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## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: Accepting the future*

*The future is constantly surprising. Are you ready for surprises? Do you welcome changes to your life or the possibility of new challenges? Bring your feelings about these things to the Lord and worship Him for His authority over your future.*

### For myself

Dear Jesus, I have sought to do what is right but I have not always achieved this. I have attempted to be helpful to others but have often failed. I have wanted to be effective as Your servant but have ended up glorifying myself. Forgive me, Lord Jesus, and remove my fear of failure. Bless me as I endeavour to live my life for You, this day.  
**AMEN**

### For others

*Pray for those caught up in the violent storms on the eastern side of the USA. Pray that the after effects of the storm will be dealt with well and people's lives saved.*

## Meditation

Why be blind?

Why live life in ignorance of the future,  
when Christ, by rising from the dead  
has shown us where to go to meet our Maker?

Why be dumb?

Why keep quiet with the world in turmoil  
when Christ, in His care and teaching  
has declared 'Good News', revealing God is love?

Why be ignorant?

Why be satisfied just to follow others  
when Christ, by giving us His Spirit  
has given us personal gifts to use within His Kingdom?

Why be unemotional?

Why tie feelings down inside the soul  
when Christ, in offering His life for us  
has released the heart of God for our redemption?

Why be limited?

Why let sinful nature have the victory  
when Christ, by showing us the truth  
has opened up all things to those who follow Him?

Why not see?

Why not speak, search, know and feel  
when Christ, through resurrection power  
has liberated every soul of faith for glory and eternity!

## Bible Passage

### **Luke 16:14-18**

<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees heard all these things, but they were lovers of money and they ridiculed Jesus. <sup>15</sup> So He said to them,

***“You are people who like to appear right before others; but God knows your hearts, and what is highly prized by people is repugnant to God.***

<sup>16</sup> ***“The law and the prophets stood until the time of John. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to force a way in, <sup>17</sup> yet it would still be easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for one small letter of the law to be missed out!***

<sup>18</sup> ***“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”***

## Review

As with yesterday's passage, this is not easy to understand. If we take the reading as it is, as if read in church on Sunday, then parts of it sound rather strange. So we must study it until we find its meaning, because it is not to be found in Scripture without reason.

Some parts this passage echo great Scriptural teachings from elsewhere, for example, where Jesus speaks of God who *'knows your heart'* (15:15 - see Psalm 139), or where He mentions the importance of the *'law and the prophets'* (15:16 - see Matthew 5:17, 7:12). However, it is hard to find a theme that holds everything together. Obviously, Jesus is confronting the Pharisees, but what is His teaching about the Kingdom of God when He says, for example, *'everyone tries to force a way in'* (15:16)? Then, what does He mean by saying that no *'small letter of the law'* will pass away (16:17)? His teaching could be simply that the Law stands forever, but it is also possible that Jesus was continuing to speak rather *'tongue in cheek'*; this could have been a cutting comment about how the Pharisees were more bothered about details of the Law than their eternal destiny! We must approach this passage with care.

All this comes immediately after a passage in which Jesus did indeed speak rather *'tongue in cheek'* (16:1-13). There, He was disparaging towards those who tried to deal with their eternal destiny using their own dishonest means (16:10,11) and He accused them of trying to *'serve two masters'* (16:13). But the Pharisees overheard what Jesus said and dismissed it out of hand. As Luke reports, they were *'lovers of money'*, and in their understanding of

Scripture, they believed their prosperity was evidence of God's blessing and to them, wealth was a blessing not a curse. They regarded Jesus as a wandering preacher who was yet to show through either His learning or His wealth that God had blessed Him!

With all this in mind, our passage is far more understandable. Jesus immediately points out the attitudes behind the Pharisees' sneers; they were posturing in order to appear '*right before others*' (16:15). Then, by referring to the Psalms (44:21 and 139:23), He reminds them that God 'knows the secrets of the heart' and can therefore see their greed. They Pharisees treasure worldly wealth, but Jesus declares this to be of no value in God's eyes, '*what is highly prized by people is repugnant to God*' (16:15). Jesus has turned the Pharisees' beliefs upside down, but this is a powerful teaching. No wonder Paul says in his first letter to Timothy, '*the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil ...*' (1 Tim 6:10).

Verses 16 to 18 can be confusing (see above), but Jesus keeps to His teaching theme of God's coming Kingdom. Before the time of John the Baptist, God's people lived in a different 'era'; he says, '*the law and the prophets stood until the time of John*' (16:16). In those times, God had revealed Himself through the laws of Moses and the words of the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve (Amos and Hosea through to Malachi). But with the coming of Jesus, a new situation presented itself. God's Kingdom had indeed come (*'the Kingdom of God is at hand'* - Matt 4:17), but Jesus now says something strange was happening, '*the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to force a way in*' (16:17) What does He mean by this?

Jesus is not telling us that because it is difficult to get into the Kingdom of God we must give this all our effort, our '*force*'. How can this be so when He teaches elsewhere that people cannot get into heaven by their own efforts, only through following Him (Luke 18:25f. John 3:16). It is far more likely that here, Jesus is concerned about the many people who are trying to do just this; they are trying to get into God's Kingdom by their own efforts, and principally amongst these are the Pharisees, who strive to come into God's presence by the effort of attaining the exacting requirements of the Law. They were trying to force God's hand by barging their way into the Kingdom by force, and Jesus was not impressed!

The next verse then becomes much easier to understand. The words '*yet it would still be easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for one small letter of the law to be missed out!*' (16:17) are not merely an aside by Jesus directed at the Pharisees, but a tough challenge. He says that God's revealed Law within Scripture does not change, even though the new age of the Kingdom of God has come, because God is faithful and consistent. The trouble with the Pharisees was that they understood God through their own understanding of the Law, and could not see God through Jesus. They could not therefore appreciate the true value of what the Law said about God, about human sin, and the need for redemption, they had trapped themselves within their own legalism and could not see anything else. If they turned to Jesus, however, they would discover that the Law of God was fulfilled in Him (Matt 5:17), and God's Old Testament revelation had not changed.

All this is confirmed by what Jesus says in verse 18, where confirms God's Law in the strictest terms. Jesus warns that there is no divorce in God's Kingdom, and whoever marries a divorcee is guilty of adultery! Now this verse of Scripture has caused great controversy within the church about divorce, so what does it mean?

What Jesus says here about marriage is a 'counsel of perfection', and is in fact more rigorous than the Old Testament. So although Moses allowed men to divorce (not women) as a concession (see Deut. 22:19, 24:1f.), at the heart of the matter, it seems that God did not and does not want divorce (see also Matt 19:9). Moreover, those who flagrantly abuse the privilege of marriage and play with their relationships effectively commit adultery (16:18). But if this it is God's will for marriage to be unique and lifelong, this teaching does not mean that He

does not understand the complexities of human relationships or the problems of sin. Nothing here says that God will not be ready to forgive those who turn to Him when marriage fails.

In His Kingdom, God's rules are absolute, and they are more exacting than the laws of Moses. The pathway by which ordinary people get into the Kingdom certainly involves many things, including failure and the need for forgiveness, and striving to do God's will, but we enter it by Christ alone. As Jesus has pointedly said throughout this teaching, God's perfect will is not found in the Pharisees' self satisfied belief that wealth reflects God's favour (16:15), or that people can get into the Kingdom by striving to keep God's Law (16:16). Luke's Gospel has yet to reveal the full Gospel truth about entering through Christ and by His blood, but in this passage, we gain more than a glimpse of where we are heading.

## Going Deeper

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

#### **V15 'make yourselves appear right'**

##### Other translations:

*'who justify yourselves'* (NIV)

*'who like to appear righteous'* (New Living)

The Greek word here is 'dikaiosune', which is a the common New Testament word for 'righteous'. In providing a translation, however, we should remember that this word was in common use in Jesus' day not merely for theological purposes but for normal speech. I have therefore translated the word in a way that would have been familiar to people of the day in common speech, rather than in the technical and theological manner as used later on in Scripture by Paul in his letters.

#### **V15 'repugnant'**

##### Other translations:

*'detestable'* (NIV)

*'an abomination'* (NRSV)

It is worth remembering the force of this word for a Jew. In the centuries before Christ, their Greek masters had set up an image of Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple. This was an extreme offence to the Jews, who called this the great 'abomination'. It was something utterly repulsive to Jews and to God, and the same word is used by Jesus here. This can be translated in a number of ways from 'detestable' to 'repugnant' or perhaps 'repulsive'; any of these will do, but we understand the sentence best when reminded of this background.

#### **V16 'everyone tries to force a way in'**

##### Other translations:

*'everyone is forcing his way into it'* (NIV)

*'everyone tires to enter it by force'* (NRSV)

The difficulty of this famous phrase is that the Greek is enigmatic. It says roughly this, *'all force their way into it'*. The Greek word for 'forcing in' is debatable, and has been translated in numerous ways throughout history, though I find no good evidence for translating it in any other way.

However, it can help us get the right picture of this phrase if we remember that Jesus teaches that we cannot get into the Kingdom by our own efforts, but by faith in Him (*'No one comes to the Father but through me'* - John 14:6). This brief saying disparages human efforts to get into the Kingdom, such as those of the Pharisees.

### **V17    *'one small letter of the law to be missed out'***

#### *Other translations:*

*'the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the law'* (NIV)

*"one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped"* (NRSV)

The Greek says literally, *'It would be easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for one small stroke of the law to fall'*. The Greek words for *'small stroke of the law'* refer to the fine pen strokes that distinguish between the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which is notoriously awkward to read and copy. Scribes had to learn the intricate art of getting these right, and not everyone was capable of doing the task. There can hardly be a more dramatic way for Jesus to insist that the Law of God stands. Of course, how we interpret it is a matter of carefully following Jesus' own teaching, rather than that of the Pharisees.

## ***Further Comments***

### ***John the Baptist***

There is an interesting connection between this passage and the Gospel of Matthew. The famous verse about people trying to enter the Kingdom of God by force appears in Matthew 11 (11:12), which also refers also to John the Baptist.

This much is clear, but it may be that there is another connection here between Jesus' thoughts and John the Baptist. For John died (Matthew 14:2-8) because he exposed the adultery of King Herod, who abandoned his wife, the daughter of Aretas, and married the wife of his half brother, Herodias.

Is there a hint in this passage, therefore, of Jesus consciously continuing to do what John had done, for His message about divorce here is uncompromising. Could it have been addressed to Herod? It would certainly make sense of Jesus to include this teaching here if it was!

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

***Making sure that what is prized is also submitted***

The challenge presented by this Scripture is for us to make sure we do not prize anything higher than our God, His Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. It can be very easy to value some things so highly that we forget we run the risk of allowing them too high a place in our lives, perhaps even higher than our Saviour.

It is relatively easy however to ascertain what might have become so idolatrous in our lives. If we ask ourselves what within our lives has the power keep us from worshipping God or doing His will, then we will perhaps begin to expose some of the culprits.

### ***Forcing a way into the Kingdom of God***

This Scripture reinforces the clear teaching of the Gospels that we cannot enter God's Kingdom by our own efforts, however hard we try. Those interpretations of this passage that suggest Jesus is teaching about the effort people must put into their walk with God are wide of the mark. Jesus constantly warns against religious presumption about salvation, and this passage is yet another of this kind. 'Those who take the Kingdom by force' are people who, like the Pharisees, try to gain the good things of God by their own efforts and in the light of the Gospel, should know better.

### ***Divorce***

After reading this passage, I remain of the opinion that while the goal of marriage remains absolute, and as Jesus taught, this does not mean to say that it is right to ignore the problems created by divorce. If a Christian who is indeed married in the sight of God then sins and consequently divorces, without dealing with this before God, then I reckon it is right to say that if they take up with another person it is the same as adultery, as Jesus has said here. However, around the frayed edges of this relatively clear cut picture are the many less clear cut facts about human relationships which represent the truth about many marriages.

Also, because I hold this 'high' view of marriage, I am of the opinion that the relationship many people enter into when they get married can be far from what God intended. Many marriages that come to grief come nowhere near God's ideal in Christ, whether they were conducted in church or by the state, and I do not think Jesus intends to curse with the accusation of adultery those people of the world who try to find a new partner when their sadly faulty marriage fails. Those for whom this is true need Christian ministry, not church condemnation.

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

- What do you prize most dearly? It can be hard to challenge yourself in this way, because we can easily block off certain parts of our lives from the challenge of the Gospel, yet we must be challenged not to do this. It is only as we yield all things to God who made us that we become the complete people God wants us to be. So set all things aside, especially all you truly value, and submit to your Lord and God.
- Discuss with another Christian friend whether you believe it right for the church to sanction divorce, and in what circumstances?

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

1. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about the Kingdom of God?
2. Which parts of this passage do you find most difficult to understand, and discuss whether this study has helped or hindered your understanding of it.

3. What does the Law of God in the Old Testament teach us about the nature of God, and how can we live God's 'Law' today as followers of Christ?

## Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, I know that I am a sinful person, who struggles to find the right way to live and who longs to get it right! Help me, I pray, as I seek to walk by the guidance You have given me in Scripture, and through the fellowship of my church. Make me steadfast and true to Your calling. AMEN

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