

LUKE

Part 61: “In Light of Eternity” (pt. 1)

Luke 16:1-18

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Sunday, August 18, 2019 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

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. 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.

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.”

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

¹⁸ “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. ¹

Introduction

After a long pause, we are returning to our journey through the gospel according to Luke. And nothing says, “Welcome back to Luke!” like the bizarre and perplexing chapter that is Luke 16. If during our Scripture reading you found yourself scratching your head, saying, “What in world is he going to do with that passage?” You are not alone. It reminds me of the time when I read Luke 16 last Monday, and I asked the question, “What in the world am I going to do with this passage?”

At Redeemer Christian Church, we value what is called “expository preaching.” This means that the great majority of our Sundays, our preaching systematically works

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 16:1–18.

through books of the Bible, line-by-line, verse-by-verse. As a church, we take the Bible very seriously because we believe that it is God's inspired and authoritative revelation to us. One of the reasons we preach through books of the Bible is because we want to treasure all of God's word to us, not just the parts that you like or I like. We want Redeemer to be a place where you hear what Acts 20:27 calls "the full counsel of God"; not a place where you only hear my favorite things to talk about or the five topics that I think will make our church bigger. That means that we from time to time we will run headlong into hard to understand passages of Scripture like Luke 16. But here is the good news: often times when we are forced to dig, we find that there are great riches in the depths of God's word (cf. Pr. 25:2).

Luke 16 wasn't always confusing. These words would have made a lot of sense in Jesus's time and culture, but we are a little far removed from the world of the first century. Think of it this way. There can be challenges in communicating with people who are significantly older or younger than you. We call this a "generation gap." People who speak the same language and who are alive at the same time and live in the same county can use the same words but mean different things. Now, imagine that generation gap spanning multiple centuries, continents, and languages, and how much distance those things create between us and the world of the New Testament. But when we choose to do the hard work of bridging that gap, we can understand what God's perfect word can say for our life today.

As far as context goes, Jesus is making his final journey to Jerusalem. Increasingly, he has stepped up his level of urgency as he approaches the cross. He is giving lots of teachings to his disciples (μαθητάς) about how to live their lives in the light of the kingdom of God (Lk. 16:1). In fact, what holds this chapter (and even the first half of chapter 17) together is Christ's challenge for us to think beyond the here and now and instead live in light of eternity.

When you get to a hard passage of Scripture, it is important to ask good questions of the text. So with that in mind, I am going to organize my outline under the three questions I've been asking all week as I have been studying this text: *1.) What in the world does this weird parable mean? 2.) What about this teaching was so offensive to the Pharisees?, and 3.) Why does Jesus bring up marriage and divorce, seemingly out of nowhere?*

Exposition

1. What in the world does this weird parable mean?

This is a weird parable. It's like an anti-hero TV series where you have a few interesting characters, but no one character is a good guy.

The first character is known simply as a "rich man" (Lk. 16:1). He is wealthy and powerful, and he is using his wealth and power to get more wealth and power. This practice was in itself a shady business because Old Testament Law forbade the lending of money out at interest (cf. Ex. 22:24; Lev. 25:36). How did he get around this, you

might ask? Well, he didn't technically lend money. Instead, he lent out commodities like "oil" (6) and "wheat" (7).² But he doesn't handle the dirty work directly. That job is for the second and main character of the parable – "the dishonest manager" (οἰκονόμον τῆς δικίας)(8).

The dishonest manager hasn't been doing the best job. A report is brought to the rich man that the manager is "wasting" (διασκορπίζω) his wealth (1). Interestingly, it's the same word used for the prodigal son "squandering" (διασκορπίζω) his father's wealth in the previous chapter (15:13).

The manager gets called into his boss's office, and he is told to turn in his accounts because he is going to be relieved of his duties. But even though the manager wasn't too concerned about furthering the rich man's interests, he is now very concerned about furthering his own interests.

His body will not allow him to do hard labor for income, and his pride will not allow him to beg for mercy (3). So he concocts a microwaved retirement plan. Before he turns in his books, the manager quickly calls in several of the rich man's debtors. He then tells them that he is going to reduce their outstanding balance by 20-50% (5-7). He essentially invents the debt settlement industry, because he knows he's going to need to ask for some big favors. Specifically, he would like to be received into their houses (4,9). To put it bluntly, when he loses his job, he is going to need a place to crash.

And, no doubt, the debtors would be very happy with the dishonest manager. Imagine if someone said, I can cut your mortgage debt in half. Wouldn't you be a little more inclined to say, "Sure, you can stay for a week in my guest room"?

At the end of the story, the rich man is impressed by the dishonest manager's "shrewdness" (φρονίμως ἔποίησεν)(8). He says, "Well, this guy might be lazy, but he is not dumb!" And that is the end of the story!

No one in this story is a good guy. The dishonest manager is under a dishonest boss trying to make his way in a dishonest world.

So is Jesus commending the dishonest manager? No, and yes. Jesus is not praising the manager's dishonesty or underhanded business practices, which are sinful. *But he is commending the fact that even an immoral man like this is able to have vision for something beyond his present moment.*³

Jesus is saying if unjust, ungodly people can think beyond their immediate present circumstances so as to make preparations for a future that is to come, the people of God should all the more live their present lives in light of eternity (9-10). We are called to be a people who are living not only for the temporary and transient, but those who

² Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 193.

³ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 412.

live for a greater kingdom that is to come. If we truly believe in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus, shouldn't our present lives reflect that truth?

As Paul later rights to the Roman Church: ***“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”*** (Romans 13:11–12, ESV).

This should cause us to ask ourselves, “How often do we really think about eternity? What are we doing to cultivate in our hearts an awareness of eternity?”

2. Why are the Pharisees so upset at Jesus?

Now, the Pharisees have been getting mad at Jesus for quite some time now. But what is it about this teaching is offensive to them? In principle, they should be shouting “Amen!” to Jesus’s teaching about living for eternity. The Pharisees are religious leaders, after all. These are supposed to be the super-spiritual guys that care about the things of God more than the average person.

But Jesus knows better. Jesus sees beneath the veneer of the Pharisees’ outward spirituality, and that despite all of their big God-talk, they are men who are very much caught up with the things of this world.

At the time of the first century, the Roman Empire ruled over the Jewish people. The Pharisees were a group of Jews who, even though they were under Roman rule, they cared very much about keeping the Jewish people holy and separate from the unclean ways of the pagan world. They felt like that if they followed their rituals and laws rigorously enough that God would give them a restored national kingdom for Israel. Their religion was a stepping-stone towards the goals of military victory and material blessing. In other words, they said they were worshipping God, but what they really wanted was what they thought God would give them – prosperity and power.

Jesus has now just called them on the carpet. He says, ***“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”*** (Luke 16:13, ESV). The word for money is “mammon” (μαμωνᾶς), but it is also wealth and material pleasure and prosperity. Jesus is saying you can appreciate mammon. You can utilize mammon to pay your bills and provide food for your family. But you can’t serve material blessing as if it were the end all be all of your life. You can’t love mammon and God at the same time.

But then look at the next verse: ***“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him”*** (Luke 16:14, ESV). The Pharisees loved them some mammon! In their hearts their hope was set on this world. Because of their this-worldly orientation, although they practice some of the outwardly visible matters of the law, the Pharisees neglect weightier things of “the Law and Prophets” (cf. Mt. 23:23).

We need to hear this as American Christians because sadly, like the Pharisees, God's people today can live with our hearts and our hopes set on this world too.

Jesus is saying to them, and he is saying to us: *“Don't find your hope in the things of this world. A new kingdom is at hand. Eternity is breaking into our midst. We must live in light of this new reality!”*

But what does it mean to live for eternity? Should we go out and do some new radical thing that is extraordinary and world-changing and newsworthy? Maybe, but that is never how we start. Instead, Jesus is calling his disciples to live in light of eternity in small, simple, everyday moments of life. He is calling us to spend our money and our time and our conversation and our thought-life such a way that reflects that we believe in an eternity that is to come. We are to see eternal significance in the small things. We are to be faithful in the little (10).

We live in a world where it is all too easy to believe in the concept of eternity but live for this world. It is easy to do business in such a way that we are not breaking the law, but we are not exactly living above reproach either. We might even be willing to cut some corners if it makes a profit or gets us ahead. It is easy to parent in such a way that we say we care about eternity, but what most of our thought-life and energy is related to our kids is along the lines of how good they are doing in school, how good they are doing in sports or in band, and what kind of college they can get into. What this text is calling us to is an eternal perspective on even the most daily and ordinary things of life. Jesus is calling us to live faithfully to him even in the small things.

But the extraordinary thing is that when God's people commit themselves to being faithful in the little, it changes the world! Like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a mighty tree (cf. Lk 13:19), when God's people are willing to work from the margins of society to give witness to the hope of the kingdom of Jesus, it can change the course of history – and it *has* changed the course of history.

As C.S. Lewis has written, *“Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world. If you read history you will find that the Christians did the most for the present world are just those that thought the most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot in the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you'll get earth “thrown in”: aim at earth and you'll get neither.”⁴*

⁴ C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 118.

3.) Why does Jesus bring up marriage and divorce, seemingly out of nowhere?

After all of this teaching on eternity, Jesus makes a one-verse-long, non sequitur statement about divorce and marriage: ***“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery”*** (Luke 16:18, ESV).

Outside of living in Jesus’s time and culture, this statement seems like it comes out of nowhere. But inside of Jesus’s time and culture, this teaching would have been immediately recognized as another confrontational statement that exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were religious leaders that prided themselves on the observance of the Old Testament law. So they cared a whole lot about Sabbath and circumcision and kosher food and ceremonial washings. But they also tended to ignore big parts of the Old Testament law when it was convenient.

One part of the law that they tended to ignore was marriage. Both the Old and New Testaments tend to make a pretty big deal out of marriage. According to God’s design, marriage was to be a faithful covenant union between one man and one woman that was enduring (cf. Gen 2:24; Mt 19:3-9).

But according to the Pharisees, as long as you were a man, marriage was something that you could take or leave.⁵ In fact, it was very easy for a man to procure a divorce from his wife for any reason. Now, that might not sound shocking or scandalous in our culture, but for a woman in the ancient world, this was a scary situation. If a man divorced his wife, she suddenly found herself in a position without a means of income, support, protection, and shelter. Divorce was devastating then, and it often continues to be devastating now.

As I say this hard truth, I know several people in this room who have gone through this experience. Broken marriages are sadly part of this broken world. Scripture even teaches about biblical grounds for divorce (Mt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15).

But the emphasis of what Jesus is saying is that marriage is not trivial before God. Marriage was designed by God as a signpost that points to God’s eternal and enduring love for his people. Later in the New Testament, Paul will even say that marriage is a mystery that is ultimately about Christ and his church (Eph. 5:32).

Now there is a lot that the Bible says about the design and the beauty of a Christian vision for marriage and sexual ethics. It is not the time or place to get into those details based on this one verse.

⁵ Wright, 198.

What I will say is this Christians should view marriage and practice marriage in such a way that points toward eternity. We should care deeply about the sanctity of marriage. And here is what I don't mean by that. I am not saying Christians should expect people with different worldviews to think about sex and marriage the same way that we do. What I am saying is that how we practice sex and marriage and singleness should give witness to the truth of the gospel we claim to believe. In other words, if you are really concerned about how culture has defined the institution of marriage, but you are unconcerned about whether or not you sacrificially love and respect your spouse, you are doing it wrong. If we want to sanctify marriage, we must seek to have marriages that embody goodness and truth and beauty.

We are to look at marriage, as we are to look at all of life, in light of eternity.

Conclusion

The challenge to live for eternity is not an easy thing to hear from Jesus. It wasn't easy to hear these words then, and it isn't easy to hear them now. But Jesus knows what it is like to take the hard road. He is not going to Jerusalem for the pleasures of this world. He is going to die on the cross for our sins and our eternal salvation.

Unlike the dishonest manager, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, not just lower our debt. He will pay our debt in full – a debt so massive that we could never pay it ourselves. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus is the truly faithful one. He was faithful in the little by living a perfectly righteous life for decades in obscurity. And he is faithful in the big, by dying on the cross and rising again for our salvation. Jesus is the one who is faithful to his bride, now and forevermore.

So Redeemer Christian Church, in our daily lives, may we be a people who live our lives now in light of the eternal reality of Jesus.

As the author of Hebrews tells us, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV).

AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Starters

- 1.) *Read Luke 16:1-18, and put the main ideas of this passage in your own words.*
- 2.) *Although this is a challenging passage of Scripture, a major theme includes living our lives now in light of eternity. How often do you think of eternity? How might we cultivate an awareness of eternity in our lives?*
- 3.) *What are ways that we can be faithful in little, everyday tasks in such a way that points toward the kingdom of God?*
- 4.) *In the context of verses 1-17, Luke 16:18 talks about the importance and sanctity of marriage. How should an eternal perspective shape the way Christians understand marriage and singleness?*

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