

Will You be a Rich Man? (Luke 16:1-18)



Did you know Jesus talked about money more than any other subject, including prayer, heaven, and even salvation? The two stories in Ch 16 start with, *'There was a rich man...'* (v1-18, v19-31) Jesus told the story of two rich young men in Ch 15, brothers in fact, who had plenty of money but finished up with no friends. Money Often divides people. Some of the richest people are the loneliest people. The prodigal son had a third of his father's vast estate, but when the money ran out friends also ran out. The remaining family wealth belonged to the elder brother, but he too ended up on his own with no friends.

The truth Jesus brings home to us in Ch 16, is that we are all headed for bankruptcy one day. The minute we die, we will become penniless. We won't be able to spend a dollar, buy anything, or write a cheque. Money will completely fail us then. We will have to leave all our money behind to those who come after us, however much we own right now. The real question then becomes - will you have true friends when that time comes? Jesus says that it depends on how we handle our money here and now.

A. The Crook Steward (Money Manager)

This is a notoriously difficult parable to interpret because the steward commended by Jesus is thoroughly dishonest and corrupt. In fact, almost everyone in this story is dishonest in their financial affairs. This story is told in two parts: (1) the steward's predicament, and (2) the steward's prudence.

1. The Steward's Predicament (How he got into trouble) - This steward was a corrupt money manager who was looking after his absentee master's property and finance, and he was cooking the books and pocketing his master's profits. The rumours of his dishonesty reached the master, and the master decided to call for an external audit. If the books were not straight, the steward's head would roll. Now the steward knew he would soon lose his job. So, he thought long and hard about how he could survive his predicament. He wasn't cut out for manual labour; he'd been a pen pusher all his life. But who would hire him after being fired dishonourably? There was no welfare system in those days, and he would rather die than to beg. Was there any way out for him? Suddenly, he had a brilliant idea! And he digs his way out of the predicament. So How did he do it?
2. The Steward's Prudence (How he got out of trouble) - A man with only a small window of time, has two possible solutions: (i) short term solution, and (ii) long term solution.
 - i. Short term Solution – Take the master's money and run. Some short-sighted people would take this option. But the money would not last long, and there is a high chance of getting caught with all eyes on him.
 - ii. Long term Solution – Make friends of his master's business partners who owed him large sums of money! So, he called them 'one by one' because secrecy was essential, and he played the 'compassionate man' and slashed their debts by up to 50%!

900 gallons of olive oil (100 measures *'batos'*) was the yield from 150 olive trees. 1,000 bushels of wheat (100 measures *'koros'*) was the yield from 100 acres of land. Both were significant sums. The steward reduced their debts by 50% and 20% respectively. He did the same for all his master's business partners.

In doing so, the steward has become (1) a 'good, compassionate guy' to these people, and (2) they have become 'fellow criminals' in his scheme. It is thoroughly dishonest but very clever! Now, these men will return the favour when he needs their help. There is honour even among the thieves. The steward has the option to blackmail them if they don't help him out. Either way, he made sure his future was safe. He has secured 'friends' who would come through for him when his finances fail.

- iii. When the master heard about what his steward did, he expressed grudging admiration, *'He has done very well for himself. I could learn a thing or two from this man about money and people management.'* The master did not like what the steward did to him, but he took his hats off at the steward's clever strategy. What did he admire the steward for? Not his brilliant criminal mind, not his morality, but his shrewdness.

We can learn from unbelievers. Our unsaved parents can teach us how to live wisely. Our unsaved boss may know more about the business than us, etc. Jesus said, *'The sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation for the sons of light.'* (v8) How we need to ask God for His wisdom (C.f. James 1:5)

B. Lessons from the Crook Steward

1. This steward was praised for his 'good sense'. What 'good sense' did he show? He showed (1) building relationships with people is more important than acquiring 'things', and (2) investing in the future is more important than gratifying the immediate present.

Jesus taught His disciples it is good sense to 'make friends with worldly wealth.' Someone once spent a million dollars to have lunch with Warren Buffet, and he said it was worth it because of what he learned from the billionaire and the connections he got through him. Jesus put this principle in the eternal context. *'Use your money to make friends who would receive (welcome) you in the ETERNAL home.'* (v9)

2. When we die, the financial system of this world will disconnect us, and we will be deleted from their system. Our effective net worth will become zero, and our total sum of balance redistributed to others. At that point, our friends will become infinitely more valuable to us than money. Will we have people who welcome us to their 'eternal home' because we are their friends? Will there be people who say to us, *'Thank you! Your money placed food on my family table. Your money put the roof over our church. Your money brought the gospel to my village. That's why I am here. Welcome home!'*

Children in the olden days played 'Grab the Land' game during the school lunch breaks. They would flick pebbles on the ground, draw lines in the dirt, and jostle for the biggest 'real estate' in the playground. But when the school bell rang, they would throw away their pebbles, shake the dust off their hands, and return to the class where their teacher was waiting, and quickly forget the game. The question is, will you have friends when you get up from the dirt to go back to the classroom? Did you fight so hard and refused to give any 'grace' to your classmates, that no one wants to be your friend in the classroom after the lunch break is over? Or did you gain friends to go back to the classroom with, because you gave up some pebbles and dirt for them during the lunch break? How is your money is spent? *Will some of it go to win eternal friendships that will bridge heaven and earth?*

3. The prodigal son spent all his money but was left all alone in a far country away from home. The elder son saved all his money and was on his own outside home. So is everyone who uses their money only to enrich themselves. They will prove to be fools like the two young men. They will be alone without any friends to welcome them into their eternal home. In the next passage, Jesus talks about a poor beggar named Lazarus and the selfish rich man. In *sheol*, the rich man yearned for a visit from Lazarus, but he did not get it.

The sons of this world can only see this life here and now. But we must gaze at eternity. While we look after the needs of the present, we need to be far more concerned about our eternal home, and for providing eternal shelter for the lost. Every dollar we spend to help someone through heaven's door is money well-spent. In fact, it is the money we will keep for eternity.

C. Honest and Faithful Money Management

Jesus teaches us there are true riches and real wealth system in heaven. Heaven is not a socialist state where everybody gets the same thing. It surprises many people to find out that the wealth in heaven will not be evenly distributed. It will be distributed according to individual merit on how we manage our money here on earth.

1. Jesus makes three contrasts between the earthly riches and the heavenly riches.
 - i. Size - Earthly riches are infinitely small compared to the incalculable and vast heavenly riches. It defies our imagination.
 - ii. Purity - Twice Jesus refers to money as 'unrighteous mammon', i.e. 'dirty money'. (v9, c.f. v11) Mammon 'μαμωνᾶς' is Aramaic for money and wealth. This means money and the wealth system on earth will always have in it the fundamental corrupting influence - the way it is created, expanded, earned, circulated, and spent. Hence, it is 'dirty', unlike the pure wealth of heaven. So, it is a constant battle for Christians to make money righteously and to spend money righteously.

But Jesus says something incredible here: *'If you can be faithful in the handling of dirty money here on earth, then you can have true righteous riches of heaven afterward.'* The vast heavenly riches we will receive depends directly on how we manage the tiny earthly riches now.

iii. Permanence - Every monetary system fails due to corruption. The average lifespan of a reserve currency is less than 100 years. The US dollar is tearing apart right now for the same reason. And none of the riches on earth are truly ours. It is only a loan with a time limit on it. It doesn't belong to us. The proof of that is, we keep nothing in this world indefinitely. Everything passes through our hands to the next set of hands, and so the cycle goes. But in heaven, the riches are yours to keep forever. There is no inflation or deflation or burglars there. Nobody can take your wealth from you.

'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.' (Jim Elliot)

2. Faithfulness Indicator - (1) Don't look at how you handle big things in front of big people on big occasions. Look at how you handle small things when no one is looking. That will reveal how faithful you are because faithfulness in the sight of God is not skill, but character; (2) Don't look at how you handle what is yours, but look at how you handle someone else's. This includes property, business, tasks, and also ministry.
3. God or Money - Jesus then made a bold categorical statement, 'You cannot live for money and live for God.' (v13) Jesus is saying, if we try to serve God and serve money at the same time, something will happen to our heart and mind; and we will live continual inner conflict and internal war. In fact, God hates the lip-service coming from a conflicted heart with alternating priorities. We need to make a definite choice which master we will serve. It's got to be either God or money. It can't be both – that will be a sure way to 'despise' God.

D. Money and the Human Heart

The rich Pharisees scoffed at Jesus, 'That's ridiculous. We worship God and we make money.' They believed the material blessing they enjoyed was the 'proof' of God's approval of their life and ministry. But Jesus said, '*You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.*' (16:15) In other words, 'You may have impressed men, but you have not impressed God. You may have fooled yourself, but you haven't fooled God. You love money, and you make lots of it. And you say you love God. But I will prove it to you that your heart is not right with God.' (1) Your attitude to the gospel is wrong, and (2) your attitude to the word of God is wrong.

1. Pharisee's Attitude to the Gospel: '*The law and the prophets were until John. Now the kingdom of God is being preached and I am preaching the kingdom of God and the people are 'forcefully pressing into' the kingdom of God to grab hold of it.*' (v16) Who were the people rushing into God's kingdom with humble and hungry hearts? Were they the rich respectable people like the Pharisees? No, rather the poor, prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners were like the people rushing into shopping centres for the post-Christmas mega sale. They were taking the kingdom of God with both hands, and leaving the love of money behind, like Matthew, Zacchaeus, etc.

Even today, where is the rapid growth of the kingdom of God? Not among the rich, but the poor. Thank God for wonderful exceptions, but it is a tough job to bring the gospel to the wealthy, who feel they've already got everything they need. The lovers of money will eagerly grab the financial papers and read from corner to corner. But they usually don't have the same hunger to grab the word of God and read it cover to cover. And that is why many who are rich here on earth, will not be rich in heaven. That's why many who are first will become last, and the last will become first.

2. Pharisee's Attitude to God's Law: The rich Pharisees not only resisted the gospel, but they also 'bent' God's law when it suited them. They placed hard rules on the common people, which was impossible to keep, but they made every effort to find loopholes in God's word for themselves when it suited their lifestyle.

Jesus brings up the issue of 'marriage and divorce' among them as a prime example. Hillel allowed husbands to divorce their wives for spoiling their dinner, and Akiba allowed husbands to divorce their wives if they found someone prettier. (*Akiba Gittin 9:10*) When we have lots of money, we can easily buy the things we want and discard those things we don't want and replace them with a better model. So, we develop a mindset of treating everything in life, including marriage, as a business proposition. We sign up if it works. If it doesn't work, we write it off as a loss, and then we can make a new deal. This was exactly what was going on in Jesus' days among the rich, respectable, religious people.

'Situation Ethics' is a popular teaching in the Church today. It says in effect Jesus is prepared to bend God's word to suit particular situations so long as it is 'inclusive' and 'loving', and God is so gracious, He is really

incapable of sending sinners to hell. This kind of teaching has risen from affluent nations. But Jesus tells us, not one jot or tittle can fail from the law of God. (v17)

3. *'For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.'* (v15) This is one of the most shocking statements from Jesus.

Time is coming when the money we have won't mean much, but the relationship we have will mean everything. Relationship with God and with the people with whom we will share eternity. Compared to Jesus' days most of us are fabulously rich. So, we need to listen to Jesus very carefully. How wealthy will we be five minutes after we are dead? Will we be rich then? How are we handling the 'unrighteous mammon', the 'dirty money'? Will God be able to entrust us with true riches of our own?

The love of money dulls our spiritual senses. Have we allowed our spiritual senses to be dulled? Are we bending the word of God to suit our lifestyle? Or are we grabbing the gospel with hungry hearts and pressing forward to take hold of the kingdom of God?

We will all have a mighty surprise when we get to eternity. Let's pray it will a good surprise. We will care about our 'bank balance' in heaven when we get there. Jesus said, *'No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.'* (v13) Lord, deliver us from divided hearts and divided loyalties.