taking the way of least resistance? Or are you working through it? Are you extending forgiveness? Are you saying there is an eternal immutable law of God, which I dare not break or violate? Are you giving loyalty to Christ in that area of your life?

Our relationship with God is decided, in large part, by what we do in this real world of temporal problems, which play such a large part in our life—what we do with money and sexuality and with morals and with personal relationships. Jesus is calling us to reality and to foresight and to faithfulness and to loyalty to Him and to each other.

Closing Prayer

Father, in Jesus’ teaching today You’ve give us an example of a bad man who showed, by his shrewdness, that we also need to take care in how we live. For we also face a day of dismissal. Only, our dismissal is from this life. We never know when that day is going to take place. By Your grace, You’ve come to help us live a life that will be satisfying to You and to us. You’ve come to make us strong people who are strong enough to own the things we have rather than letting them own us. And we are strong enough to work through our problems rather than escaping them. So, Lord Jesus, teach us fidelity to You and show us where we’ve not been generous with You and where we’ve not been generous with others who stand in need. Help us, Lord, to remember the good example of this bad man. Help us, too, Lord, to recognize that when we find criticism with You, there may be something needy in our own heart like in that Pharisee who criticized whose own life most needed Your grace and Your help. Help us, Lord, to never

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stand in judgment on You. Let us, instead, stand before You and let Your Word search us and examine us and help us. We ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.