

St Andrew Bebington
20th April 2008 AD

Luke 16:1-13

Planning for the future

¹Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'³"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg - ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶"Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'⁷"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'⁸"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. ¹⁰Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³"No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money."

A few years ago a good friend of mine, a curate at the time, was in a staff meeting with his vicar and a couple of others when they were interrupted by a phone call from the local branch of the Abbey National. The manager asked whether Peter, the vicar, could pop over for a few minutes to help them. They had a man in his seventies, a member of the Salvation Army, who had called in to tell them that God had told him to give all his money away. Clearly they thought that they had a bit of a nutter on their hands and they wanted Peter to talk him out of a stupid and rash decision.

When Peter arrived he found a completely sane and mature Christian man. He explained that he had retired a good number of years ago on a perfectly adequate pension. He had his own flat to live in, with no mortgage or other outstanding payments. He had always been a single man, he had no family and no dependents. Quite unexpectedly he had come into an inheritance of several thousand pounds. As he explained to Peter, "I wasn't expecting this, I don't need it, I have everything I need to live on, and after praying about this I believe God would have me give it away for his work."

And the vicar said to the branch manager, "In my judgment he's heard from God quite correctly."

I love that story. It offers a perspective on money so utterly different from that which dominates our entire culture. It is a perspective which reflects perfectly the message of this parable of the dishonest manager: namely, that we should use money for spiritual good.

To be sure, it is a curious parable, with Jesus seeming to praise dishonesty and unethical pragmatism. But we'll talk through it and I hope you will see that that is not the point at all. The big point is quite different and quite simple – simple to understand, that is, but deeply challenging to put into practice. The message of the parable is, as I said: use money for spiritual good. Use money to invest in the kingdom of God. Use money to plan for the future: that is, an eternal future.

In common with most of Jesus' parables this has three main characters, and between them they stand for three related truths. The three characters are the master or rich man, his manager, and his debtors. The three truths are these: from the master we learn that we are all accountable to God for how we use our possessions. From the manager we learn that we should use our possessions to invest for eternity. From the debtors we learn that such godly planning will result in eternal joy. We'll take those one by one, and then see how Jesus pushes the point home further by drawing out two general principles for us to take to heart.

The master

From the master we learn that we are all accountable to God for how we use our possessions.

¹Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'"

Then, at the end of the story:

⁸“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

So, here is the manager called to account and when the time comes for him to give it he is praised for what he has done. Why he is praised, we will come to. For now I simply want us to note the fact of accountability, and the real-life parallel to which this parable points, namely that Jesus’ followers are accountable to God for how they use their wealth.

It is an uncomfortable theme – for me it is, at any rate – but it is a consistent one throughout the Bible.

So last week we heard about tenants in the Old Testament, from Isaiah chapter 5, and from the New Testament, in Matthew’s Gospel, and in both cases they were called to account because God had given them so so much, so generously and abundantly, but they had squandered it for themselves and wasted it.

Then there are the parables of servants being given a varying sum of money and expected to use it wisely and give account for their investing.

Going beyond the teachings of Jesus, we have Paul’s general statements that each of us must give an account to God. We have the famous words from Hebrews – ‘Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account’ – and later in that letter the reference to leaders as ‘men who must give an account’.

In fact, Jesus even said that we will have to give account for every careless word we speak.

God will hold all his people to account.

It is hard for us to get this into our mindset, but there was a time when it was different. The historian Paul Johnson, in one of his books, asked the question: In the late 19th century why was it that British merchant seamen were more trusted than any others in the world at that time? His answer was that for them, living in the wake of the Evangelical revival, the balance sheet of the judgment on the last day was more important, and more real, than the balance sheet of today’s trading. Such thinking hasn’t lasted, as we can see all around us, but here, for a time, was a culture which was aware that there was a day of reckoning to come, that they would be held to account.

Isn’t there a huge challenge for us here? When we think ‘money’ or ‘spending’, do we, at the same time, think ‘God’? Do we ask the question, How does God view this spending decision? I’m not saying we shouldn’t spend: money is for spending; it’s no use for anything else. But do we spend wisely? Do we spend in way which we are happy to share with God and for which we will be content to give an account?

The manager

From the manager we learn that we should use our possessions to invest for eternity.

This is where it looks so puzzling. The manager has wasted his master’s possessions and is about to lose his job. He hasn’t got the skills or the inclination to find another job so he cheats his boss in order to make friends for himself who will look after him when he’s booted out. And for this he is commended. What is Jesus getting at?

Jesus is not commending dishonesty. It is important to note his words carefully, in verse 8:

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

Jesus doesn’t cover up the fact that this man has acted dishonestly. Nor is he commended for being dishonest. He is commended for acting shrewdly. Jesus goes on:

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

In other words, within his own terms of reference, described by Jesus as ‘this world’ or ‘this age’ – that is, in thinking of himself and his own good and his future – the man had acted shrewdly or wisely. He had seen a serious problem looming up before him – he was about to lose his job; his options were limited – he wasn’t able or willing to do manual labour or to beg; so he did what he could to ensure that in the future he would be secure – he turned his master’s debtors into friends. He planned for what lay ahead.

Now that is the parable. The real-life point is that we, as disciples of Jesus, as ‘people of the light’, should also plan ahead. But we should do so within very different terms of reference; we should do so with an eternal perspective. Thus, verse 9:

⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

We too should use money to plan for a good future – but a very different future. We should use our money to invest for eternity, for God’s kingdom. That, says Jesus, is to act shrewdly.

Interestingly, that same word translated ‘shrewd’ or ‘wise’ is used again by Jesus in the parable of the ten virgins. Five were wise or shrewd and had spare oil for their lamps; five were foolish and had no spare oil. And the point is a similar one to that here: wisdom or shrewdness consisted of being ready and prepared for a future whose timing was uncertain. When the bridegroom arrived – in other words, when God’s kingdom finally came – the wise ones were ready.

That is what Jesus is commending to his disciples here: be ready for the world to come. Invest in it. Use worldly wealth – what we might call ‘filthy lucre’ – to gain spiritual friends for the future.

The challenge here, surely, is the question, Do we value that kingdom of God so highly that we will invest money in it?

I once read an article with this imaginary conversation in it. A family is sitting down at the dinner table and the conversation starts like this:

“Children, this is going to be really hard for you, but we’ve decided that we’re not going to be able to go on that holiday to South Africa after all, and we’ll probably have to go camping in Wales instead. The thing is . . .”

And then we were offered three conclusions to the statement. Why can’t they afford this holiday?

1. “The thing is, it’s now three months since Dad lost his job, and he is still not sure when he’ll find one again. We can’t risk spending that much.”
2. “The thing is, now that we’ve decided to send Peter to private school, there is simply not the money to do both.”
3. “The thing is, we’ve committed ourselves to help build that seminary for the poor pastors in Pakistan, and we can’t do both, not this year, at least.”

Number 1 would sadden them, but they would surely understand. Number 2: they might resent Peter his private school, but they can see the economic realities. But number 3 . . . ?

Yet it happens. I’ve heard of people cancelling holidays or downsizing their houses or remortgaging their properties in order to give to an aspect of God’s work which has really caught their imagination and their hearts. A couple of years ago I chatted to the head of maths at our boys excellent grammar school in Kent and he told me that he was going to give up the headship and work a 90% timetable in order to be able to give more time to his family and his church. That is investing for God’s kingdom.

Now I haven’t been here long enough to know people’s circumstances nor to do the maths, so let me simply ask the question, could we at St Andrew’s could invest much more heavily in God’s kingdom without feeling unduly pinched? And if we were to . . .

The debtors

From the debtors we learn that such godly planning will result in eternal joy.

On the subject of planning for the future I remember a friend of mine, not long after he became a consultant surgeon, telling me how very common it was for consultants to work incredibly long hours in order to save masses of money for an early and long retirement, only for them to have so overworked themselves that they died within a year or two of stopping. Here was a planning for a future, but it was for a short-term future and the result was often bitter disappointment.

What Jesus is commending is a quite different sort of investment: an investment for a long-term future where the result will be eternal joy. Verse 9 again:

⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Perhaps we can put it in terms like this:

Imagine Jane Jones of St Andrew’s arriving in heaven a few days before we celebrate her funeral down here. She is met by a small crowd who introduce themselves like this: “Hello Jane, how wonderful to see you. We’ve been waiting twenty years and more for this. You may not remember, but when you were a young woman you were praying about what to do with a sum of money and you ended up giving it to Crosslinks to support a new training and outreach project in our country. As a result of your gift they were able to train several more young evangelists than originally anticipated and a couple of them came to our remote village for almost a year. During that year there was something of a mini revival and all of us here were saved at that time. We’ve been dying to meet you (literally!) and tell you that it was your investment in the kingdom that God used for our salvation. Thank you, and welcome.”

The manager in the parable ensured himself a welcome in this world. Jesus urges his disciples to ensure themselves a welcome in the world to come.

The challenge here – for me at least – is to live by faith and not by sight. I am sure that if I could see such a welcome into the kingdom of heaven I would gladly part with cash for it. But I can’t . . . whereas I can see the next holiday or the new car or the bigger house. We need to live by faith – faith

like that of the heroes in Hebrews 11, all commended for seeing what is invisible – and then we'll be more prepared to invest in what cannot yet be seen, knowing that one day we will enjoy what cannot be taken away.

Jesus hasn't quite finished. He presses the point home with more teaching and broadens out into two general principles we need to hear. First, money is a barometer of our hearts. Second, money is a competitor for our hearts.

Money as a barometer of our hearts

¹⁰"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

Typical teaching of Jesus here: a choice of two ways – either this or this – pressed home three times. If you can be trusted with very little, that is worldly wealth, that is someone else's property, then you can be trusted with very much, that is true riches and property of your own.

The very little is money; the true riches aren't specified, but in the context must refer to spiritual riches, the things of God. The point, therefore, is that how we handle money is an indicator of how spiritually alive and responsible we are. Money is a sort of spiritual barometer, an indicator of the state of our hearts.

Which means that we have a wonderful potential growth point here. When we begin to handle money in a godly way we begin to grow spiritually. So many Christians have found that when they begin to let go of money, when they begin to give, when they begin to trust God for their finances, then they grow in faith and in knowledge of God.

A very promising Christian medical student once gave up his medicine in order to train to become a missionary. The parents of this student – Christian parents too – were absolutely livid with his pastor and blamed him for spoiling their son's career. At the same time the non-Christian medics and friends of their son were queuing up to ask what on earth could be more attractive than a lucrative career as a doctor. What spiritual riches were being discovered there by someone who was proving trustworthy with very little.

Money as a competitor for our hearts

Finally, yet another either-or from the lips of Jesus. Either master money or it will master you. Verse 12:

¹³"No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money."

Everyone serves somebody or something. Everybody has someone or something which has won their ultimate allegiance. And Jesus' point here is that it is impossible to share that ultimate allegiance: either you will give it to money or you will give it to God. What you cannot do is share it.

And surely it is true that though God has many competitors for our hearts, money is the biggest. Who is your master? Who is mine?

Jesus said, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." When it is gone . . . for, of course, it will go. The day will come when it will be gone and we won't take a penny with us. On that day will we have great regrets – regrets that money captured our hearts and we invested for ourselves and for such a short-term future and now there's nothing of eternal value to show for it? Or will we rejoice that we invested so wisely that the results and the fruit will be before us for eternity?