

The Dishonest Manager **Luke 16:1-15**

We're back in Luke's Gospel. Now to remind you, Jesus is steadily making his way to Jerusalem and as He does so the Pharisees and Scribes, the religiously upright, moral conformists of their day were complaining that Tax Collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus and He was receiving them. And through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the two lost sons, Jesus spells out that God goes in search of lost people, that He wants as many as will respond to join the feast, the party of His kingdom. And the tax collectors and sinners are the ones who are responding.

Now that's great, but what will it mean for the way these tax collectors and sinners live? What impact should coming to Jesus and being received by him and entering the kingdom have on them? Can they just carry on as they were, happy that in some way Jesus has given them His seal of approval, and where there's grace there's no real need for change, or do they now need to become like the Pharisees and be very legalistic about the way they live, or what? What will coming to Jesus mean for these sinners who have thrown off the social norms? What will it mean for the tax collectors who have sold out to money and the desire to get rich?

And what we're going to see over the coming weeks is that being a follower of Jesus is going to radically affect how an individual sees and interprets this life. That was true for them and it is true for us. And interestingly, when it comes to how Jesus changes the way we see life, the first area He tackles is money, and how we see, and handle wealth in this life.

So this morning we're going to read what many people think is Jesus' most difficult to understand parable, which contains, in some people's view, some of the hardest verses to understand in the whole New Testament, but which, when you get your eye in to what Jesus is saying here, has the power to revolutionise the way you live now and the way you will live for all eternity.

So let's look then at the parable of the dishonest manager.

Luke 16:1-15

Now, the first thing to notice is who Jesus is telling this parable to, and in v1 Luke says it was to 'the disciples'. And I don't think that just means the 12. Luke tells us in v14 that the Pharisees were also listening in and that they 'ridiculed him.' So this wasn't some private teaching just for the 12, this is public so you can bet your bottom dollar that the tax collectors and others who are coming to him are listening as well. They're included amongst his disciples, his followers. So, the very people who had been caught in the trap of making money, hoping it would give them what they wanted, but who had discovered it had cost them dearly, are in the audience that Jesus is addressing. And what he sets out is how those who call themselves his followers are going to view and handle money, and both for the tax collectors, for the other disciples and for us, it's most definitely not 'business as usual.'

Firstly, we're going to see the pull of money; secondly the power of money and then the third point is going to be: paying your way into heaven.

The Pull of Money

Now if I were to ask you is money good, bad or neutral, what would you reply? Money, in and of itself, good, bad or neutral? I suspect most of us would say, it's neutral. You can use it for good or for bad, but money itself is neither good or bad it's just neutral.

But Jesus doesn't see it in those terms. On two occasions in this passage, v9 and 11, he refers to money as 'unrighteous wealth.' Now, why does he call it, unrighteous? What's unrighteous about wealth? Well, of course sometimes, and you won't have to think long about this to come up with examples in your own life, or in the lives of those you know, sometimes to make money you do things you shouldn't do. You cut corners you shouldn't cut, you make deals you shouldn't make, you turn a blind eye when you should have turned away completely, you treat people in ways you shouldn't. So it's unrighteous because sometimes wealth is gained by unrighteous means.

But it can also be unrighteous wealth, because we can use it for unrighteous purposes: when we have money we can use it to feed our own selfish greed, or our personal gratification. We may have made the money perfectly honestly and righteously, but having made it, we either use it unrighteously or it helps foster unrighteous attitudes in our hearts.

But I reckon the principle reason Jesus describes it as unrighteous wealth, is because of the corrupting influence it can have on our lives.

You see, Jesus personifies money and wealth here. He describes it as something that will compete with God for the ultimate place in your heart. Verse 13: 'No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money.' Unless you handle it right, Jesus is saying, wealth will become your master. You start off thinking that money will serve you, but you end up serving it. The decisions you make, the stuff you give your life to, the way you spend your time, how you orient your life, will start being determined by money and the desire for more, or the need to maintain a certain level, rather than by God. It's what's driving your life, it's taken control. You can be enslaved by it.

Money has the power to capture your heart. It has the power, Jesus says, to become an idol in your life. Now, you might say, come on Martin no one really bows down and worships money, calling it an idol is a bit strong isn't it? Well, not if you realize that idol worship is not just bowing down to a statue and offering incense. An idol is anything other than God that we look to for our security or protection, or where we find our sense of worth and significance. It's what gives our lives meaning. And as an idol, wealth has the power to take that place of God in our lives. And it is one of the big idols we face in the west today.

You see, we are all wired for worship. We will all give our lives to something. We will all pursue something, and seek security and significance in something. And

Jesus says, that must be God and not money. Money will try and take that place, and people will try and serve both God and money, but Jesus says, that will always fail. There's only space for one on the throne of your heart; so it's got to be one or the other. Choose the wrong one, and you might very well be wealthy, but you will be spiritually bankrupt. Choose the right one and money will fall into its right place. Now that might mean your salary is less. Serving God and not money may mean you have less to spend on yourself. It may mean you decide not to do that deal that could have made you stacks. It might mean you don't take the job you've been offered. But you can make those decisions knowing that it's God you're serving, not mammon.

And hidden in this parable, which we are going to look at next, Jesus gives us good reason to make God and not money our god. And that is that money simply doesn't last. V9: '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.' Now, we'll unpack that in a minute, but for now, listen to what Jesus says in the middle: 'when it fails.'

Money will fail you, Jesus says. It's not *if* money fails you, but *when* it fails you. Money *will* fail you. And it will fail you for two reasons. Despite it promising so much it will ultimately fail to satisfy. Just think of Rockefeller who was asked 'how much is enough?' – and he answered, just one more dollar. We always want just a little bit more. No matter how much your salary goes up, there never seems quite enough. It never fills the hole because the hole, the desire keeps on growing. It doesn't ultimately satisfy. Rather, like an addict, it leaves you hungry for more.

But the second reason money will fail you, and the reason Jesus is getting at here, is that the day will come when money is a thing of the past. Benjamin Franklin said, 'Only two things in life are certain: death and taxation.' Well the tax collectors and you and I know taxation is a certainty, but so to is death. And there will come a day in everyone of our lives when your salary, bonus, bank account, number of houses, type of car you drive, the number of rooms in your apartment, will all be utterly irrelevant; a day when we see these things for what they really are. There will be a day when instead of thinking about and worrying about this stuff, you'll be fighting for breath and staring eternity in the face. And when your breath fails you and you stand before the throne of God, you won't be thinking interest rates and investments then. The last garment you wear has no pockets.

But what does all that mean for how we should handle money and wealth? If it has the power to enslave us and master us, if it has the power to become an idol in our lives, and if it will ultimately fail, what should our attitude to it be? How should you young guys, as you mature and start your careers, approach money and wealth? How should those of us who are established in our careers handle it? Well, this parable, which on the surface seems perplexing, is Jesus answering just that question: how to use it while you have it.

The Power of Money

So Jesus opens the parable in v1 by telling us, 'there was a rich man who had a manager.' And this manager is the central character. He's an estate manager. He's a steward, his job is to manage his master's wealth. But reports are coming in to his master that this manager is wasting the resources that have been entrusted to him. That's the charge against him. And his master calls him to account for his stewardship, for how he's handled what has been entrusted to him, and tells him that he's fired.

My father was a pharmacist and ran his own small business. And when he died, I was still at university, and we had to get a manager in to help us run the business and keep it going. He was a nice guy, a young pharmacist, maybe in his early 30s. But over the space of a couple of months we grew suspicious that he was stealing from us. So we got our solicitor involved and at the close of business one day, the solicitor and I confronted the manager with the evidence. We told him we had worked out how much he had taken, that it was equivalent to that month's salary, which as a result we would not be paying him, and he could consider his employment terminated. And what was so striking, and it's one of those experiences etched on my mind, was that apart from him going deathly pale and asking for a glass of water, he made no attempt to defend himself, made no protestations of his innocence. He knew he was guilty and had been caught. He left that night and we never heard from him again. And just like him, this manager in Jesus' story, this steward, makes no attempt to defend himself against his master's charge. He knows he's guilty, as charged.

And so realizing that the writing is on the wall, he decides he needs to prepare for the future when the money runs out. V3: 'what shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I'm ashamed to beg.' One would be much too much like hard work and the other would be demeaning. So he comes up with this cunning, and dishonest, plan.

He brings in all the people who owe his master money, and he slashes their debt. Now, the commentators can't decide whether he is cutting back the illegal interest his master was charging – so actually what he's doing is a good thing, or whether he is sacrificing his own commission that he could rightly charge, so this is really hurting him, or whether he is just being dishonest, and using his master's wealth for his own gain. And if you want to know what I think, I think it's the last one. This guy is cooking the books, he's being dishonest, which is why Jesus calls him in v8, 'the dishonest manager.'

And there lies the reason why people stumble over this parable. They think, hang on a minute, is Jesus praising this man's dishonesty? Is he holding him up as some kind of moral example? And the answer to that is absolutely not. He calls him dishonest. He presents him guilty as charged. What the steward's master commends him for is his shrewdness. It's like saying, what this guy has done is wrong, but you've got to admit it was clever.

And Jesus is saying, yes and you can learn something crucial from him. But to understand that you've got to see why the steward does what he does. And what he is doing is harnessing the power of money for his future well-being.

His aim, in doing what he does, is to take his master's resources, and put them to work for his future blessing. He cuts these people's debts in the hope that when he's out of work, they will look after him because he looked after them; that they will welcome him and give him work when his current master kicks him out.

Now, let's say it again, Jesus isn't presenting him as some kind of pattern of morality. This isn't Jesus' guide to doing business and making your way in the world: step number 1: defraud your boss. He isn't praising this guy's actions, he's saying: look you can learn something from him. This man knows how money works. He knows he can use it now to influence his future good. And in v8 Jesus says, 'For the sons of this world [people like this dishonest manager] are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light [than the children of God].'

Jesus is saying that the sons of light, the sons and daughters of the kingdom, the children of God, you and me, don't see that money is to be used now for the future, our eternal future. He's saying that with eternity ahead of us, with the day when money will fail us one day nearer than it was yesterday – we should be just as careful and diligent in assessing the long term effects of how we use money now, as this guy was in protecting his earthly wellbeing.

But what will that look like? If you want to escape the pull of money and harness the power of money, as you should, what will that look like? Three things:

Firstly, you and I will understand that we are stewards. Jesus says, v13, 'you cannot serve God and money.' We have to decide who we are going to serve. Is it ourselves, money, or God. And once we realize it has got to be God, we begin to see that everything we have is His. Every last dime is His. And He has entrusted His wealth to us. So, it's not the enemy's – so you don't need to feel bad about having it, it's your Heavenly Father's and He has graciously given it to you to enjoy and to steward.

Secondly, how you steward it will be marked by generosity. Look what Jesus says in v9, '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.' Now, you might hear that and think, 'What! Am I supposed to try and bribe people to be my friends? Surely Jesus doesn't mean that!' And you're right, he doesn't mean that! He's saying, use the wealth entrusted to you to make friends who will welcome you into eternal dwellings – friends who will be there to welcome you when you die and enter into God's eternal kingdom.

Just imagine this scenario: you take your allowance, or your salary, and rather than spend it all on yourself, you start giving some of it away. Some you give to a Bible translation project for a people group in Asia who don't have the Bible in their own language. Some you give to church, and some you give to a Christian

humanitarian relief organization. With the help of the money that you gave, imagine the gospel of John gets translated. An elderly woman is given a copy, reads it, and comes to believe in Jesus. With the help of the money you give to church, Mark's salary is paid for. Through his ministry, a friend who was invited to the youth or student group gets converted. Through the money you give to the humanitarian relief organization, food and medicine is distributed, houses are built, and some of those people, whose lives are saved from famine or disease, see the witness of the Christian workers, and come to believe in Jesus for themselves.

Then one day, you die. The day your money comes to an end. Who will be there to welcome you into God's Kingdom? Whose going to be at your welcome party? The old lady who believed through John's gospel, translated into her language with the help of your money will be there. 'Thank you! I am here because you gave: welcome to your eternal home.' Your friend who came to know Jesus will be there to welcome you: 'Thank you for supporting that pastor with your money! I am here because you did!' And the individuals, who you have no idea about, who you will never meet, but who came to Christ because you gave to a missions organization will be there: 'Thank you for giving - for feeding me, for clothing me, for giving me shelter, but most of all for letting me hear about Jesus. Welcome to your new home!'

That is how to make friends with unrighteous wealth, friends who will welcome you into your eternal dwellings, through the wealth that could corrupt you but whose power you have learned to harness in generosity.

But the third thing that will mark how you harness the power of money for eternity is faithfulness. V10-11: Jesus says, '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. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches.'

Jesus is saying that this age is the training ground for eternity to come. This is just the dress rehearsal. And our current wealth is just the tester for whether we can handle the real wealth in eternity. You see, one of the ways money corrupts is it keeps you rooted, fixated, caught up with *this* life, it can be like a pair of cement boots keeping you stuck to the stuff of this world. But Jesus is saying this is just the rehearsal. And whilst we tend to think of money and wealth as the real riches, Jesus is saying, no, this isn't the real stuff. The real riches lie ahead.

And money is just the test-bed of our character, of what we really believe about eternity, of whether Jesus is really our greatest treasure or just a nice add on. And it's in our faithfulness in the small things that our character gets revealed. You see it's in the small details that we want to dismiss and say, 'o that doesn't matter,' where Jesus says, 'o yes it does!' How you do your taxes, how you file your expenses, young people - how you handle your allowance now: you may think, hey its just a couple of franks, it doesn't matter. Jesus says, it does matter because it's not about the amount, it's about your heart.

So, escaping the pull of money and harnessing the power of money we will be marked by the attitude of a steward, by generosity and by faithfulness, even in the small things.

Now you might hear that and think, 'Martin, that sounds suspiciously like you can buy your way into heaven.'

Paying your way into Heaven

Does all this mean, like the medieval Roman Catholic Church taught, that you could buy your way into eternity? And the answer of course is no. Does how we use money now have eternal significance, for us and for others, absolutely, but the debt we owe to God can never be paid by money. But it still needs to be paid, and it is in Jesus giving himself for us that our debt is cleared. It is in the sacrificial generosity of Jesus that our way into heaven is paid for.

And understanding that and knowing that and experiencing God's generosity in your own heart, that He gave up His greatest treasure for you, that will give you the desire and the power to steward His wealth generously and faithfully.