

Jesus!
*“The Now and the Not Yet:
Setting Our Values on What Really Matters”
(Luke 16:1-15)*

Take a first look.

I. In a sermon on giving, Dave Ferguson, pastor of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, read this letter from Jeff and Julie, who attended the church:

“Julie and I started attending Community Christian Church in January 1993, after moving here from California.

“We moved here for a business opportunity that ended up not working out, and we soon found ourselves in a desperate financial situation. We were behind in our rent and our car payments. We had back-IRS payments, 16 credit cards with more than \$40,000 in debt, and not enough food in the fridge to keep our tummies full. And on top of all that, we decided to start a business.

“Well, in the middle of this, Jon had challenged us to include our finances in our commitment to following Jesus, and I really struggled with this. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to support CCC or set an example for others to follow. It was, in fact, that on occasion Julie and I were so broke that we ended up going to a friend’s restaurant to ask for free food. I thought, If I’m struggling to keep my family, how can I commit what I don’t have to God? What am I supposed to do; just write a check for ten percent of my income and hope that something happens? Jon urged me to trust God and give it a shot.

“After prayer and discussion, we decided that God would get the first portion of every check and not just what we were willing to give up each week. We learned to make God the first priority in our lives, and we had no idea how we’d get by.

“During the week after this decision, my brother and I were dropping off flyers at a construction site looking for work. We’d started a carpentry company. We met a builder, and he asked if we would be interested in doing their work. He had a house that was ready for us to start immediately and about twenty more to do during the next twelve months.

“Julie and I no longer questioned how we’d honor our financial commitment. Julie and I decided to increase our giving.

“If our story ended there, it would be a good story. However, you cannot outgive God. Over the next couple of years through a complicated and divinely orchestrated series of events, Julie and I also went from renters to homeowners. Owning a home has given us the ability to restructure our debt and give us some security and stability. I felt the need to tell our story. The story is much, much more than about finances. It’s about faith, stepping out and trusting God with all that we have—our lives, our future, our relationship, and even our finances.

“Now as I reflect on this story and what we experienced, I’m still trying to answer one question. What was it that we sacrificed?”

II. Probably nothing puts our values to the test like the way we make and use money. What do we consider valuable enough to exchange our work to have? And are those things, tangible and intangible, rooted in time or in eternity? Jesus took the time in his last weeks of public ministry to teach his disciples some important lessons about “the now and the not yet.” He especially challenged their way of determining values. Are they linked solely to “the now,” or are they linked even more firmly to “the not yet”?

We must listen to this teaching from Jesus and learn what we can about adjusting our values according to the terms of heaven.

Take a closer look at Luke 16:1-15.

I. STEWARDSHIP OF OPPORTUNITY, PROPERTY AND LIFE IS WHAT REALLY MATTERS.

1. In the parable of the shrewd manager, the manager is commended by his master not for his *dishonesty*, but for his *shrewdness*. I was a bit comforted as I studied this passage, when I read the comments by Leon Morris in the *Tyndale Commentary on Luke*. He said, “This is notoriously one of the most difficult parables to interpret.” He goes on to say that “the root problem is the commendation of the steward who is so plainly dishonest.” He continues to outline two major interpretive viewpoints of the parable. First, “The usual explanation is that the steward is commended, not for his dishonesty, but for taking resolute action in a crisis.”¹ He quotes the consummate interpreter of the parables, T. W. Manson, who “reminds us that there is a world of difference between ‘I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly’ and ‘I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.’”²

Second, Morris suggests that the parable could also be interpreted in light of the commercial practices of the day. It was forbidden for Jews to charge interest to fellow-Jews, so to get around this prohibition, often the amount of money owed was inflated on the bond to include interest. It didn’t appear on paper that interest was charged, but the interest was there, nevertheless. In light of this background, when this desperate manager realized that he was being turned out, and he knew that he was too weak to dig and too proud to beg, he went to each of those who were indebted to his master and changed their bonds to reflect only the original amount borrowed.

This put his master in the awkward position legally of not being able to demonstrate that the former amount of the bonds was really just. In Morris’s words, “He could not repudiate the steward’s actions without convicting himself of taking usury.” So, the rich man finally commends the cleverness of the manager, even though his commendation probably contained a hint of begrudging. The manager “had” him, and he knew it. The manager saved his future, and the master saved face as a man of piety. “Both were acting decisively in a difficult situation.”³

John Calvin removed the process of interpreting this parable from the realm of fanciful speculations and hidden allegories and tried to go straight for the kernel of meaning. Regarding this parable, he said, “How stupid it is to want to interpret it in every detail! Christ simply meant that the children of this world are more diligent in their concern for their own fleeting interests than the sons of light for their eternal well-being.”⁴ A. M. Hunter, from whom I borrowed the quotation from Calvin, sums up the parable this way: It is as if Jesus were saying, “Oh, if only my disciples would show as much practical prudence in God’s affairs as the worldlings do in theirs!”⁵

This suggests the stewardship of opportunity.

The shrewd manager, though perhaps dishonest, made the best of his opportunity, difficult though it was. That act of seizing the moment was commended.

A—As for ourselves, we need the constant reminder that life is a limited opportunity. We have only this brief time to set our course for eternity. How will we manage the opportunity that God brings before us?

I—In his novel *The Testament*, John Grisham probes the interplay between relatives after a fabulously rich man dies suddenly. The book is worth the read, as it is a good story and

1 Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC, p. 268.

2 Morris, p. 269.

3 Morris, p. 270.

4 A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Westminster, 1960), p. 33.

5 Hunter, p. 104.

includes as clear a presentation of the gospel as you will find in a work of fiction. It is crazy how *extreme* people will become when billions of dollars are at stake! The book is rather believable, as with much of Grisham's writing.

2. *In the parable, the manager was to give account for his use of what belonged to his master.* He was, after all, the "steward" or "manager" of that which was not his own.

This suggests the stewardship of property, the second direction of stewardship (see vv. 10-13).

"What do you have that you have not received?" Paul asks the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:7). The presumed answer is, "Nothing." Everything we have and all we are, are gifts from God our Creator.

A—Do we affirm each day that we are simply managers of what ultimately belongs to God?

3. *Ultimately, Jesus' disciples should value relationships with people over having money.*

This suggests the third realm of stewardship, the stewardship of life itself.

"Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). Now there is a saying! There is an ethical dimension to the use of all our money, not just a tenth of it that we may make available to the church for the purposes of God's kingdom. All our possessions should be available for the purposes of God's kingdom! The "they" in the second half of that verse could be a Hebraism for God, the "divine plural." Ultimately, the use of money for building relationships and even for bringing other *friends* into the kingdom will lead to God's ultimate welcome into heaven. This does not mean, of course, that we can buy our way into heaven. We cannot (Led Zeppelin and "Stairway to Heaven," notwithstanding!). But it does imply that the way we use our resources now indicates—gives evidence to—what our true destiny and home really are.

A—How are we managing what belongs to God in this narrow window of opportunity, our present human life?

I—I find it an interesting matter of providential "accident" that the e-mail newsletter of *Christian History* magazine when I was first studying this passage some years ago, was about "John Wesley and money." In fact, Elesha Coffman, the writer of the newsletter, quoted a portion of Wesley's sermon on Luke 16:9. She also showed what kind of man Wesley was. "Wesley, from lower-middle class stock himself, consorted mostly with people who worked hard, owned little, and could never be certain of their financial future. But he preached so widely and became so well-known that his income eventually reached 1,400 pounds per year—equivalent to more than \$160,000 today [in the early 2000s]. Still, he chose to live simply but comfortably on just 30 pounds while giving the rest away. In fact, he donated nearly all of the 30,000 pounds he earned in his lifetime. He once wrote, 'If I leave behind me ten pounds ... you and all mankind [can] bear witness against me, that I have lived and died a thief and a robber.'"⁶

Wesley extracted three principles from Jesus' teaching in Luke 16:9, which he applied well both to his own time in early-industrial England (late 17th century) and to our own. Here are his principles:

(1) Gain all you can (by honest and upright means).

6 Elesha Coffman, *Christian History* newsletter, 11/30/01.

(2) Save all you can.

and (3) Give all you can. He surely illustrated all three principles himself in his own practice of money management.

II. ETERNITY IS WHAT REALLY MATTERS. This is the essence of the parable's thrust and of our Lord's comments after telling it.

1. *There is a clear contrast in this passage between the temporary value of money and possessions and the eternal value of people and pleasing God.* It is clear that Jesus places more value on people than on money. Which can be forfeited for which?

2. *There is also a clear emphasis on living in the light of eternity.* Eternity does not end. This temporary life does. Which should be valued more highly?

A—So for us, do we give ourselves over as fully (and more so!) for eternal concerns as we do for merely temporary ones?

I—Are we more earnest in nurturing our portfolio of investments than we are about nurturing the character of Christ in our souls? Are we more determined to have or keep a certain position, perhaps in our daily work, than we are to fulfill the calling of God upon our lives for His service?

"You cannot serve both God and money (or, *Mammon*, literally)." For that matter, "You cannot serve both God and *anything else!*" Money is a tool. It should be our servant, and God's servant in our hands, not our master. Eventually, all of it will be worthless, in some cases sooner than later.

Kevin Miller, an editor with *Leadership Journal*, recorded this at the beginning of the new millennium: "On January 1, 2002, 12 European countries will begin switching from their existing currencies—the lira, franc, mark, and so on—to a new currency, the euro. After a grace period of six or eight weeks, all traditional currency will become worthless. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, two men in Berlin 'plan to fill an empty swimming pool with nearly \$45 million worth of deutsche marks, and invite people to dive in. The German government will use about 128 shredding machines to dispose of old banknotes. The state government of Hesse will burn its marks in a heating system, and organizers of the Cologne carnival want to use shredded notes as confetti.... The Austrians plan to turn their schillings into 560 tons of compost."

Miller concludes, "Likewise, there will come a day when all our money will become no more valuable than compost."⁷

We were in France doing short-term mission projects in 2001 and then again in summer of 2002. The transition was happening even in 2001, and it was basically confusing. We heard from our missionary friends there that the buying power of the Euro was much less than it had been with the French Franc. The currency became compost—or collectors' items.

III. THE STATE OF THE HEART BEFORE GOD IS WHAT REALLY MATTERS.

1. *The Pharisees sneered at Jesus, because, as Luke reveals, they "loved money."* These were devoutly looking religious men. They wore the right clothing. They strapped little boxes of Scripture quotations to their bodies (*phylacteries*, these were called). They were meticulous with their observance of all things Jewish. But their hearts were out of step with God. Perhaps they had come to

⁷ Kevin Miller, Wheaton, Illinois; source: Ray Moseley, "Euro Conversion Spurs a Frenzy: Many Getting Rid of Cash Before It Becomes Worthless," *Chicago Tribune* (6-04-01).

see God as the means to their ends.

2. *Jesus challenged them to examine their hearts before God and to adjust their values accordingly.* “What is highly valued among people is detestable in God’s sight.” This was surely a direct “smart bomb” aimed right at materialism.

A—In our affluent culture, we must be on our guard all the time against greed, which Paul calls a kind of idolatry.

(Colossians 3:5 [NIV]: *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*).

I—What are we willing to risk our lives for? What is worth giving our lives to gain?

Consider this young woman’s bad example: Suze Orman tells, “When I was 13, my dad owned his own business—a tiny shack where he sold chicken, ribs, hamburgers, hot dogs, and fries. One day the oil that the chicken was fried in caught fire. In a few minutes the whole place exploded in flames. My dad bolted from the store before the flames could engulf him.

“Then my mom and I arrived on the scene, and we all stood outside watching the fire burn away my dad’s business. All of a sudden, my dad realized he had left his money in the metal cash register inside the building, and I watched in disbelief as he ran back into the inferno before anyone could stop him.

“He tried to open the metal register, but the intense heat had already sealed the drawer shut. Knowing that every penny he had was locked in front of him about to go up into flames, he picked up the scalding metal box and carried it outside. When he threw the register on the ground, the skin on his arms and chest came with it. He had escaped the fire safely once, untouched. Then he voluntarily risked his life and was severely injured. The money was that important.

“That was when I learned that money is obviously more important than life itself. From that point on, earning money—lots of money—not only became what drove me professionally, but also became my emotional priority.”⁸

Thankfully, we have often had better examples. There is Jesus Himself. There are historical figures like John Wesley, whom I already mentioned, and George Müller, who spent his life and all his worldly goods to establish homes for orphans in England to the glory of God. How about Florence Nightingale, who gave her life of privilege to care for the sick and dying, or Mother Teresa, who gave her life to serve the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India? To this list, we could add many of our own parents and grandparents.

Take it home (applications): What really matters in the light breaking through from eternity?

I. God matters!

II. People matter!

III. The direction and values of our hearts before God matter!

How does God need to adjust our hearts to reflect these?

8 Suze Orman, *9 Steps to Financial Freedom* (Random House, 2000), p. 3; submitted by Aaron Goerner.