



LESSON 17

Luke 16:1-31

Information for Teacher

This week's text includes two units that merit some advance thought. First, we get a story of a steward/manager who gets praised for what seems like a deceitful practice. Your class members will understandably have some questions as to what exactly is being taught in the story of the shrewd manager.

Second, Luke gives us Jesus' teaching on divorce in a quick fashion without much context or additional explanation. As you are well aware, marriage/divorce/remarriage is a complex issue that has caused real pain in many lives, including some in your class. This week's class time is not the ideal way to treat this issue in depth – the rules, the exceptions, etc. The basic issue is being faithful. This whole passage is about being faithful in many ways – with our possessions, in our marriages, to our God, etc.³⁸ So it's probably best to highlight that broad theme. If your class should happen to try to explore the divorce issue in more depth, feel free to allow your class elder, if applicable, to address some of that. Don't get caught in an uncomfortable situation. Let other church leaders help.

Opening Discussion

- *Tell the class about a time when you felt you got swindled.*

Introduction

In this passage, Jesus speaks to his disciples (although the Pharisees overhear) about wealth. He tells two stories about rich men and their use of wealth in this life. As we read, be thinking about forming a fuller biblical theology of wealth and possessions.

The Biblical Text

Luke 16:1-15 (The Shrewd Manager)

³⁸ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2004), 198.

- Jesus has been talking to the **Pharisees** in chapter 15, but his attention now shifts to his **disciples**.
- Jesus will now tell the first of **two stories about rich men** (16:1, 19).
- The rich man (owner) accuses his **manager** of being **wasteful**. He calls the manager in and fires him.
- The manager is **fearful for his future**:
 - He can't dig.
 - He won't beg.
 - He needs a new job.
- To **make friends** who might hire him (or at least welcome him into their homes), he devises a plan:
 - He goes around **reducing what people owe** to his former boss.
 - This will **curry favor** with people he knows.
- There are several possible things the manager is doing:
 - Jews were forbidden to lend with interest. Maybe the owner was breaking the law and charging exorbitant interest *in kind*, and so this manager is actually just **chopping off the interest** and performing an **act of pious justice**.
 - Ringe writes, "by reducing the amount owed, the manager is doing justice."³⁹ This reflects Jesus' new economy.
 - Or maybe the manager is just **reducing prices** that might be too high. The owner can't call him out on it, because the people have already shown their gratitude for the price break. For the owner to negate the deal would put him in a bad spot. The deals have already been promised.
 - In fact, the owner commends the manager for pulling one over on him.
 - This undercuts the owner but makes friends for the manager who is about to need such friends.
- The story ends with several teachings:
 - Use **worldly wealth** (which you can't take with you when you die) to **gain friends** and **make life better** for others (16:9).
 - Prove yourself **trustworthy** by how you handle wealth and possessions (16:10-12).
 - Choose which **master** you will serve: God or money (16:13).
- The story ends with a reminder that the **Pharisees are listening**. They **love money** (16:14) and obviously don't like this story.
- Jesus tells them their **value system runs counter to God's**. Through Jesus, God has been instituting a **new value system**.
 - The things the Pharisees value, God does *not* value.
 - This is another instance of the theme of **reversal of fortunes**, which finds its first articulation in Mary's song. Rulers will be brought down, but the humble will be lifted up. The hungry will be fed while the rich are sent away empty. (See Luke 1:46-55.)

³⁹ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: WJK Press, 1995), 214.

- *What exactly does the manager do that is commendable?*
- *What parts (if any) of this story are we supposed to imitate?*
- *In what ways do we make money our master?*
- *What are some cautions for us when we read and try to apply this story?*
- *How does this story show God's new value system?*
- *Wright writes that we run into trouble "as soon as we begin to think of money, or land, or other people, as commodities we might own or exploit."⁴⁰ Discuss your response to this.*

Luke 16:16-18 (Teachings)

- Most Bibles set this section off from the previous one, and for some good reasons. However, we need to **read this in light of what Jesus has just said to the Pharisees** in 16:15. God has a new value system!
- BUT, **the old Law has not been rendered useless** because of this.
- In fact, it would be **easier for the skies and earth to disappear** that for "the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law" (16:17).
- Jesus will come back to the **importance of the Law** later in the Lazarus story.
- In illustrating the **relationship of the old Law to the new reality** brought about by his appearance, Jesus talks about **divorce**:
 - The old Law **permitted divorce** if the husband went through the procedures to issue a legal certificate of divorce (see Deut 24).
 - But, under Jesus, a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman is an **adulterer**, certificate or not (Luke 16:18a).
 - In a related teaching that follows from the previous statement, a man who marries a divorced woman commits **adultery** (16:18b).
- It is important to keep 16:18 in **context**. This is **not a random drop-in** of such an important teaching. Jesus is using marriage/divorce as one **example in a broader discussion** about the Law.

- *Discuss the relationship between the Law and the new covenant in Christ. How is the old Law still useful to us?*
- *Does Jesus (or any New Testament writer) ever call the Law bad?*
- *Understanding that divorce is a very difficult thing to discuss and certainly to endure oneself, what is the broader principle about fidelity in marriage that is important here?*

Luke 16:19-31 (The Rich Man and Lazarus)

- This is the **second story** in this chapter about a **rich man**.
- While alive, the rich man, who dressed and lived in luxury, passed by the poor beggar, Lazarus.

⁴⁰ Wright, 198.

- Note: this is not intended to portray the **real Lazarus** who is a living person in the gospel stories.
- Lazarus is afflicted with **sores**.
- Lazarus has begged the rich man daily for **scraps** to no avail.
- Lazarus gets a **name** in this story, while the rich man remains nameless. We quickly learn who the hero/important character is in Luke's account.
- Both men die.
 - **Lazarus** goes to **Abraham's side** (i.e., to **Heaven**, or something like it. Remember, this is a parable, not an insight into what life-after-death is really like).
 - The **rich man** goes to **Hades** (again, **Hell**, or something like it).
- The **rich man** can look up from Hades and **see Lazarus in Heaven**.
- The rich man asks Abraham to allow Lazarus to give him (the rich man) just a **drop of water**.
- Abraham **won't allow** it. The rich man got good things in life while Lazarus got bad things.
 - This flies in the face of a belief that says "**good people get good things**. Thus, if I have good things (i.e., wealth, possessions), I must be favored by God."
 - This mistaken belief finds its root in a reading (or perhaps misreading) of texts like Deuteronomy 28, 30, and other passages, where **blessings are promised in response to obedience**.
 - Job and Ecclesiastes question this **relationship between obedience and blessing**.
- No one can now cross the **great chasm** between the two.
- The rich man asks to at least be allowed to **warn his family** by way of Lazarus. He wants Lazarus to be sent to warn his family not to act as he (the rich man) did.
- Abraham again says no. He believes that having "**Moses and the Prophets**" (a way of saying the Old Testament) should be **enough** to prevent a fate like the rich man's.
 - This Old Testament is enough to **call people to repentance** and thus avoid a fate like the rich man's.
 - Lazarus coming back from the dead **wouldn't be an effective warning** if people have not paid attention to an even greater sign: the Old Testament (16:31).

- *What were the sins of the rich man?*
- *What excuses do we make for not helping people like Lazarus today?*
- *In what ways does the Old Testament call people to repentance?*
- *Is this strictly a moral tale? Should we just let the poor stay poor so they'll get to Heaven? (Or is this a misinterpretation of this story?)*

Application

- *In what ways can we use our wealth and possessions for the benefit of others (as opposed to storing it up)?*
- *Discuss the concept of being frugal in light of the story of the owner and manager, especially the teaching of using worldly wealth to gain friends? Is this a teaching we're supposed to apply?*

- **Craddock writes, “Anxiety about money is a disease that affects those who have it and those who don’t.”⁴¹ Do you agree?**
- **From these stories, what can we say about a biblical view of wealth?**

Next Week’s Text

Luke 17:1-18:30

⁴¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 189.