



Conversation about money

Luke 16:1-13

Following some emphasis upon the importance of giving, it doesn't seem entirely inappropriate to focus upon Luke 16, which in its first 13 verses throws a spotlight upon the theme of money. The section is then followed by some critique of the Pharisees. There is no doubt that the passage is challenging to understand, not least because of the danger of misinterpreting the Parable of the Dishonest Steward (vv 1-8a).

Many take offence at the parable because it looks as though Jesus Christ is commending the steward for a dishonest action. In fact one writer on this particular passage in Luke commented, "None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like the story of the dishonest steward."

We remind ourselves that, according to the law, people were not allowed to charge interest when lending money. There were ways around this by saying that interest could be charged on mutually-beneficial transactions. The person giving and the person receiving a loan formed a partnership which would last for the lifetime of the loan and until the interest had been repaid. The interest would then be known as profit, so technically the law was being observed.

The issue in the parable is that the steward was being threatened with redundancy and was seeking to protect his future by getting the debtors to rewrite their loan documents to their own advantage. Put another way, he was dissolving the partnership.

The parable is variously described by people as the story of the dishonest steward, the shrewd manager or even the prudent treasurer.

The reason why we shouldn't allow this parable to divert us from the essential truth that Jesus is communicating revolves around the nature of parables. Whenever we read a parable of Jesus, which was a unique way of teaching, we:

- should remind ourselves that they are not stories of factual truth
- must look for the overriding message, not specific details within the parable
- must always put the parable into the particular context – or what we might call its setting.

I had a preacher – colleague who drew comparison within the parable to Chekov's play *The Cherry Orchard*. In that play, a very wealthy woman landowner returned home from an extravagant life in the capitals of Europe. She brings her younger daughter and a romantic eccentric brother with her. At home to welcome her were her elder daughter, who was a very dour religious woman, and a number of similarly eccentric friends. She is so deeply in debt that, unless she can raise the money from her friends, the estate and particularly a much-loved cherry orchard would have to be sold.

They are amusing, affectionate and likeable people, but quite incapable of managing their affairs wisely – or of making the necessary economies. Enter then a former serf, an astute operator. He tries to persuade them to develop the estate for second homes, but fails. He then buys the estate over their heads, and they become homeless.



The former serf is a thoroughly unpleasant person, but his astuteness gives him victory over the “nice people”. The implication is that this is what happens when kindly, unworldly people meet the shrewd and the sly. It has many marks of this parable.

It is important not to run away with the mistaken idea that Christians are kind-hearted idealists who are apt to be unrealistic in the way they behave. The key is in verse 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.”

This is a parable where I would have valued being able to hear the tone of Jesus’ voice as he told the story – or see the expression in his eyes as he gazed at those who originally heard his words.

The background of this parable leads us to a specific setting for our text:

Luke 16:10

“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.”

This is a text that appears to cover off the parable and lead us into some of the most meaningful teaching of Jesus – and what follows are words that are not simply related to money, but to general principles about life and how we might live our lives by taking responsibility seriously.

Augustine is said to have remarked about the earlier parable, “I can’t believe the story came from the lips of our Lord.” Yet, this parable, which is only recorded in Luke, includes our text and following verses to help to clarify the situation.

The text seems to be about faithfulness and it is worth reminding ourselves that we have an awareness of the big promises that often have to be made. Among these are:

- the good intention of marriage
- the importance of friendships
- moral commitments of many kinds
- business deals and civic endeavours.

In life it is certainly true that we often struggle with the little aspects of faithfulness which are necessary to implement the larger components of living within commitments.

What, then, do these words mean when applied to our lives?

It is a proof of fitness

The passage is about far more than money and suggests to me the whole arena of priorities needs to be examined, if we are to be fit to serve God and his kingdom. It is something for all of us to consider.

- whatever are our aspirations in life, there are small steps to be taken
- the ability, desire and reaching out for responsibility requires a series of small commitments also



- very soon the early disciples would find themselves facing challenges, which call for commitments large and small.

If we are to fulfil our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ today, then there are deeper lessons for us to learn. In the listening circle, there would appear to be those who were struggling with the question of priorities, particularly in relation to serving two masters. There might also be those who were dealing with the question of faithfulness as they sought to follow Jesus.

The issue addressed by the Lord is about faithfulness in large things and faithfulness in small things. The truth is that all of us enter into this discussion at some point.

Here is a theme that can be traced back to Luke 12 and the Parable of the Rich Fool. The story is very challenging and can cut into the way we think about the kind of things that can happen:

- when people are struggling with work, business or family
- when people are wrestling with recognition or non-recognition.

However, Luke's Gospel, which has a particular focus upon money and possessions, has some very positive cameos in relation to these themes. Good examples can be found throughout the Gospel, including:

- the Good Samaritan who told the innkeeper, "I will repay you whatever you spend." (10:35)
- on the theme of prayer and the friend at midnight: "...give you as much as you need." (11:8).

Luke is certainly not telling us that possessions ought to have no importance in our lives. Possessions can turn the most unattractive situation into something quite beautiful, for example when the hungry are fed, the homeless are housed and the hopeless are given real purpose. How we use what we have is an indicator of fitness for the life of every Christian.

The superannuation industry has adopted the song "From little things big things grow". This song was originally a protest song relating to a strike and land rights here in Australia. The message, however, has an age-abiding principle: the thought that how we deal with small things is clearly adjoined to the truth of greater responsibility.

Rodney Hunter summed up the passage by saying, "Jesus is surely right in linking faithfulness to grand purposes with faithfulness to things that are small."

Deep spiritual issues run throughout our text and yet, for many folks, there is the temptation to eschew small stuff for much larger business.

It determines our priorities

It is true that wealth is the presenting issue in this section of scripture, but it is about far more than money, for it raises the question of priorities in the broadest context of ultimate loyalties and values.



When I study the teachings of Jesus, I realise that the essence of his love and compassion is directed toward those described as “the least of these”. Therefore, we should not be surprised that Jesus is continually questioning us about priorities.

This theme is a vital one for those of us seeking to live out the Christian life in the practicalities of everyday encounters. If the conduct of the steward in the earlier parable reveals matters that might appear ruthless if standing alone, then what follows in these words of Jesus is a radical criticism of “mammon” which stands as a practical exhortation to use money, possessions and our lives in the fullest sense in a way that pleases God.

Mammon requires some comment: it means either wealth or property and is not the name of an idol, but was often personified to refer to valued possessions. The term was current, even amongst Greek-speaking Christians, and required no translation. It is a powerful expression and is still understood by many, even today.

Jesus’ warning against mammon reminds us, as Martin Luther said, to “fear, love and trust in God above all things”.

Our priorities will determine how well – or otherwise – we use what we have in our care from God. The point that is most memorable in this Lukan context is that fulfilling small tasks is the best way to demonstrate our right choices and priorities.

A time-management expert at Harvard Business School spoke about A, B and C Priorities. He contended that far too many people spend their time on C priorities. He then asked his students, “Why is this so?” After an interesting discussion, the group concluded that C priorities are often easier to accomplish and secondly you feel that you are actually getting something done. However, they can prevent us from reaching B priorities and almost always, if wrongly prioritised, avoid all A priorities.

Life is not easy and even straightforward things involve a difficult start. I recall that an early cookbook gave the recipe for cooking a rabbit and it began: “Firstly catch the rabbit ...”

Very early in the ministry of William Booth, there was a concerted attack from religious and political leaders. His son Bramwell showed him a newspaper cutting. William Booth’s observation was, “Bramwell, fifty years from now these things will matter very little in relation to how people treat us. It will however matter a great deal how we dealt with the work of God.”

It shines a light on our commitment to god

The thirteenth verse puts the issue before us with great clarity. Greed can very quickly turn to idolatry and then the basic confession of God’s people is broken (Exodus 20:1-3 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Penny Nixon in examining this passage suggests that one way to approach the earlier parable, and this significant teaching building upon it, is to make a connection between resources and relationships. The question she offers that can help us to explore this is “What are our motivations behind the relationships we forge, and how are those relationships economically determined?”

- serving God is always the bottom line



- there is a direct relationship between serving in small ways and the development of larger responsibilities
- we can understand this in a wide variety of ways.

The question of our priorities in the area of possessions is actually much more than a matter of possessions. Pascal confessed that, “The last thing one knows is to put God first.”

Fans of the American Wild West will find in a Deadwood, South Dakota museum the inscription left by a beleaguered prospector, “I lost my gun. I lost my horse. The Indians are after me. But I’ve got all the gold I can carry.”

Sadly, throughout my ministry, I have met people who have been victims of “get rich quick” schemes. Often these people come from backgrounds that cause us to be surprised that it could happen to them. However, it does! And yet in the teaching of Jesus, there is much that would remind us that our eyes should not be on short-term gain – and certainly not in a way that would damage others.

I have often heard people discussing the strong words of Jesus regarding giving to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, and suggesting we should be duty-bound to love our sense of nation above all things. I think that is a huge error.

In the biblical sense, Jesus was actually minimising that kind of materialism. Of course, paying taxes, exercising our right to vote and obeying civil laws are vitally important. But we cannot ignore the fact that our ultimate obligation is to “seek first the kingdom of God ...” (Matthew 6:33) This verse puts all other obligations into a correct perspective. This is the top priority for the Christian.

In her book *A Practical Guide to Prayer*, Dorothy Haskins tells about a noted concert violinist who was asked the secret of her great ability to use this instrument. She answered the question with two words: “Planned neglect.” Then she explained, “There were many things that used to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened the room and did whatever seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. That system prevented me from accomplishing what I should on the violin. So I reversed things on the violin. I deliberately planned everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of planned neglect is the secret of my success.

There are some challenges in that story. But when we hold it alongside this thought of Jesus that we should be faithful in small things, we learn one of the greatest lessons of life. On this passage, Tom Wright offers the thought that “money is not a possession, it’s a trust: God entrusts property to people and expects it to be used to his glory and the welfare of his children ...”

This is the beginning and end of all Christian conversation about money and things.