

There are some things in this world that should inspire a natural and healthy level of suspicion and caution in us. Unfamiliar dogs, for instance. You don't pat that animal unless you know him.

Nigerian princes. They're often less legitimate than they might claim.

Perhaps one of the big ones, young preachers who preach a sermon on money. A dollar sign in the opening slide should inspire some caution.

Well, let me tell you two things: first, have pity. Last time I preached Luke 16 I was an intern and I got the joyful job of preaching through the whole chapter 2 weeks in a row. The whole thing is about stewardship and money, so I basically became the church's fund-raising preacher for a few weeks.

Second, the Bible does speak significantly about money. Jesus, in particular talked a lot about people's money. And there was a reason for that.

Love for money is one of the most alluring temptations there is. That's pretty easy to see. Last year Australians lost more than 340 million dollars to scams and that's just the ones that were reported.

Why? It's important we don't oversimplify, some people are legitimately tricked without unhealthy desire present, but often it is because so many people want more than what they have, and are willing to take a risk for it. Or, more simply, because people love money.

This is an area that many of us struggle with. Often the touchiest part of a Christian's life is their wallet, and how they are stewarding the resources, both financial and other, that God has given them.

And it's worth saying from the outset: I am certainly not immune here. I haven't been scammed out of large quantities of money, but I have gone through serious times of struggling to trust God whilst in a financially difficult situation.

Well, will you turn with me to Luke chapter 16 and we're going to see what Jesus has to say to us on this complex subject.

Now, just to give you a little background, Luke gives us chapter 16 on the assumption that we have seen the back drop that he laid in chapter 15 where Jesus spoke to two groups of people, on the one hand the sinners and tax collectors, on the other the Pharisees, the supposedly righteous people of the day. He explained, most notably with the parable of the prodigal son, that they were both lost and in need of God's salvation.

There he characterised these two groups as two sons of a Father. The sinners and tax collectors, he says, are like the famous prodigal son, who prematurely takes his inheritance, and runs away to squander it in a foreign land, goes to Vegas, so to speak. Or, I don't know, the Gold Coast maybe? But he finds that when it runs out and times get tough, his new friends abandon him and his Father is his only hope, so he returns to his Father humbly and repentantly, knowing he deserves nothing, and finds to his joy that his Father welcomes him with open arms.

He casts the Pharisees as the older son who works tirelessly for his Father. But the parable makes it clear that he is doing that not out of love for his Father but out of desire for his Father's stuff. And by the end we see that although both sons had been living with false motives, the repentant prodigal son has been accepted back and celebrated, whilst the seemingly obedient older son remains on the outside thanks largely to his own arrogance and lack of grace.

So in Luke 15 Jesus has made it clear: both groups are sinners, living lives that were offensive to their heavenly father, both deserving God's wrath, but as the loving father of wayward sons the Father was willing to suffer a great cost to himself to provide them both with mercy and redemption. And it is largely into these two groups that the account of chapter 16 is separated.

And today we're looking at the first half of the chapter, where Jesus speaks to his disciples, many of whom were of the tax collectors and sinners. And he gives them a parable that exhorts us to steward what we have for a purpose. And what we won't get to this time around is that he then goes on, in the second half of chapter 16, to deliver a much more ominous parable to the Pharisees, with a basically similar message.

And the unified message of our passage and the chapter is this:

**Christians follow Christ with everything they've got, in pursuit of eternal gain.**

If we are saved by Christ, then we are to use everything we have now for the sake of eternal gain.

What God has given you now is not given for your gratification of temporary desires in this life, but for the pursuit of eternal desires.

Let me encourage you, take a bit of time this week and sit down and read through Luke 15-16, to get a better view of what's happening here.

Well, let's get to it, Luke 16, from verse 1.

(Read Luke 16:1-8)

So Jesus, speaking to his disciples, tells them a story: there's this rich guy and he has a steward, that is, a man who takes care of his financial interests. And he hears that the steward has been stewarding very poorly. In fact he has been wasting his master's money. The Greek word there in verse 1 which the ESV translates as wasting, can mean scatter, and has the sense of just throwing it away. It's the same word that we saw in chapter 15, the prodigal son, when the younger son went to Vegas, so to speak, and squandered his inheritance. And so the rich man, the boss tells his manager to get his stuff together, clear off his desk, organise his books, turn them in, and leave. He's sacked. The steward panics. He doesn't know what to do. His job is his livelihood, but a life behind the desk has left him unsuitable for a labouring job and he's just too proud to beg. And so he gets sneaky. He decides that, before he hands over his books, he will call in the people who owe his boss money, and he will cut down their debts so that essentially they end up indebted to him.

Now what do we expect the master to do? Will he give the steward a boot in the bum on the way out the door? Will he say "right, off to prison with you! You won't get out until you have worked off the last cent!" Well, interestingly, no! In fact we're told the master commends the steward for his shrewdness. It's like he finds out that this steward has swindled him out of even more of his money and he says "niiiiiiiiice!". "Oh man, great job, I certainly didn't see that one coming".

And then finally Jesus draws his conclusions from the story. Finally, it's all going to make some sense, right. What does he say? "the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. 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".

I MEAN WHAT THE BLAZES IS GOING ON HERE!? This is one of those passages that we might find easier to skip over in our reading. You know, you're reading Luke and "Oh the prodigal son. Amazing, what a message of redemption and the Father's love. Oh hey, a parable about a manager who is dishonest and gets congratulated for it and Jesus says the message is use unrighteous wealth to make friends..... aaaaaaahm.... I'm sure we'll look at this one in Church at some point, I might just move on. Oh thank heavens, it's verse 10!"

But seriously, whilst this is notoriously one of the most difficult parables to interpret, there is a vital point to it. Just for clarity's sake, let me tell you what I think it is, and then I'll show you how we get there.

### Christians give everything they've got to win others.

Why is that the point? Well, there are a few reasons why we have so much trouble understanding this parable. Firstly, we are baffled by the rich man commending his dishonest manager. I think we come out of the prodigal son, where the father represents God, and expect that this parable will fit the formula. But the rich man clearly doesn't directly represent God, and the lesson of the parable hasn't got anything to do with the relationship of the rich man and his steward.

Also, there's some cultural context we need which will help us to get our heads around what goes down here. Many commentators point out that the people of Israel were explicitly commanded in the law not to charge interest to fellow Israelites, and the sneaky way that a lot of "rich men" got around this was to charge extra on the original loan. So for instance, if I was lending you fifty measures of oil, we would make an arrangement and write 100 on your bill. That way you got the oil that you needed to get your venture off the ground, and I made a profit to make taking the risk of supporting you worthwhile. But whilst this was a done thing, it wasn't exactly regarded as honest or upstanding.

So when we read about the manager cutting down the bills, he may just be removing the interest, not swindling his master out of house and home. Now that's not the only interpretation, maybe he was actually swindling his master.

But if this is the case, it gives us a better understanding of the master's reaction, because he can't exactly throw his weight around in the community to get the bills changed again, or make a fuss and throw the steward in jail, because it might come to light that he was dishonest in making the loans in the first place. So he begrudgingly concedes that the steward has gotten the better of him, and commends him on his cleverness.

And that's important to note too. The master doesn't commend his dishonesty. He commends the clever, shrewd use of the money.

Our next big difficulty is with those words that Jesus uses: "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth". Does he mean we should deal dishonestly to make money to make friends with? What is this unrighteous wealth? The answer to this comes in verse 11, when Jesus contrasts unrighteous wealth with true riches. He made a similar contrast back in chapter 12 when he told his disciples:

*"Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*

(Luke 12:33–34 ESV)

Clearly Jesus' idea of true riches is the riches that come with having Jesus. The riches of eternity with God. So the unrighteous wealth he has in mind seems to encompass everything else. Not necessarily things that are bad, but just all of the things we have in this life that won't come with us to the next.

So now that we know all that, we can look at the parable with fresh eyes and understand what Jesus is saying, and we'll see that there is actually symbolism going on here, but not in the same way as the prodigal son. Let's have another look at what we've got:

Jesus is teaching his disciples here, so the steward, the main character of the story, represents them. And this steward discovers a painful truth: his employment is soon to be terminated. It is inevitable, there is nothing he can do to prevent it. All that he can do is choose how to use the things that will soon be taken away. Now he could go out and have one more party, senselessly waste a little more of his master's money. But instead of focusing on the very brief time he has now, he focuses on what will come after he is sacked, and so he uses everything he has, knowing he won't have it for long, to make friends.

The connection we, and the disciples, need to make here is that the steward's job equals our life. We know that, because when Jesus applies the story he talks about the friends that we make receiving us into eternal dwellings, that is, life after this life. So Jesus is saying: you have a limited time in this world, and none of your money, your car, your stocks, your family photos, the pleasant view from your house, none of that will come with you. But! How you use those things now *will* have consequences for then.

In fact he gives us one very specific instruction on what our priority is to be when we consider how we use what we have now. Use it to make friends who will welcome you in to heaven. That is, use it to build relationships to share the gospel. Use it to show Christ's love and to have opportunities to share about what he has done.

So, the point of these verses is that **Christians give everything they've got to win others.**

A great example of this mentality comes when Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica (1 Thes. 2:19) : "what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."

*There's* a person who sees the priority of missional living in the Christian life. Imagine the joy of knowing on that last day that these are the ones whom God saved through you.

Everything you have is given to you for this purpose. And understand that it **is** all going to be taken away, "when the wealth you have in this life fails", says Jesus in verse 9. Not "if it fails" or "in case it fails", but "when it fails". One day it will all be taken from you, at a time you don't know.

And let me warn you, it is a fool who says that he will start being a good steward tomorrow. Not many people die expecting to die. In movies, people usually have time for some last words, or they've at least managed to accidentally say something significant just beforehand, but that's not how it usually happens in the real world.

I once saw a man die at a fast food drive through. Middle of the day, he was doing nothing evidently life threatening, no one was waving any weapon around, he was just in his car getting soft serve with the grandkids ... and his foot happened to slip at the wrong moment as he leaned out of his car door and moments later he died. No chance to make amends for how he had used what he had been given. No chance to utter a final prayer for forgiveness. No words.

The stark truth of the matter, that everyone knows but we all so often just try to put out of mind, is that we really can't assume that we are any more than one heartbeat away from the next life.

And Jesus says: How you use what you are given now will reveal whether you can be trusted with what you could have then.

Read it with me from verse 10:

(Jesus continues on) "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? 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."

The point of what Jesus says here is that **Christians give everything they've got to gain more of God.**

In fact, he Jesus basically says that how we are using all that we have now reveals whether we're ready to receive the true riches of having God. What this essentially boils down to for us is, again, God has given you what you have now, are you using it well? Because it's not yours.

Notice there: "if you have not been faithful in that which is another's". Jesus is saying that what we have in this life is given to us temporarily. We are stewards of it, but God is the owner. So we need to use it for his purposes, not ours.

In these verses, Jesus speaks about the riches of this world and the riches we gain by following Jesus, and notice that he is really clear: The riches of this world just don't compare to God's riches.

Look at the words he uses for what we have now: "a very little", "unrighteous wealth", not even ours "that which is another's".

And then compare to how he describes the riches that are to come "much", "true riches", "that which is your own". The riches of this world, as sparkly and wonderful and alluring as they may sometimes seem, are nothing compared with the riches of having Christ.

You see, stewarding what you have been given, as a good follower of Jesus, isn't about always saying no to good things, not having any desires or when you do denying them. It's about desiring something better. And I'm convinced that this is the key to stewarding what you have well. You see all of the things we could desire in this world: money, sex, power, respectability, stuff none of those things will ultimately deliver the satisfaction that they offer. I mean it's kinda obvious when you think about it, and the best place to look is the world of advertising. Here's some examples:

I passed a billboard once which read: "The perfect place to live: Rochedale." Is it? No offense, those who live there, but perfect?

My favourite is smartphones, I may have used this before, but one of the galaxy s phones was advertised with the slogan "life companion". They released another one a year later. That's not the best life expectancy.

Indulge me for one more, what do these two signs have in common?

Well, for starters, they were both on the 15-minute walk from my house to this church at the same time.

Second, they are both offering to fulfil you. One with internet, the other with a pre-owned car.

And third, they both lie!

Name the car, or motorbike, that has offered you lasting peace? Tell me about the internet connection that satisfies you?

But here's what Jesus says over in Matthew:

*"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

(Matthew 6:19–21 ESV)

To have Jesus is the greatest treasure there is. Other treasures fade, he doesn't. Other fulfilments are fleeting, he lasts. Other things will ultimately disappoint, he does not.

To have God almighty,

the most glorious God,

who is more powerful than we will ever imagine,

who made all of the riches that we go after without breaking a sweat,

who is love, so much so that he came and died on a cross and carried all of our sin so that we could have him.

That is true riches. What we have in Christ now, and will have in Christ in the end will last for ages upon ages and on into eternity.

And when we realise that, that's when we can really steward our money well, because if Jesus, who works for me to know him more and to have more of him, if he wants me to get rid of some money, or to share it to share the gospel, then of course I will because it will mean more of Him! That's why Jesus says here "you can't serve God and money" because it just doesn't make sense. Why would you? If you're serving money, if that's what you're going after, even part of the time, then you haven't properly understood how glorious it is to have and pursue Jesus.

And we should emphasise, this isn't saying that we are saved by our use of money. No-one is forgiven by God because they use their money correctly.

But rather, how you use your money will reveal your salvation. How you use everything you have will reveal whether you have truly believed.

If you are a saved person, then you have had revealed to you the surpassing worth of knowing God, and so you will bend everything you've got toward serving him, and gaining more of him in your life.

Now it's not without reason that Jesus chooses to emphasise this point with the example of money. He continues to do so throughout chapter 16. Money has been a trap for so many Christians. I think it's easy for us to look at people like Joel Osteen or Creflo Dollar, prosperity teachers, men who fly around the world telling people that God wants them to be rich now, and think to ourselves "I'm pretty good. I don't believe that the gospel is about me getting money now", but the question which Jesus is asking us here is: "do our lives actually reflect us believing that?"

Let me ask you a question: If you won the lottery today, what would you do with the money? You know, you get the call that someone has bought you a ticket and you are now the proud owner of \$76M dollars, what now? Anyone, throw out an answer if you dare? (pause)

Maybe some of us would go and buy a beautiful house in the Gold Coast hinterland, and a car and invest some for later and put some in the bank. Here's a quiz question (and yes, quiz questions in my sermons are always a trap, count on it, no you may not abstain) do you think it would be the right thing to do to use most or all of that money for the glory of God and the growth of his kingdom, either in your own life or by giving it away?

So, here's a thought: from the poorest student among us here at Grace Bible Church, to the wealthiest man or woman, on a global scale, we are lottery winners. Understand me, I'm not talking about how we have been Spiritually blessed, I'm talking about money. We are wealthy beyond compare.

I found one website comparing average monthly disposable income country-by-country, that is the money you have left over every month after you have bought the basic necessities you need to survive. Australia sat at number 10. At number 20 there was Norway, earning on average about \$1000 less in disposable income per month than us. At 50, the 46 million residents of Spain, at about \$1600 of monthly disposable income per person. At 100 on the list, the roughly 2.5 million residents of Namibia, on about \$600. At 150 on the list are the 160 million residents of Bangladesh, with about \$300 of disposable income per month. At number 176, the last country with enough statistics to fit on this particular list, the 11 million Cubans, with an average monthly disposable income of \$25. Now remember that's an average, and in many countries a significant portion of the wealth is in the hands of a small part of the population, so that number would be considerably lower for most of the people in those nations. Many people do not have disposable income at all, in fact many don't even have the money they need for the necessities: food, water, shelter. So you are a lottery winner. So the question is not what would we do with that lottery money, the question is: what are we doing with that lottery money?

Or, to phrase it like verse 12 of this passage: what are we doing with God's lottery money?

You might expect that, given this is a sermon in a Church, I'd say that the first place to give is here, to the Church. But I don't think that's right.

Don't get me wrong, the church you attend should be the *second* place you should look to answer that question. That's pretty high on the list. It is important to give to the Church you are a part of because that giving enables the work we do here to spread the gospel and equip the people who come to this Church, that's you, to do the same.

But that's second place, because the first place you should look for where to give your money for God's glory is in your own life. Using your money for God's kingdom is not primarily a case of giving it to an organisation to use well, but of using every cent well, including but not limited to what you give to the Church, and to mission groups like compassion. Every cent is given to you for his Kingdom.

And there are just an unending number of ways that can look, but all with that priority at the root.

When you buy a house, are you looking at it thinking: how will I use this to make disciples for Jesus? When you buy your television or computer, you need to ask yourself: is this something that will glorify God in my life? And both of them can be.

For some, this might look like pursuing a higher paying job with a heart to give more. For others, this might look like taking a big reduction in pay in order to have more time in your life for making disciples, or for going off to Bible college.

It could look like intentionally budgeting for more visitors in your home, or keeping money aside to bless your neighbours.

Here's a question, how much money am I keeping saved up just to give away when someone needs it?

I remember I was leading a small group once and we came to a time of prayer, and I asked for prayer for a friend and his family who were going through some terrible struggles with one of their kids' health, and financial needs because they lived in a country where they needed to pay for all of their healthcare.

And another guy in the group, Dan, says "Oh hey, we have an account of money that we set aside just for situations like this so we're equipped to give when people need it. We have a thousand dollars if it would help." That money was there because they wanted to take every opportunity they could to display and share the truth of the gospel. Incidentally, he was an apprentice with the army at the time, so not the highest paid position in the world. That was an inspiring example of this mentality for me.

More recently I've had plenty of chances to see people in this church who don't have lots of money, uni students, young parents, nevertheless giving generously of what little they have to show the love of Christ and to promote the spread of the gospel and the growth of God's people.

Do you want to know the worst part of all this? The worst part is us. Because as much as we might know this up here, we're going to fail at believing it regularly until the end of our lives. Don't get me wrong, as people of faith we can grow in this and through God's sanctifying work as we come to a deeper faith in the truth of who Jesus is we will come to know more and more that he is better, and our lives will reflect that. But there will be times when we fail at that.

But do you want to know the best part of all this? The best part is Jesus. You see we fail as stewards, we fail to desire what is best for us and we listen to the voice of the old ways that says that there is something else to fulfil us. But Jesus didn't fail. He stewarded perfectly, used everything he had for the glory of God because he desired only that. He was perfectly faithful in the little of this life. God the Father could never have demanded that Jesus hand in his books, because he was entirely undeserving of death and punishment. "No-one takes my life from me" said Jesus. No-one could take his life from him because he was, and is, God and he was utterly perfect and without flaw. "No-one takes my life from me" said Jesus "but I lay it down of my own accord". Jesus chose to die, he offered up his perfect stewardship to atone for our faults and flaws. He offered up perfect, unadulterated worship of the Father to

atone for the idol worship of our hearts. And not just that, but so that we could have God's Holy Spirit in us teaching us and changing us so that we can finally use what we have been given for the glory of the one who is so much more.

So whilst we should learn from this passage to use our money for God's glory, and to worship Him alone, the main thing we should get from this passage is a reminder to look at the perfect steward and wonder. The one who has at great cost given us his perfection. The one who gave everything so that he could welcome us into eternity. And as we see him, we let how he is change how we are.

## **Stewardship: following Jesus with all you've got (Luke 16:1-13, May 27, 2018)**

**Main Point: Christians follow Christ with everything they've got, in pursuit of eternal gain.**

Please pick a few relevant questions from each section and ensure the majority of the time is focussed on application.

It might be worth saying to your group at the start that a parable makes a point, but as an illustration, it doesn't transfer entirely to the situation that is being illustrated. So, for instance, whilst God is the owner of all we have, in the parable the owner does not make an exact 1:1 comparison to God.

Read through Luke 16:1-13 as a group.

### **General questions:**

1. How does this parable speak to us today? What do you think is the point of it?
2. What priority does this parable give us for how Christians live their lives now? What does it look like for us to steward "shrewdly"?
3. Compare the two different types of riches in verses 10-13.
  - a. What exactly does each one represent?
  - b. What does it mean that earthly riches are "that which is another's"?
  - c. How does our use of the "little" of this world relate to us receiving the "much" that God has to offer?
  - d. What exactly is the "much" that we gain with having Christ? How does this motivate us to steward well?

### **Application questions:**

1. How specifically should the truth that true wealth is having God affect how you use what you have now?
2. Do you find yourself falling into the trap of thinking that you would be generous and a better steward if you had more?
3. What specifically do you need to change in how you approach your use of your money (/time/life/stuff)?
  - a. Perhaps a helpful activity for people in the week might be to think through how you spend your money, maybe even just look at your last pay or two, and examine how much you spent on worldly gain, and how much on heavenly gain.
4. When you fail to steward well, where do you turn? How can you know that God forgives you?