

Home Church Study Guide—May 23, 2010
Kingdom Life in the Everyday (Luke 16)

Luke 16 is one of the most highly debated chapters in this gospel. As always, these studies need to be subjected to careful consideration and discernment. What I first want to do is consider the “bottom line.” In other words, is there a basic understanding of this parable with which everyone can agree? Ultimately, no matter how you understand this parable, Jesus is saying that money has not value unless it somehow helps or assists that which is eternal. So, no matter what, we can agree on that. Also, Jesus is calling us to integrity, pointing out the importance of being honest with what we have. We cannot serve two masters. We either pursue God or pursue money. Again, no matter what else we take from this passage, these truths are basic and clear.

I believe the story of the dishonest manager is a classic example of what I call a “gotcha” story. It is an extremely effective method of teaching if done correctly. It clearly stands as a comparative story to that of the prodigal son. That wonderful parable tells us of the true heart of God, longing for the lost to come home. The story of the dishonest manager shows how the Pharisees saw God, and it is a startling contrast! The dishonest manager has no redeeming qualities (though some have tried to “rehabilitate” the man). He is dishonest, has no integrity, and is lazy. He is caught cheating—skimming off the top-of his master’s goods. At this point, the prodigal son and the dishonest manager have a similar story, but the dishonest manager does not repent. He just does all he can to use his shrewdness to benefit himself. He not only steals in the present, he sets up a system where his stealing benefits and secures his future. Now watch the reaction of the master/father in this story. He commends the man’s shrewdness!! Are we to believe God is to be understood as commending dishonesty? Surely not! But that’s how the Pharisees effectively saw God. They had taken all of God’s gifts and made them their own. They honored one another for their shrewdness! Jesus here is telling a story that conforms to their foolish view of the nature of God who would commend them for their scheming. Do you think Jesus would teach us to use our wealth to secure eternal benefit through scheming? I believe the NRSV has it right when it translates the word for wealth as “dishonest wealth.” There is a negative context which justifies the wealth discussed here as wrongfully obtained.

Jesus clearly “got ’em” in their hearts. After His sarcastic story of the master being impressed by His fired manager’s dishonesty, Jesus says, “whoever is faithful in a little is faithful also in much.” This is exactly opposite of what the manager did. He should have repented and thrown himself at the mercy of his master as did the prodigal son. But instead, the manager was even more dishonest. If we cannot be faithful with the little we have in this world, how shall we be entrusted to reign with Him for eternity? THIS IS A BIG QUESTION! We must see ourselves in a context bigger than just our own lives in this world! It does matter whether we are honest with that which we have been given. We each have our own little kingdoms here on this earth over which we exercise control. If we are not honest with that which we have, how can we expect to reign with God over all He controls? We are either in training to honor God or we are being dishonest with what we have. We cannot serve both God and wealth. We cannot praise God with our lips, but use our lives to amass dishonest wealth. Those things which the rebellious human heart sees as something to be prized (shrewdness, dishonesty, pursuit of wealth) by humankind are an abomination in the sight of God. There is no room in the kingdom for a self-advancing ethic at the expense of others. We must repent. Jesus came to bring a total change of heart. It is a change of heart that will not allow for dishonest use of wealth. It is a change of heart that will allow us to embrace and imitate the very heart of God—who calls us to faithful integrity.

All of us are in training. What are we training to be? What is our view of the purpose and scope of our lives? Are we bending all the rules, dismissing the teachings of God about such sacred things as marriage, living as if life were about our happiness and comfort? Do we think, like the dishonest manager, that we can take the wealth of our master and misuse it to our advantage? And, if we get caught, we can wriggle our way out of responsibility—maybe even using our earthly wealth to our eternal advantage? The call of Jesus rings out again. If we are misusing the inheritance granted by God, let us not imitate the dishonest manager. We know the heart of God. We know He is longing for us to repent and come home! Full sonship awaits the repentant heart. God’s judgment awaits the shrewd, unrepentant “mismanager.”

It is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking life is about us! Is the story of the rich man that much different from how many of us live? Do we live sumptuous lives while others starve? Here Jesus is continuing to teach us about the heart of God. He is concerned about all of His children (all of humanity), and if we are well blessed, we must not think that means we are free to do what we want with what we have. If we are blessed with earthly wealth, if we are not faithful over that which ultimately has no meaning (earthly wealth), why should we expect to be blessed with true and eternal riches? If we separate ourselves from God’s heart and passion now, why would we expect to be accepted into His bosom after physical

death? The rich man seemed to have it all, but a gate separated him from his opportunity to meet the needs of his fellow man. As Jesus tells the story, he is describing a man so fully consumed by his own well being that he would not even share the discarded food from his table with the beggar at his gate. Lazarus' condition was so desperate that scavenging dogs feasted on his oozing wounds. What are we to do? In and of itself, wealth is not evil. The wealthy father feasted at his prodigal son's return. What is so dangerous is closing our gates and letting the sick and the poor die in agony while we feast in what is essentially emptiness—our own selfish interests. This rich man could have been a rich benefactor, but instead spent his wealth on a fine house, fine clothes, and sumptuous food— all for himself.

The difference in the lives of Lazarus and the rich man is immediately seen at death. Lazarus is carried by angels to be with Abraham. We are not told why he is given such exalted treatment, but the story would lead one to believe that God was saying to His angels, "he has suffered enough, now give him comfort." The rich man is simply buried. He finds himself in torment, agonizing in flames. I am not sure how much this parable is intended to be an actual description of what happens after death, however, it is a powerful description of a wasted life! If we live in sumptuous, self-focused "dignity" in this life, and we throw our wealth away by soaking up the gracious gifts of God for ourselves, and we miss the reason for which we were created— to live in His image as a generous giver, what else should we expect but punishment? What was once a moveable gate— all it took would have been for the rich man to open his gate to an ill and starving man and give him *the scraps from his table*—now becomes an unmovable, fixed chasm. The rich man's wasted life had built an immovable separation between himself and the comforting rest provided by God in the bosom of Abraham. Pathetically, the rich man quickly insists that Lazarus relieve *his* suffering. Unwilling to express mercy by giving Lazarus the scraps from his table in life, he did not hesitate to ask Abraham for mercy, calling on Lazarus to bring him relief from his agony. There is a clear, brazenness to the rich man's behavior even in death. He refers to Abraham as "father" even though there was nothing in his life to show such a relationship other than his self-supposed status. His language even suggests he expects Lazarus to serve him because of his earthly status! We see no signs of repentance— only self concern.

Even in what is often seen as a redeeming behavior in the rich man (his request for his brothers) we see the self-serving nature of his heart. He did not request the chance to make his wrongs right. He wanted to save his brothers. His circle of concern was those with whom he shared his earthly status. He didn't ask for his wealth to be distributed among the poor. He wanted to warn those closest to him to avoid the suffering he was experiencing. But Abraham correctly pointed out that even if one was raised from the dead, those living such a life would not repent. This truth would be verified by the resurrection of Jesus Himself. When confronted with the reality of His resurrection, the religious leaders immediately concocted a story of His body being stolen rather than facing the truth vindicated by Jesus' coming to life. Oh, the dangers of a self-focused life. Even the One raised from the dead will not be heard by those satisfied by a life of sumptuous self-focus.

The real question is "What do we see as the purpose of our lives?" If we live for the accumulation of wealth, it is a wasted life. Earthly status and wealth ultimately have no value or meaning. We cannot serve both God and wealth.

"So What" for Home Church discussion:

1. What are ways in the past we have misused life for our advantage instead of God's glory?
2. How have we demonstrated faithfulness over that which has been placed in our charge?
3. Are there "Lazaruses" around us? Individuals or situations that need our help that we simply haven't seen? Find a situation of need as a small group and respond to it appropriately.