
Buying Heaven

Luke 16:1-15

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Introduction

It is Sabbath in Jerusalem, and it's a typical hot afternoon. You are invited to a party at the house of one of the Pharisee rulers. For you this is a regular occurrence. These are your friends. You are one of the rich, wealthy and politically powerful. You are particularly interested in this party because Jesus and his disciples have been invited and you have a lot of questions because of the news surrounding his arrival.

You have been to this house many times before and you are very comfortable inside. This day you have to arrive late because of some other responsibilities you had to take care of beforehand. When you arrive, you are received into the house by the servant, and escorted through the large outer court of plants, stonework and outdoor furniture. Passing through the gallery and reception room, you begin to hear the sound of men talking, moving around and laughing. There are multiple conversations taking place. In the large dining apartment, there are couches, chairs and tables for dining and conversation. Because of the wealth of this man there are candlesticks and lamps and pictures on the wall, and numerous cushions for head and arms as men lounge, talk, and eat. Immediately you are offered a pottery chalice of wine and ushered into the room. You notice that although there are numerous conversations, most of the men are aware of Jesus and his disciples. He too is eating and drinking, lounging, and telling stories. Of course, he already caused a stir by healing a man as soon as he arrived at the party.

The windows are lattice and wood trim and very accessible to the street. There is a large open door that opens into the back courtyard which has attracted a number of people who were not invited to this party, yet, many townspeople have gathered around the windows and doors trying to watch and listen to the activities inside. In fact, some local tax-collectors that have moved in to close proximity to Jesus, and they have been tolerated so far by the host and the other men. At one point Jesus addressed the tax collectors with a story directed to them, and the crowds with another story.

Tension in the room is rising. Jesus has already questioned the humility of the men fighting for the places of honor at the tables. You even heard Jesus question the Pharisee ruler concerning the guests that he invited to this party, telling him he should invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame, and then he would be blessed at the resurrection of the just. He told a story about a wedding feast where the poor, the blind, and the crippled were invited, and the original guests were shut out because of other responsibilities they pursued instead of going to the feast.

As you move closer to Jesus, you hear him tell three stories on finding lost things; a single sheep, a lost coin, and quite a disturbing story about a son who took his inheritance spent his money foolishly and came back home to be a servant in his father's house, and unbelievably the father welcomed him back, as full status as a son (much to the anger and frustration of the oldest brother)! Listen carefully, for he is about to tell another story... to his disciples...Let's pray...

The Story (16:1-8)

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.”² 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.’³ 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.’⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’⁷ 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.’⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

Accountability (v.1)

In this parable there was a rich man who had a manager for his household. The economic situation in Jesus’ time was one of great dichotomy between the rich and poor. There was only so much wealth available at the time. It was not like modern society in the West where capitalism and freedom of movement and thought have contributed to the ability to create and amass great wealth, as well as the creation of what we call a “middle class”. Wealth was often gained at someone else’s expense; often through thievery, extortion, usury on debt, or taxation. The poor got poorer as the rich got richer. One of the main ways that wealth was gained was through lending money and taking land and possessions as collateral. When a borrower defaulted on a loan, which was often inevitable, the debtor became a slave, or dependent on charity.

In a wealthy household in this society there may have been numerous slaves, or tenant farmers working for the rich man, as well as traders and merchants who worked with the manager as he represented the needs of the owner. The Greek word for manager in this text is literally translated steward, or “household manager”, or manager of household affairs. All of the household goods and supplies were probably managed by the steward as well as any commerce for the household. A manager could have been a slave or indentured servant, but in this story the manager is soon to be removed from his position and therefore, was probably hired to be the manager by the rich man. The manager, like all of us who have jobs, is accountable for his work and is asked to give an account of his management.

Loss of a job (v.2)

Charges were brought before the rich man that the manager was wasting the rich man’s possessions; the rich man immediately calls the steward into account for his work, and based upon concerns about the alleged mismanagement of his possessions, the rich man fires the manager.

Looking out for number one (v.3-7)

Jesus' story continues, explaining that the manager considers his dilemma and comes up with a scheme to win friends and possibly be in a position to extort a comfortable existence after he is fired. Look at verse 4 and 5:

“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.’⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’”⁵

What is the manager's plan? The man in this parable decides to reduce the amount of money owed to his employer by his debtors, thus, perhaps, putting himself in their debt. At least one commentator suggested that the manager is merely reducing an overcharging of interest on the accounts. In this scenario, the rich man would be fully repaid, while the debtors would receive a reduced price on their total bill, and thus, the manager would not be acting dishonestly.

However, one thing we know from Jesus' description of the manager is that the manager is dishonest. He is looking out for only himself. After he is fired, (and perhaps before he has to clear out his own possessions from the rich man's home), he essentially steals from the rich man, and tries to make friends by shifting their debt to himself (at least in terms of personal indebtedness). He cannot seem to bear the consequence of giving up his way of life and standard of living. Consider heart themes that run through this story: the manager is perhaps lazy; *“not strong enough to dig”* (v.3), or perhaps it sounds like he is not willing to do physical labor to provide for himself, and he is also proud enough not to want to beg for his daily provisions (*“and I am ashamed to beg”*) (v.3). Remember, there were not many options for work and prosperity, so losing his job could have caused great hardship and a radical shift in his life and lifestyle. Remember up to this point, the manager would have been essentially living in relative ease and comfort.

Look at verse 4: *“I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.”⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’⁷ 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 manager summons the rich man's debtors and reduces the debt owed by each debtor. Jesus actually points us to the manager's motivation. He believes that by reducing the debtor's debt, he will be able to be received into their homes after he is released from his job, therefore enabling him to continue to live a comfortable life without really ever working. Do you ever see this type of craftiness and shrewdness glorified in our culture today? Why do people sell drugs? Why is it a popular theme in music today...the idea of having money, having whatever you desire, but not having to work for it? Where does that money come from? Consider other ways some in our society seek wealth without working for it. This type of shrewdness is taking place all around us in our society, and often glorified in pop-culture.

A surprising commendation (v.8)

In a surprising twist, when the rich man realizes what has happened, he actually commends the dishonest manager. He admires his craftiness and thievery. This seems amazing to me as a business owner, especially because of the circumstances surrounding the accusations and the firing of the household manager. The master recognizes what has gone on, and how the dishonest manager has manipulated others and even the master himself in an attempt to put himself in good standing with the master's debtors, and the master actually commends the dishonest manager. The master recognizes the steward's craftiness and honors him for his dishonest creativity.

Look at verse 8:

"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."

Could I give a bonus to one of my employees for somehow skimming money off of my income? Or could I respect an employee who tried to work himself into my client relationships with the knowledge that he or she would eventually turn those clients against me, and over to them? Could I honor and praise an employee for that?

Jesus comments on this story by recognizing that worldly men show more creativity in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. Is Jesus saying then that we as followers of Christ are to use dishonesty in dealing with the world? Are we supposed to be crafty with our money? Can we use money to influence others somehow into being accepted into eternity?

What then does this say about the master? If God is somehow the master in this story (as many commentators suggest), can we serve a God that favors and commends dishonesty? You see, this is a parable of contrasts...the manager clearly loves money, and is willing to do whatever it takes to take care of himself, but so does the master...the master also loves money. He admires the manager's deceit and craftiness, even to the point of commending him.

Back at the gathering of Pharisees... can you hear the snickers and approvals under the breath of the men in that room, as they relate to the craftiness of the dishonest manager, and enjoy this story of intrigue and manipulation. I have to ask myself at this point, how many times I have done this very thing in my heart when I watch such a story on TV. How many times do I allow the craftiness and deceit of wealth to steal my conscience, while I watch and listen to a story that clearly collides with God's kingdom like an abrupt car crash ending in broken pieces of steel and glass?

The Application (16:9-13)

Can wealth be used to gain eternal life?

In another surprising comment on this story Jesus adds...in verse 9... *"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."*

The world is crafty in dealing with wealth, and to be honest, it is easy to become hypnotized by the toys and comforts that wealth can bring, but can the use of wealth influence others for eternity? Can wealth justify us before God?

Is this a charge to use our money for the sake of bringing ourselves and others into the kingdom of heaven by using our money in a shrewd and crafty way? Can the use of our money be used to justify ourselves before God? Are there ways that we are trying to use our wealth today to appear righteous in the eyes of others? How can money receive us into eternity when it fails?

It can't! Money cannot be used for any of these things, it cannot justify, it cannot win others for Christ, and we cannot use wealth to secure the salvation (or eternal dwellings of others). Now, is wealth in and of itself evil; not at all! It is the pursuits of our heart that makes wealth collide with God's economy. We can and should use our resources to further the kingdom, but can our money really be used to make friends for ourselves and thus be used to welcome us into eternal life? What were the Pharisees doing that Jesus was getting at? How were the Pharisees using wealth to try to justify themselves before God and others? Who was at this party? But wait a minute you say, Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples, right?

Accountability of the use of wealth

Jesus provides us with application of this parable. Let's read beginning in verse 10...

“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. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ 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.”

Is Jesus then telling his disciples to use their wealth to gain friends and secure their own eternal future? What wealth did they have? No, this is a parable of contrasts. Verse 9 is sarcasm! The Pharisees were using their wealth to influence others for their own benefit and self-justification.

The manager loved money, the master loved money, and the Pharisees loved money. Are we possibly in love with money? Of all of those at the party listening to this story (the Pharisees, lawyers, sinners and tax-collectors, disciples, and crowd) who do you relate to in regards to your wealth?

This parable is a story about money, and our accountability with our money, and our heart treasure regarding money. We are tested by God with very little before we are given more to manage on this earth. How can we be trusted with someone else's wealth or given more of our own if we are careless or dishonest in the small wealth that we are given? How can we be trusted with spiritual wealth if we cannot manage our physical resources that God has given us?

The love of wealth

One point that Jesus does make very clear in verse 13; you cannot love God and money equally, and what we do with our wealth can show us and others whom we serve. Let's read verse 13 again.

“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.”

Jesus' words here are direct into the heart. Like cutting off of a hand that causes you to sin or the removal of the eye that lusts, there is no room for sugar-coating or down-playing this truth; you will love one and hate the other, but you cannot love both! But, the story is not quite over...remember, Jesus was directing this to his disciples, right? Let's look at what happens next in verses 14 and 15:

"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵ 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."

So, was this parable really directed towards the disciples? Or was it just a continued indictment on the Pharisees and a warning to all who will listen? I believe it is both, and clearly intended to get our attention and challenge our heart orientation towards wealth. You see, it is against God's economy to allow us to justify our love of wealth because we tell ourselves and others that we are using it to somehow expand the kingdom.

The Warning (16:14-15)

Can wealth justify?

The Pharisees clearly saw themselves in this parable or at least heard Jesus' sarcasm in the ending commentary and it certainly got their attention. Where do you think the Pharisees finally got it? Perhaps they related to the shrewd and crafty manager who tried to take care of himself by stealing from his owner. Or did the Pharisees see their own lack of stewardship with all they had been entrusted? Did they see themselves choking life out of the "spiritually dying" on a daily basis in their attempts to expand God's kingdom without recognizing Jesus for who he claimed to be? Maybe they see the worldliness in the master himself as he commended the manager for stealing from him, but ignore their own greed and love of money while they are at this party among the "elite" or their attempt to somehow show themselves righteous through their love of wealth and influence, but rejected the very people Christ came to save. Are we ever like the Pharisees who used wealth to justify themselves before men, yet continually ignored the true spiritual needs around them? Do we ever try to convince ourselves that money is a necessity to expand the kingdom of God, and therefore we need more money, so we can give more, but really keep more for ourselves, or use money to raise our standing in the eyes of others?

God knows the heart

God knows our hearts even when we think we are deceiving all of those around us. Jesus makes it very clear...we cannot love both God and money, because we will love one and hate the other. But even though, like the Pharisees, we think we are deceiving those around us (and maybe even ourselves), God knows our heart, and as we know here at the Chapel, that is where the battle lies, in our heart. If you find yourself loving money, then you cannot love God!

What man loves, God hates

In Jesus' final summation in response to the Pharisees, Luke draws on the parables that Jesus had been telling at the party that were intended to capture the Pharisee's heart from the beginning of chapter 14 all the way through chapter 16. The Pharisees coveted plac-

es of honor at the tables; they only mingled with the powerful and wealthy, inviting guests that could only return the favor. The Pharisees despised the poor, crippled and lame, and had no concern for the lost for which they were supposed to care. They cared only about their own comfort and social standing...all the time believing that others recognized them for their “true” spirituality. Deceit and craftiness among men, while exalted in our society is despised by God.

“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. (v.15)

Conclusion

Even though the illustration Jesus gave was about money, there are overtones and expectations revolving around the management of eternal treasures as well. We have been given grace and gifts to use and manage on earth, (gifts that we have opportunity to use or discard everyday). These are often the “true riches” that we are given in response to our wise stewardship in the other areas of life. The wise or poor management of our wealth may influence how and when we are entrusted with “true (eternal) riches”. Does this mean that we are all going to be given great wealth if we are good stewards of our money? Does this mean if we are of little wealth, we have been poor managers of what God has given us? No, but this parable clearly does teach that whether we love God or money can be seen in our management of our daily resources.

Are you honest and faithful in the small things in your life? Do you ever cheat or steal from your employer, or your spouse, or other family members? Taking items from work or family members that you feel are small and inconsequential, is stealing. This is being dishonest in “a little” and reflects how you will respond to greater wealth and responsibility. If you are not faithful in small things you will not be faithful in much.

Recognize that the deceitfulness of money is shrewd and crafty as it creeps into our hearts, much like the dishonest manager’s craftiness with his former employer’s wealth, as our eyes and hearts begin to glance away from Christ and move towards the treasures and toys that this world offers. Perhaps your workplace even motivates its employees by appealing to worldly greed. This is the game played in my industry where you are often treated to dining at the nicest restaurants, vacation centers, and hotels, all the time appealing to your desire to have more, and thus motivating you to work hard to have the best this world has to offer. Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable, the world knows what desires motivate worldly hearts.

Parents, where are your children’s hearts inclined, and how are you addressing their lust for bigger, better, and more “things”? In my own home, this is a major concern. My wife and I work hard to help our children focus on eternal wealth as opposed to worldly wealth. If you ignore this as a parent, your children will leave your home and quickly become ensnared by the desire for wealth. In my work I have seen many young (and not so young) adults trapped like a caged animal with debt, due to pursuing riches they cannot afford. The end result for Christians is that they are unable to give to the needs of the church, or to the expansion of God’s kingdom.

Are we all given the same amount to manage? No...but, like the dishonest manager we are accountable with what we do with our wealth, and we will be judged on its use some day.

We need to keep this in mind with every decision you make with our money and responsibilities.

Are you managing your money in such a way that shows that you love God, not money?
Are you honoring God in every small detail of your finances?

Jesus and his disciples were invited to a party one hot Sabbath afternoon, and if you were there mingling with the rich and influential, what would you have heard Jesus say? How would you have responded? What about now? Will it change the way you think about your money? Will it change the way you manage the resources God has given you? You cannot love God and money.

- God knows the heart
- What man loves, God hates

Conclusion