

Critiquing Basic Assumptions

Luke 16

What would it have been like to converse with Jesus and just talk about life? We read in the gospels about this exact experience as lived by others. One example would be the time when Peter asked the Lord, "When my brother sins against me, for how long should I forgive him, as many as seven times?" Remember that Jesus' answer was not what Peter expected. Jesus did not agree with Peter's premise. He did not respond at all in the direction that Peter expected. Jesus answered, not seven times but seventy times seven times. The sense that I want you to have is that it wasn't safe to talk to Jesus. I am using the word "safe" in the sense of expecting what you get and getting what you expect. Jesus was a teacher who taught what was most important whether His listeners were open to the truth or not. What you should expect in conversation with Him is to have your thinking challenged as never before. Do not expect to pass His test. There are in each of us patterns of thought and expectation that are in contradiction to the spirit and principles of the Word of God. Jesus knows exactly where all of these errors lie and He knows how to expose them for what they are. If you want to engage with Jesus, prepare to change. Changing you from who and what you are into the person He created and redeemed you to be is His singular agenda. Believe me, none of us are there yet. Expose yourself to Jesus and He'll turn your world upside down. Does that sound scary? Does such a prospect make you nervous? Relax. Believe. Trust in Jesus. He will not destroy you. He will build you up. He will not take away from you but He will add to you. You will not be worse off but you will be so much better off. Our scripture today is a case in point. If you hear what Jesus is saying it will challenge your assumptions and introduce a transformation of thought that will bring you to a new and better place. Prepare for a new life!

Our chapter, Luke 16, is very tightly put together. The parable of the unjust steward is a problem passage because it is difficult to interpret it. It seems to contradict normal sensitivities. Money and goodwill are viewed as competing commodities. In the middle of the chapter, the Pharisees respond with derision to what Jesus has said and Jesus replies with what appears to be a random selection of truisms that may not at first seem to apply to anything else that is a part of the larger discussion. Then, Jesus told the story of the rich man and Lazarus who was a poor man who knew and sought alms of the rich man but in a great reversal, the outcome of the story finds the poor man comforted in "Abraham's bosom" and the rich man suffering the torments of hell.

It might be helpful to start at the end rather than the beginning. In Bible times, wealth was associated with blessing. The spiritual giants, Abraham and Job and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and even Moses in the end achieved great prosperity and power. In contrast, poverty was seen as a curse. And the poor included all of the disadvantaged; widows, orphans, the blind, deaf, and lame as well as the indebted and the strangers in the land. The story of the rich man and Lazarus ignores these assumptions and also any doctrines defining true spirituality to draw a picture of contrast that reveals a rich man in hell and a poor man enjoying the comforts of heavenly bliss. The story puts a question to the listener. You can't miss this question. It is what the story is about. At the end, would you rather be the rich man or Lazarus? This question was unthinkable. It upset everyone's assumptions. Is there a relationship between poverty and divine approval? Are the poor rich and the rich poor? But don't go too far with this, the question is, which person was better off and what about them would have made such a stark difference in the outcomes of their lives? But also don't miss the clear implication that there are some (many) poor who are better off than the more obviously advantaged classes. In the mix are the choices that we make. Wealth creates great responsibility before the Lord and no one is a law unto themselves. The level of responsibility that accompanies wealth may be an ironic disadvantage from the perspective of eternity.

In the middle section of the passage, Jesus is derided by the Pharisees who were as a matter of core values, lovers of money. They also thought of themselves as

spiritual giants. Whatever success they had in accumulating money was attributed in their minds to God's blessing and served as a proof that they were right with God. So Jesus said to them, "You are those who justify themselves before men, but God knows your hearts..." They had no distinction between the material and the spiritual. The concept of giving up the material in order to have an advantage spiritually (outside of their tithing which was a show of their spirituality) was completely foreign to them. Jesus' warning, "Lay not up for yourself treasure on earth..." was nonsensical to them.

The law and the prophets had contained many cautions in respect to wealth. In case after case, compassion and social responsibility are lifted above the accumulation of more money by the wealthy. The announcement of the kingdom of heavens coming alerted the people to a new era of God's specific work. These were not normal times but special times in which exceptional sacrifices would be required of the faithful. The most spiritual were not the wealthy who had everything but the disciples whether poor or rich who were willing to leave everything behind and follow Jesus.

These values expressed by Jesus had the support of Scripture. Jesus lived in complete compliance with all Scripture. The Pharisees and the super religious of His day had devised ways to get around the clear teachings of the Scriptures in order to live as they desired. One of those primary desires that motivated them was to be rich. Another example of how they short-cut the Bible was their practice of divorce and remarriage. They used the law to legitimize their infidelity. Jesus was saying that if you use the law to get rid of a wife in order to be with someone else then what you have done is just as wrong as if you had not covered yourself with all the paperwork. Again, they were making things up for their own "advantage" instead of submitting to God through obedience to the Scriptures.

The unjust steward took bold action for his own advantage with the outcome of securing a future that would otherwise have been very bleak. His master also profited by the collection of otherwise bad debts. He commended the last act of the steward and characterized it as shrewd. He recognized that in his effort to

secure his own future the steward had also turned "bad" money "good" and this benefited the master even though the steward at this point was not motivated by service but only by self-interest.

Jesus turned this into a life lesson for His followers. Learn something from the world people who are shrewd in respect to this life and apply what you learn to how you approach a life with eternal values. "Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home." If you can trade money for eternal gain then you should do it every time. What is the money of this world compared to the riches of eternity? You can't take it with you but you can invest now in that which pays later. Gifts to those in need, money for missionaries, supporting the ministry of your church, giving away Bibles, taking care of widows and orphans. These are all eternal applications of temporal resources. We live between two worlds. One world will burn with fire and everything in it is destined to be destroyed. The other world will be secure for eternity. In which world do you want to build up your treasures?