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## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: Accepting the future*

Praise You, heavenly Father, for the powerful ways You govern our world. You have a wonderful plan to lead Your creation through all the ages of the world's existence until it is eventually concluded in You. We praise You, for You seek to guide everything and fulfil your plan in love and justice; You save those who are lost through Your love, and You make all things 'right' through Your justice. ALLELUIA! Your ways are perfect, heavenly Father. **AMEN**

### For myself

*Pray for strength to face any sins that mar your life today. Reach out to the Lord, stretch out your arms to Him and seek His help.*

### For others

*Pray for victims of injustice and oppression, and pray for those who experience this throughout the world as the evil of racial prejudice. Resolve to keep your eyes open for any elements of racism that creep into your own words and attitudes. Whether or not you feel you are a victim of any form of racism, resolve to 'love your enemies', because this is Jesus' command to all His disciples.*

## Meditation

Place your trust in the Son of Man;  
the man who came to show the world  
what life could be for every fallen soul.

Place your trust in Christ;  
the servant of God who was born like us  
yet kept His Father's will as far as death.

Place your trust in the son of God;  
the leader who had the authority  
to confront every evil and evict the devil.

Place your trust in the Teacher;  
the Man who taught the truth, unswervingly,  
and revealed the love of God to all the world.

Place your trust in the Healer;  
the Counsellor who listened and cared enough  
to meet real need in healing and in liberation.

Place your trust in Jesus,  
the Friend of Sinners. Come walk with Him  
whose pathway leads from here ... to heaven.

## Bible Passage

### **Luke 16:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> Jesus then said to the disciples,

***“There was a rich man who had a steward who had been accused of wasting his resources. <sup>2</sup> He summoned the man and said to him,***

***‘What is this that I hear about you? Tell me what you have been doing! You cannot be my steward any more.***

<sup>3</sup> ***“So the steward said to himself,***

***‘What will I do, now that my master is dismissing me? I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup> But I know what I can do, so that when I am removed from my post, people should welcome me into their homes.’***

<sup>5</sup> ***“He then summoned each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first,***

***‘How much do you owe my master?’***

<sup>6</sup> ***“and he replied,***

***‘A hundred measures of olive oil.’***

***“The steward to him,***

***‘Take your contract, sit down quickly and change it to fifty.’***

<sup>7</sup> ***“Then he asked another,***

***‘And you, how much do you owe?’***

***“He replied,***

***‘A hundred containers of wheat.’***

***“He said to him,***

***‘Take your contract and change it to eighty.’***

<sup>8</sup> ***“The master praised the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the people of light. <sup>9</sup> So I tell you, make friends for yourselves by using your dishonest wealth, so that you will be welcomed into their eternal homes when it runs out!***

<sup>10</sup> ***“Whoever is faithful in a little is also be faithful in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is also be dishonest in much. <sup>11</sup> If then you have not been trustworthy with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true wealth? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with things that belong to others, who will give you what is yours?***

***13 No servant can serve two masters; for he will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."***

## Review

Of all Jesus' parables, this is surely the most difficult to understand. At first reading, we may be shocked to find Jesus giving teaching that appears to condone the injustice of some rather dodgy dealing! The steward clearly plays around with the accounts of his master for the dubious benefit of gaining sympathy from his friends after being sacked! I confess I have struggled with this parable ever since I first read it many years ago, and I am only just beginning to find a way of interpreting it that makes sense to me. But first, I must say something more about the traditional way of interpreting this parable, and I will then explain why, ultimately, I have to reject this interpretation and go for what many think is a more speculative approach.

For centuries, the standard explanation of this parable has been something like this. The dishonest steward, having been accused of wasting his master's resources (16:1), manipulates his master's accounts to the benefit of his debtors, and thus gets personal favours from these debtors! This, apparently, is what Jesus refers to later on, when He talks of '*making friends for yourselves by using your dishonest wealth*' (16:9). The message of the parable is then that if we have the skill to manipulate things to our earthly advantage, how much more should we be wise in doing the things of God. Verses 10 and 11 then encourage us to be faithful stewards of God's resources, and verse 13 (which is sometimes separated from this parable, or just not read with it) warns us that we cannot have '*two masters*', and we ultimately serve either 'God' or 'wealth', and must choose which one.

Of course, faced with this, most preachers speak only briefly about the parable and head straight for the very last verse here (16:13). This straightforward teaching of Jesus has the great benefit of being a Scripture verse found elsewhere in the Bible (Matthew 6:24). His talk of '*two masters*' also ties in very well with the teaching of Paul, which talks about the difference between the two extremes of gratification of the '*spirit*' or of the '*flesh*' (Romans 8:4f.), and also the difference between being a '*slave to the law of God*' or a '*slave to the law of sin*' (Romans 7:25f.). Most preachers are far more comfortable with these ideas than Jesus' parable of the dishonest steward!

This, however, is why I am not happy with this traditional explanation of the parable. After we have followed the story itself, which is easy enough to understand, Jesus concludes the parable firstly (16:9) before adding further comments in verses 10 to 12, and then adding a saying (16:13) that gives a new dimension to his teaching here, contrasting God and 'wealth'. However, the teaching at the conclusion to the parable (16:9), does not sound like Jesus' teaching. He seems to tell people who are dishonest to act dishonestly in obtaining friends for themselves, so that they can rely on them when everything '*runs out*'! But surely not! Would Jesus teach this? And what is this about being welcomed into '*eternal homes*' belonging to other people (16:9)? There is nothing else in Scripture like this! John says that God welcomes us into His prepared 'eternal home' (John 14:1f.), but all this here in Luke is very strange!

We cannot try and excuse this passage or pretend it doesn't exist in Scripture, so I reckon there must be another explanation, and I would like to make two suggestions about how to handle this passage. When we put each one together with the other, then I reckon we will arrive at a closer understanding of what Jesus meant by teaching the disciples this parable.

Firstly, I reckon Jesus was speaking somewhat ironically, or ‘tongue in cheek’! Just prior to this parable Jesus had told the powerful parable of the Prodigal Son, which tells the story of a young man who realised he was in a crisis, repented, and returned home. It was a serious parable first delivered to everyone, the Pharisees and scribes and the crowds (15:1). At the beginning of this ‘parable’ however, Jesus turned aside to speak to His disciples, which is not so much a ‘*parable of the Kingdom*’, but a story of how someone with means and authority responded to a worldly crisis (16:1). He was accused of false dealing and successfully managed his own way out of it!

This makes more sense, and explains why in His comments in verses 10-12, Jesus contrasts faithfulness and dishonesty. His point is that the first parable, that of the Prodigal Son, demonstrates an honest response to God from the midst of a crisis, it is ‘*faithfulness*’ that will be rewarded (16:10). However, the story of the dishonest steward describes, ironically, the pointless worldly consequences of being ‘dishonest’ (16:11). The conclusion Jesus paints in verse 12 is then teaching we might expect from Jesus, ‘*if you have not been trustworthy with things that belong to others, who will give you what is yours?*’ This conclusion is the complete opposite to the self seeking ‘reward’ described in verse 9, spoken earlier by Jesus, and somewhat ‘tongue in cheek’.

There is one other theory about this passage that could help us. Those who study the times of Jesus tell us that one of the scandals of the day was the way Jewish people required interest from each other when lending money or other ‘wealth’. This was forbidden in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 23:19, Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:36), but had become well established practice. The theory is that when confronting the debtors, the dishonest steward was acting quickly to reduce the scandal of his having charged too much interest, something that might bring his master into disrepute. He had been dealing shadily, but by acting quickly, he regained his master’s confidence as well as some friends! This seems to make some sense and fit the picture here.

In this interpretation, the steward has managed to sort himself out! Moreover, this way of looking at things still leaves us with a clear picture of Jesus’ teaching at the end of this section of Scripture. There is a radical difference between someone who responds to life’s crises by responding to God, as illustrated in the parable of the ‘Prodigal Son’, and someone who manages a way out of a crisis using skill and experience with handling wealth, as illustrated by the ‘anti-hero’ parable of the ‘Unjust Steward’. As Jesus summarises at the end; ‘*You cannot serve God and wealth*’ (16:13).

## Going Deeper

### ***Notes on the text and translation***

#### **V1 ‘Jesus then said’**

##### *Other translations:*

‘Jesus told the disciples’ (NIV)

‘Then Jesus said to the disciples’ (NRSV)

You may feel I am splitting hairs rather when I highlight this as an issue of translation. However, an important point lies just beneath the surface here. The Greek words at this point indicate that what is being said here follows on directly from the parable of the Prodigal Son., but it is hard to produce a

translation that makes this clear. When it comes to interpreting the parable, this is an important point (see review).

**V2** ***'tell me what you have been doing'***

*Other translations:*

*'Give me an account of your management'* (NIV)

*'give me a report of your administration'* (CEB)

The Greek sentence here is very straightforward, but this is not a situation in which a 'calm and collected' prepared account could be given. The whole story depends on a sense of emergency. I have therefore used a slightly more free rendering that fits with the context.

**V6** ***'take your contract ... change it ...'***

*Other translations:*

*'take your bill ... make it'* (NIV)

*'take your bill ... write'* (ESV)

The Greek word for 'contract' is '*grammata*', and the word translated variously as '*make it ...*' or '*write it ...*' is '*grapson*'. The two are obviously related, and this adds a sense of poetry to the request, which could be translated quite literally, '*take your writing and re-write it*'. If this made literal sense in English it would be the preferred translation. However, I have attempted to capture the idea of re-writing, and used the word '*change*'.

**V8** ***'people of this world'***

*Other translations:*

*'children of this age'* (NRSV)

*'sons of this world'* (ESV)

The text speaks here of the '*children of this age*', but this is not a phrase we use today. However it refers to those people in the world who are outside of the Kingdom, and they are contrasted here in this story with the '*children of the light*' who are in the Kingdom.

**V13** ***'wealth'***

*Other translations:*

*'Money'* (NIV)

*'mammon'* (NRSV)

Throughout this passage we have come across the word '*wealth*', which is my preferred translation of the Greek word '*mammon*'. This word means personal possessions in total, including money, but I prefer not to use the word '*money*', because today, it can refer exclusively to 'paper' or 'bank' money rather than any other measure of wealth. I prefer the word '*wealth*' simply because this includes the idea of all things of value, whether money or property, and this is the idea here.

# Discipleship

## ***Application***

### ***Human nature***

It seems to me that Jesus is speaking here about something fundamental in human nature. People naturally tend to serve different 'masters' according to the circumstances of their lives; they work for an employer, go to church, love their families, support charities and much more, and for most, each aspect of life is separate. It can be very hard to give Jesus priority across every area of life, because it is not obvious how to do this. Of course, we find it easiest to give Jesus priority at church, but many struggle to know how to do this at work, for example, or on holiday or in the home.

Yet Jesus still challenges us to make God our priority in every area of life; He says '*you cannot serve two masters ...*'. We are then left with trying to work out this can be true in each area of life, consistently. We know that this will only happen if we keep the example of Jesus constantly in mind, if we pray, and if we allow God to work in us through His Holy Spirit. We also know that God can do great things if we trust Him, so that even doing such things as working with finances or doing manual work can be transformed. It can be very difficult to maintain some forms of work or some aspects of family life, and give God conscious and real authority and honour in what happens

### ***Serving God and not 'wealth'***

Perhaps more than at any other time in history, our world and its social structures are based on 'economics', that is, on the capitalist system of wealth creation. We can call ourselves 'left wing' or 'right wing' in our politics, but capitalism rules. Capitalism is the system by which money is earned and life is consequently lived, and it would be fair to say that it is the 'god' of our world today, who must be honoured by all without question. If anyone wants to get on, as an individual, as a country, as a church, as a community, then it will always appear, at first, that what is possible is based fundamentally on the wealth available and the skills to use it.

But Jesus rides right through our capitalist assumptions, and although many Christian scholars have worked their way around Scripture to try and claim that capitalism is consistent with Jesus' teaching, their arguments stretch credibility. It is not that Jesus dismisses what people need to do in order to live within this world, but He does say that wealth will not lead us to be fulfilled people and we will not find our destiny in God by means of it, indeed, the opposite. We cannot buck the teaching of Jesus which comes shortly (within Luke 16), concerning Dives and Lazarus. The rich man (Dives) ends up in hell having lived a life full of wealth and presumed on God's love, but the poor man (Lazarus) reaches out to the Lord in desperation and finds the salvation impossible for the rich man (Luke 16:20f.).

So when Jesus says, '*You cannot serve God and wealth*' (16:13), He presents a Christian today with what is probably the most fundamental challenge.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Read the review carefully and then read the passage again to see whether you feel you can accept the author's ideas about the irony used by Jesus. What does this theory say about Jesus' own manner of teaching, and the way he spoke and taught? Have you come across any other passages of Scripture in which Jesus appears to speak ironically?

- Ask yourself whether you give too much attention to matters of money and wealth. Are you focussed on the things of God or on pursuing these worldly things, albeit for a good reason, perhaps for the good of your family.

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. Discuss whether the possibility of this parable being 'ironic' in nature either helps or hinders its explanation.
2. Is it realistic to try and interpret this parable by referring to Jewish practices of lending in the first century, as suggested by the review?
3. What does this parable teach about the Kingdom of God?

## **Final Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, You constantly surprise us by the power of Your teaching, the compassion of Your love and the joy of Your humour. As we read the parables You have taught, help us to see the teaching they contain not merely through a perspective of theological but through the open window of the Father's view of the whole world and its possibilities. Bless us as we read and study Your Word, we pray, so that we learn the truths of the Kingdom and eternal life; **AMEN**

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