

A wise investment

Luke 16:1-15

Today's passage is all about money. And its lesson is that Jesus' family are *not* to be all about money. And to teach us this lesson, Jesus tells a story with some shady characters doing dodgy deals, and then tells His surprised followers, 'Be a little more like them.'

His story in vv.1-8 is about a guy who was entrusted with looking after stuff that didn't belong to him. Then in vv.9-15 Jesus does my job for me by offering three teaching points off the back of that, all to do with money.

The first thing to see as Jesus' people here, (and often the last thing we accept), is the connection between the story and the subject. Jesus teaches that *your money is not really your money*.

Have a look at vv.11-12. Jesus talks about handling worldly wealth as the training ground, and future true riches being the real prize. And He says the former doesn't belong to you, but the latter will.

Tom Wright comments: 'What they are, we can hardly guess, but there are 'true riches' which really will belong to us, in a way that money doesn't, if we learn faithfulness here and now.'

How you use the money that you manage matters. Not because it belongs to you, but because it doesn't. In the eternity we are being prepared for, God intends to give you something more true and good, and less fleeting and misleading, than money. In the meantime, in this life there is money to handle - whether a lot or a little - to get some practice for our true inheritance.

But if the money we take in and pay out doesn't really belong to us, whose is it? Well, I bet you can guess the answer. If we're the servants in this story, then the money really belongs to the master. It belongs to God. And the master wants to see the money that rightly belongs to Him wisely used to further His interests, rather than ours.

Now this is an idea that many Christians believe with our minds, but fewer of us believe with our actions. We can say, 'Oh, everything we have belongs to God really, I'm just looking after it' (and Scott and Emma did a great sketch a few weeks back to show that this is what handing over your life to Jesus means). But what are the distinct ways that a follower of Jesus uses money?

How do your financial actions demonstrate that you really do believe you're the manager, not the owner, of what's in your bank account?

Firstly, *use the money in a forward thinking way*. In the story Jesus tells, a servant who is about to lose his job acts with a lot of foresight. What matters to this servant is worldly wealth and job security. So he thinks two or three moves ahead to secure what matters to him. And his play involves winning friends to do it. It's dishonest, calculating and very, very dodgy dealing. But he gets a 'well played, touché' from his former master.

What the master applauds is not the dishonesty - it's the shrewdness. The forward planning. The thinking ahead two or three moves. After His story, in v.8 Jesus observes that the people who belong to this world are better at this stuff than the people who belong to Him. When it comes to money and making your way in life, the people of the world invest thought and time into how to make a future for themselves. They think two or three moves ahead for what matters to them.

In v.9, Jesus doesn't conclude from this that His people should learn to be just as cunning about securing a good financial outcome for themselves. But He does suggest that we should be just as shrewd, wise and forward-thinking about securing what matters to people of the light (which, if you need a reminder, is in v.9 - it's dwelling with God forever).

He teaches us to use worldly wealth to gain friends for ourselves (that's as opposed to using friends to gain worldly wealth for ourselves, which we see plenty of in the world around us). And Jesus says that using money in this way is a good investment, because using something that isn't going to last forever for the sake of something that is makes a lot of sense.

He's not teaching us that we can buy our way into Heaven, or buy our friends into Heaven. 500 years ago a Reformation began in the Church in part because people thought they had to bung a pay off to the Church in with their prayers for themselves or their loved ones recently deceased to get to Heaven. Lots of people went to lots of trouble to remind that Church that the only way we can and the only way we need to be saved forever is through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, by faith in Him.

So what could it mean to use our money in an eternally forward-thinking way? What 'friends' could Jesus mean for us to 'win' with worldly wealth? The Greek in this verse suggests that it's these actually these friends who are

going to be doing the welcoming to your eternal home. Who could be doing that?

Well, there's a clue later on in the chapter, in the parable Jesus tells about the rich man and Lazarus, which we'll look at next week. It's a story about a man who was wealthy in this world going to Hell, and begging that a poor man he' ignored all his life would welcome him over to Heaven. Spoiler alert... the answer is no.

God loves the poor. He desires to draw in those in need. In Isaiah 1 God scoffs at worship that neglects the needy. In Isaiah 58 God spells out that tackling injustice, and meeting physical needs in food, clothing and shelter is how to be His people. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells another story that shows our provision for those in need relates to our eternal destiny. In James 2 it's spelt out that if you wish the poor well but do nothing to help them, your faith is dead.

Use your worldly wealth - whether you have a lot or a little - to win friends amongst the poor. The abandoned. The forgotten. The people without voices and without choices. Use you money for advocacy. For clothing. For shelter. For charities that are doing something practical. For people you actually *know* that you can *directly help*. Don't just wish them well. Do something.

This is how God the master wants to see the wealth that belongs to Him used. And it's also how you invest in eternity - other people's eternities, as they come to know the God who moved you to meet their needs. And your own eternal welcome from those people who say, 'come in and enjoy our hospitality here, the way you showed us some before.'

The people of this world may use the money that they think belongs to them to win friends amongst the rich to seek their place in this world. But Jesus' people use the money that they know doesn't really belong to them to win friends amongst the poor to seek an eternal place for the giver and receiver.

How are you already regularly using the money you manage to bless those in need? Is it a serious commitment or a token gesture? Is God leading you to new investments here?

The next thing that Jesus teaches His people to be distinctive about in their dealings with money is that *we use the money in an honest way*. This might seem an offensive comment; as if Christians are the only people who shoot

straight with their finances. Of course you don't have to be a Christian to be someone who is completely honest with your money - but it helps.

It helps because we are people who know that not one thing is done in secret, but all in the eyes of the God to whom it all belongs. Because we know that it's not what you give but what you keep that He is counting. Because Scripture tells us often that God is disgusted with 'dishonest scales' (it's in Leviticus, Ezekiel, Micah and three times in Proverbs).

Because Jesus and Paul both taught us to pay our taxes in full (Luke 20 and Romans 13). Because Jesus celebrated with a man who turned away from dishonest dealings (Luke 19), but put to death two people who decided to try to lie to God and His people about money (Acts 5). It's not just the fear of God that drives us to be honest managers of money though. It's the really positive motivation that Jesus offers us back in our passage, in Luke 16:10-12.

If you've been trustworthy with this fleeting pretend stuff called money in this life, you'll be trustworthy with the real treasure that's coming in eternity. So whether you're managing a dozen estates, or trying to balance a budget on benefits - your character in how you handle what you've got matters. There's a lot in it for you in the life to come. If, on the other hand, you've been dishonest and careless with it here and now, why would God entrust you with true riches later?

You don't have to be a Christian to be honest with your money. But you have to be honest with your money when you're a Christian. If there's a debt you owe, pay up. Be dependable with your payments - don't be late. Don't overcharge clients in a bid for piling up the dosh. Charge a reasonable rate for the type and quality of your work. Don't cut corners. Don't pull the wool over anyone's eyes. Don't try to 'get away with it' when you're selling your car or your house. Don't lie to get your money back. Be trustworthy with money in the sight of the God who is assessing what unknown riches to give you permanently.

Some of those dos and don'ts are easy enough for the comfortable and well off (and if that's you, then get on with these things and let's not make excuses). But they can seem like ethical luxuries to some people who want to love and serve God, but genuinely struggle financially, and it's actually easier said than done.

If that's how you're feeling about it, have a quiet word with me some time. God can help - He can use us as a church, and there are others locally whom we can get help from together too.

What three actions do you need to take this week to straighten up financially?

The final distinctive about money that Jesus teaches His followers to demonstrate is to *use the money for God, not as God.*

You know how in lots of the things of life, we say 'Well, it's not black and white, it's a bit of a grey area...', or 'there's not just this or that, there's more of a spectrum that people are on...'? Well, Jesus doesn't speak like that in v. 13. When it comes to God and money - it's one or the other. He couldn't be clearer about it.

Each of these things - God and money - can be King in a person's life. In previous months, we've talked about how everybody has something as King, either God, or some idol that is taking His place as the point, purpose and path setter at the heart of you. There are many false kings competing for top job in your identity - family, career, partying, travel, a campaign or cause. But money is a particularly common and stubborn rival to the One true living God revealed in Jesus.

All of us manage money one way or another. So all of us have money, to a greater or lesser degree, have money in our lives. So we're all tempted to let money take over as the thing we *serve*. There's lots of ways that people end up 'serving' money. Here's a few:

- Trying to get as much of it as you can. You think that the more you have, the more you possess of it, but what tends to happen is the more you have, the more it possesses and controls and dictates you.
- Spending it on things that demonstrate: 'Look, I spent a lot of money on this.' We end up literally buying in to keeping up with the neighbours, and causing the neighbours to try to keep up with us. Appearances become what counts. Sacrificing money on what is shiny and new to show off is just worshipping at the wrong altar.
- Making decisions and picking sides based on where the money is. It's easy to favour the rich where there might be something in it for you. It's harder to serve God at times as an individual or a church or a firm or a community by

favouring the right side or the right decision when you know that means opposing where the money is.

Jesus makes it very clear here 'you *can't* serve both money and God. To love one excludes loving the other (a point that hit the money-loving Pharisees hard). To prize one is to have contempt for the other. Jesus tells us in v.15 that God is not neutral about the whole investing in indulgent and impressive things lifestyle.

It's not just that He looks at Western slaves to money cushioning their lives every week and trying to outdo each other and thinks to Himself, 'shame - that's a bit empty and shallow.' It's that He looks at it and thinks, 'that is disgusting. That's got nothing to do with me.' Do you see the language Jesus uses? 'What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.'

Let me finish with two practical suggestions for using our money and resources. Donna shared with us by email an urgent need for blankets, sleeping bags, warm winter clothing and toiletries, to be delivered from the Highlands to refugees. Let's do that. Tuesday is the deadline, pick one of the drop off points, and let's get something there by Tuesday.

Johnny shared a need with us on our Facebook 'Resource Bank' group last week. We normally use that for requesting help from each other or offering things to one another that we don't really need. But he told us about a person God had placed in his path in real, immediate need. And you stepped up. Thank you. Let's keep using this group in that way.

As you come across people in real need of food, shelter, clothing, provision - let's get each other to join in with the help. We don't need to share names, addresses, details - that's obviously inappropriate. There are other ways we can help each other of course. But this one worked well. If you're not on this Facebook group and you want to be, talk to Donna about getting your name added.

We've talked about being forward thinking with our finances - and that led us to seeing blessing and friendship with the poor as a 'where' for our money. We've talked about being honest with our money too, as a 'how' for handling it. I think this 'God or money' part centres around *generosity* with our money.

The highly valued lifestyle that God detests is the 'get everything I can for myself' one. The lifestyle that highly values being not just *honest* with money,

but also *generous* to those whose needs are before us is the one that serves God and makes a servant of His rival, money. (*PTO for Q*)

Which do you value more - opportunities to get, or opportunities to give?