

**Faithful Living While We Wait**  
**Part Four: Luke 16.1-9**  
**The Story of the Rich Man and the Manager of his Accounts**

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**David Henderson**

Do you ever come across a saying of Jesus that makes you think, "What in the world?!"

The passage we're looking at this morning, about how we're called to live while we wait for his return, is one of those.

Let's walk through it and see what sense we can make of it, and then we'll try it on and see how it applies to us today

**Luke 16.1**

Jesus told his disciples: There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.

We're in a series on the teachings of Jesus about how to live in this long in-between time between his first coming and his second coming.

Most of his teaching about how to live while we wait for his return came in the form of stories. And many of those stories feature two main characters: a person of great power and wealth who entrusts responsibility to someone else, and then leaves. Eventually he comes back, and it's time for the one who has been given the trust to give account.

That introduces us to a role that isn't so familiar in our modern world. If you go to Indeed or Handshake, you're not likely to find it on their list of possible jobs.

But it was really important in the ancient world, and it is really important in the teachings of Jesus – it's the role of the *steward*.

The easiest way to understand who a steward was is to contrast them with an owner.

Both a steward and an owner have a lot of wealth and resources at their disposal.

But while the owner owns it all, it all belongs to him, the steward doesn't own any of it, it all belongs to someone else.

So when it comes to putting the money to use, where the owner's concern is to do whatever he wants with it, to use it in a way that pleases himself, for his own purposes,

the steward's concern is to do what the *owner* wants him to do with it, to use it in a way that pleases the owner, according to the owner's purposes.

Both have considerable resources at hand, but one owns, the other holds in trust.

### **Luke 16.1-2**

There was a rich man whose [steward] was accused of wasting his possessions. So 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."

The clear implication: He has not been a faithful steward. Instead of using his resources to please the master and serve the master's purposes, he has used them to please and serve himself.

Now comes the first unexpected turn of the story – an unethical turn.

### **Luke 16.3-4**

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—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses."

Before we read the next verse, it will be helpful to understand how debts were managed in the ancient Near East.

A person would write a note of their obligation in their own handwriting on a parchment that was kept by the one to whom the debts were owed. As those debts were paid down, the person making the payments would record those payments in their own handwriting, changing the amount they still owed – 100, 80, 60, 40 – with each new payment until the debt was gone.

Picking up in verse 5:

### **Luke 16.5-7**

So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

"Nine hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied.

The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty."

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."

These are massive quantities of debt, and huge amounts of money being forgiven.

I don't think it's a coincidence that the manager seemed to have called in the people with the biggest debts, and that he forgave them – each of them – the equivalent of a year's salary. For a new manager on their staff, perhaps?

Now we come to the end of the story, and everybody knows where this is going.

The disciples would have been ducking in anticipation of the blasting denunciation of the dishonest servant. Here it comes: *Outer darkness with you! Weeping and gnashing of teeth!*

Instead, Jesus says:

### **Luke 16.8**

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

The end.

Wait. *What?!* We thought for sure we knew where this story was going!

This is the second utterly unexpected turn the story takes.

How can Jesus tell a story in which he *commends* someone who is dishonest? I thought Jesus was the epitome of virtue and goodness.

It all comes down to the way parables work.

The thing that's important to understand, as Brently did a great job of showing us last week, is that parables are designed to communicate *one* primary idea.

I remember my seminary professor, Gordon Fee, telling us that parables were like bowling balls sitting on a countertop. There's a whole lot to them, but there's just one small point of contact.

There are a lot of details in the parables Jesus taught, but they are not allegories, where every detail has its own separate meaning.

For example, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the lion is the Jesus figure, the stone table is like the cross, the White Witch is the Evil One, Turkish delight represents temptation, winter is a world awaiting redemption, and so on. That's an allegory.

But a parable is different. It has lots of details but only one primary point.

The other thing that is helpful to be aware of when you interpret a parable is that parables often function like jokes. Many of them have an unexpected twist at the end

that catches the audience. They think the story is going one way, and all of a sudden it goes a completely different and unexpected direction. And in that twist the wrong thinking of the audience is exposed.

Such as when the shepherd abandons his entire flock to go search for one helpless little sheep.

Or when the father runs to his profligate son, not to heap him with shame, but to welcome him back into the full privileges of sonship, taking his son's shame upon himself.

Or when the Samaritan, from the most marginalized people group in the region, becomes the hero of the story about being a neighbor instead of the religious leaders.

Or when, despite threat of robber or temptation to spend it on himself, the steward entrusted with an entire talent manages to safeguard and return every single penny that was given to him, and rather than being commended, he is condemned, blasted by the owner for not making risky investments with it.

So back to the story of the deceitful manager.

Notice: It doesn't say the master commended the shrewd steward for his *dishonesty*.

It says the master commended the steward, who was obviously dishonest, whom Jesus calls dishonest, for his *shrewdness*.

Jesus neither approves nor forgives the steward for his dishonesty. He finishes the story before we find out what happens to the steward. Based on what we know about ancient Near Eastern culture, the audience might have expected the manager to have said, "That was very shrewd. Nice one. Now, off with his head."

But that's not the point Jesus is making. This isn't a parable about dishonesty. If we want to learn about dishonesty and its consequences there are other passages to turn to.

The whole point of *this* story is to offer a picture of a steward making shrewd use of resources that have been entrusted to him.

Shrewd means creative and strategic, And let me show you just how creative and strategic he was.

First, without cost to himself, he leveraged the owner's resources to secure for himself a future with another employer.

Second, he left no trail of evidence incriminating himself – the changes to the debts were all written in his clients' handwriting.

Third, he left the clients having a positive view of him, thinking well of him, and in his debt, and he left them with unexpected resources to pay that debt.

And last, he left the clients with a positive view of the owner, his boss, who, as far as they knew, was the one who directed that their debts be slashed.

That's some shrewd work!

And now, story finished, Jesus spells out the conclusion he wants his disciples to draw from it.

### **Luke 16.8**

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

"People of this world" translates a Greek phrase that literally says, "The children of this age."

From Jesus's perspective, humanity is divided into two. While all are created in God's image, not all are in God's family.

Children of this world refers to those who still live in spiritual darkness, whose lives exclude God, whose way of thinking and way of living have been shaped by the fallen world around them.

People of the light, children of the light, implies both an allegiance to something shining in from beyond this world, and an inner transformation, a being made new, as a result of encounter with that Light.

Now we come to the unexpected moral of the story. Just as godly religious leaders can learn something valuable from a despised Samaritan, so children of the light can learn something valuable from children of this age.

As he sums up the point, he begins to move past the story to Kingdom realities, and to the sort of life he wants his disciples to live as they wait for his return.

### **Luke 16.9**

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

*I tell you*

You've given your allegiance to me. You call me King and Lord. Well, here's what I want you to do.

*use worldly wealth*

That is, whatever resources God has put in your hands in this fallen and broken world

*use it to gain friends for yourselves*

Remember how the steward did this. He generously used the owner's resources to gain favor with others, so they thought well of him, and viewed him as a friend.

But he also used the owner's resources in a way that increased his boss's reputation in their eyes, so they came to think well of him too.

But the word Jesus uses here is unexpected. The steward in this story just manipulated his way into others owing him something. But this admonition goes way beyond that. This expression "to gain friends" is surprisingly intimate. It describes real heart friends, close connections with others marked by warmth and affection and trust

*Use worldly wealth to gain close friends for yourselves so that*

This communicates decided purpose, intended result: do this in order to, for the express purpose of, intentionally, with this goal in mind – and what is that goal?

*so that when it is gone*

This doesn't just mean when your money runs out. Literally this says, "when it is eclipsed". This means, when none of this holds value any more, when it all passes away, at the end of your life, or the end of the age when Jesus returns.

This is the second time in these verses that Jesus introduces this idea that the time is limited and one day it will come to an end. One verse back, in verse 8, he referred to the unbelieving people of this world as "the children of this age." By implication, this temporary age.

You may remember from the opening message in this sermon series that the entirety of Jesus's teaching to his followers about their responsibility while they wait for his return can be summed up in two phrases.

The King is coming.  
The door is closing.

First, as it relates to yourselves: *The King is coming*. Cling to your future hope and wait patiently for him.

But second, as it relates to those God has placed around you – especially those who don't yet know him, the children of this age – *The door is closing*. Take advantage of the present opportunity and act urgently for their sake.

That second theme is really the focus of this parable.

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

The Hebrew expression behind this last phrase means "welcomed into the eternal temple where God dwells." Welcomed into the presence of God for eternity.

So here comes the big question. Who is doing the welcoming?

One understanding of this parable is that God is the one doing the welcoming.

But if that's the case, that "so that" earlier in the verse is problematic. That would mean God will welcome us to heaven only if we use his resources in this way.

But we know from scores of other passages that God's warm welcome of us into his eternal dwelling isn't based in any way on our works.

Romans 5.10 says

While we were God's enemies, our friendship with him was restored through the death of his Son

And I Peter 3.18 says

Christ suffered for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us home to God.

It is not through any works of ours that we "gain friendship" with God. We can be assured of his glad welcome if we look to him, trust him, give our allegiance to him, and our lives reflect that allegiance.

So who is welcoming us into God's eternal dwelling? Well, God certainly will. But I'm convinced this is referring to the welcome we will receive from those who have become our friends here on earth.

Through our generosity, through our love for them, our fondness for them, demonstrated in practical and self-sacrificial and generous ways, some who don't know Christ will become our fond friends, and becoming our friends, will become friends of the One who through Christ opens the way to friendship with God himself for eternity..

*Those* are the ones who will join God in welcoming us home.

If we have any doubt that that is who is welcoming us, look at the clear connection between verses 4 and 9

### **Luke 16.4**

The manager says, "I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, *people will welcome me into their houses.*"

### **Luke 16.9**

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

It's not the owner doing the welcoming here, warmly receiving him. It's the friends made along the way through the manager's creative and strategic use of the Owner's own resources. As Mike Dickey said to me this morning, "They are getting the party ready."

So, having gained some clarity about what it's getting at, let's try on this parable for ourselves.

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First, for those who you who are followers of Christ.

Stop and think about the people God has placed around you in your life.



Think of the people whose paths you cross from week to week

You could probably think of them in terms of concentric circles

Those closest to you, who you really know, who really know you:

- family, friends, fellow church members

Next circle out, the people you see day to day

- The people you work with, or go to school with, or who live in the dorm with you, or play on the same team with you, the people you golf with or play bridge with

Next circle out, the people your life overlaps with from time to time:

- neighbors, other people in your company, other students at your school, the people you sit next to in the stands, the people you golf with or play bridge with, the people you serve as a volunteer in the community

When we come to the next circle, beyond that, unfortunately the people can start to become invisible

- The people who serve you when you go out to eat, get your hair cut, do your banking, buy your groceries, get your gas, fill your prescriptions, buy your favorite baked goods, get your car washed, do your laundry, work out, get your nails done, get physical therapy, visit the doctor

How do you think about the people God has placed around you? How do you see the people you run across on your route through life?

I think most of us see others through a "like lens."

- those I like, or not
- those I am like, or not
- those who offer me something I like, or not.

Our primary point of reference is ourselves.

In this parable Jesus presses us to swing our perspective around, and to see people first not with reference to us, but to God. What sort of relationship does that person have with him?

In II Corinthians 5.16-17 Paul says

From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

His way of seeing other people completely shifted when he became a follower of Christ. Now the primary consideration isn't the "like lens." It's the "life lens." It is whether or not this person is a new creation in Christ.

If so, they are our brother or sister. If not, they are ones who, through our efforts to befriend them through the resources we have been entrusted with, just might become our brother or sister.

With that in mind, take a peek at this grid.

### Prayer and Reflection Grid

Potential Eternal Friends	Shrewd Use of Money	Shrewd Use of Time
People You Share Life With		
People You Share This City With		
People You Share This World With		

As you look at this grid, let me toss out some ways you might consider using God's resources to build friendship for eternity.

Don't think of this as a list of assignments. Think of this as sparks for your own thinking as you consider how best to use the resources God has entrusted to you to befriend others for their sake and for God's sake.

Consider:

- Taking cookies or flowers to welcome a new neighbor
- Getting groceries for a neighbor in need
- Sharing goodies from your oven or grill

- Put a small Christmas gift on the doors of your neighbors
- Giving prizes for a neighborhood March Madness bracket (Silver Dipper gift certificate, cookies)

- Giving a book away
- Buying donuts and cider for a neighborhood fall party

- If you upgrade a yard tool or a tool for your car, give away your old one and share the new one with your neighbors

- Take colleagues from work to lunch or coffee
- Treat a friend to a movie or McDonalds

Give to Covenant, which sends 20% of every donation straight to missions, and invests lots more to expand the kingdom through this church's witness  
 Pay for the child of a friend or neighbor to go with your child to Waves

Help support one of 25 different individuals or families that we have sent out from Covenant to the mission field: to Purdue, to Thailand and everywhere in between  
 Help sponsor someone from Covenant going on a short-term mission trip

Sponsor a child through one of partnering organizations like International Needs or New Life for Haiti

Spending money to befriend others for the kingdom can be costly and inconvenient.

But living in a wealthy culture as we do, I'm convinced that for most of us the even costlier and more sacrificial thing is to invest our *time* in building friendships for eternity. As Ben Franklin put it, "Remember that time is money." How could you use your time to make friends for eternity?

Consider

Taking someone to lunch or coffee, or having them over for a meal in your home  
 Stopping to chat on a walk or as you drive into your neighborhood

Hosting a neighborhood block party, or a drop-by gathering  
 Setting up a neighborhood communication link or directory

Asking for help around your house – your car, your yard, moving furniture  
 Shoveling snow or rake leaves for a neighbor who could use some help  
 Providing a meal for a neighbor in need

Grabbing mail or packages for someone on vacation

Investing time to get better equipped to show love or to share your faith by reading a book by Heather Holleman or Paul Copan or Doug Pollock  
 Bringing someone who is exploring the Christian faith with you to Conversations about Christianity

Going on a short-term trip as an individual or as a family, like the team that just left yesterday for Mexico, or the one leaving next Saturday  
 Getting involved in Plunge  
 Taking part in an "Engage Local" service project at LUM  
 Volunteering at Murdock

Or, really radically, praying about following in the footsteps of the family we sent to Thailand or the family we sent to the Caucus Mountains or the individual we sent to North Africa or the family we sent to the Middle East or the family we sent

to Albania or the family we sent to Elkhart, Indiana, or the many we sent two miles down the road to serve at Purdue and pack up your family and go

Again, not a list of things to do, but examples of a mindset, a way of thinking about your resources, and a way of seeing the people God has placed around you on your route

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Here's one other way to try on this parable. This is for those of you who are not followers of Jesus.

It would be so easy to think this parable is about you being the target of someone else's efforts to get you to become a Christian. But I want to encourage you to think about this from another perspective. This is actually a picture of the heart of God toward you.

Jesus himself is saying to those who already know him, there are others who don't yet know me. They matter to me just as much as you do. Go, be creative in giving them a taste of my love for them.

If God is directing those who know him to use their resources so you can come to know him too, then that means you must be pretty important to God, and your eternal destiny must be pretty important to God too.

How could you invest some of your time and money to explore the faith even as Christians are using their time and money to help you do the same?

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We're going to close by listening to a song rather than singing one, letting that song become a prayer in our hearts as we offer our time and resources back to God for the sake of reaching others who don't yet know him.

Jesus says: as it relates to those God has placed around you – especially those who don't yet know him, the children of this age – *The door is closing*. Take advantage of the present opportunity and act urgently for their sake. Take the resources I've entrusted to you, and use them generously to befriend others – for your sake, for their sake, and for my sake.

How will you respond?

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, for thee.