

## **“The Peril of Mammon”**

Luke 16:14-31

A Sunday School teacher told her class of 2nd graders the story found in Luke 16 of the rich man and Lazarus. She told them how while they were here on the earth the rich man had everything that money could buy and poor Lazarus had to beg just to survive. But when they died, the rich man went to a place of horrible torment while Lazarus went to a place of paradise.

In conclusion, the teacher asked her students: "Now, which man would you rather be, Lazarus or the rich man?" One little boy's hand shot up immediately and he said, "Well, while I'm alive I want to live like the rich man, but when I die I want to be like Lazarus."

That may seem humorous, but unfortunately there's too much truth in it. Many of us professed followers of Jesus continue to attempt what He said is impossible. He said "you cannot serve God and mammon." You and I cannot serve God and earthly riches; material wealth.

Why is this impossible? Because God and mammon are uncompromising opposites! Mammon desires acquisition and accumulation; God desires sowing or scattering abroad. Mammon gauges success by what a man gets; God evaluates success based on what a man gives. In light of Jesus' words, faithfulness to the one means absolute separation from the other. What a sobering truth; faithfulness to the one means absolute separation from the other.

In a previous discussion we focused on the first 13 verses of this chapter, Luke 16, and the subject of true riches. In those verses Jesus spelled out for His hearers the several disciplines essential for acquiring true riches.

One of the ways a teacher gauges the effectiveness of his teaching is to observe the response or reaction of the audience. The opening verse of our text shows us that Jesus clearly "struck a nerve" with His teaching on riches.

So I turn now to Luke 16 verses 14 to 31 to address the subject "The Peril of Mammon." Listen carefully as I read **Luke 16:14 to 31**.

In this text Jesus warns us of the tragic RESULTS of choosing to serve mammon.

The First Tragic RESULT is,

**A Contemptuous Spirit**

Immediately after Jesus makes the concluding statement, “you cannot serve God and mammon,” the Pharisees display their contempt for Him. Why did they do that? Because they were covetous and Jesus’ teaching brought piercing conviction to their hearts.

When you or I or anyone else is confronted with the truth we must respond. The Pharisees show us one response. They couldn’t refute Jesus’ message so they rejected the messenger. Sadly, this is the majority response of those who attempt to serve both God and riches. Luke tells us the Pharisees were covetous, literally lovers of money. Since Jesus said you can’t serve God and money that meant they couldn’t be serving God. That same conclusion is true for us if we are lovers of money.

As members of God’s chosen people and as the leaders of the ruling religious class they couldn’t stomach the teaching of this untutored Rabbi! Who was He to point out their failure to handle riches faithfully? So they derided Him.

To deride someone is to subject them to unusually bitter or contemptuous ridicule. It is usually done either in speaking or in writing. This word is used only one other place in the Scriptures; in Luke 23:35. In that text, Jesus is hanging on the cross and the religious leaders are ridiculing Him by saying - He saved others but can’t save Himself.

The Greek word used here leaves the impression that nothing was said; their derision was non-verbal. It means to turn up the nose at someone, to sneer, to scoff. The Romans had a phrase, “to hang on the hooked nose” (the subject of ridicule). These leaders had listened without comment to the three parables aimed directly at them (the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son). But now they react to the fourth parable spoken to the disciples. We get the impression that they didn’t say anything, but their faces were eloquent with their disdain for Jesus.

But, while they were communicating their contempt nonverbally, Jesus could see their hearts; and He left them know it. He exposed their contempt for the truth. He knew they made a show of being righteous in public, but their hearts were steeped in pride and sinful vices. He knew they valued the praise of men more than the approval of God.

He spoke withering words of rebuke. He reminded them that the things highly valued by men are an abomination to God; they are loathsome and hateful in His sight. The word abomination means to feel nausea because of stench, to abhor, and to detest. This same word is used in the Septuagint where the prophet Daniel predicts the “abomination of desolation,” the desecration of the Holy of Holies.

At first glance, verses 16 to 18 seem disconnected from the rest of the text; but we know the Scriptures are not random. These comments are an important part of Jesus' explanation of the Pharisees' contemptuous spirit; in this case contempt for the Law they claimed to uphold.

Jesus reminded them that the era of the Law and the Prophets ended with John the Baptist. Now, the kingdom of God is being declared and everyone, including the publicans and sinners, was pressing into it. The people were energetic in their response to Jesus' ministry; there was a moral enthusiasm and a spiritual passion. The crowds were massive and still growing. But the Pharisees didn't share their enthusiasm!

In verses 17 and 18 Jesus confronts them with their contempt for the authority and principles of the Old Testament Scriptures. By this Jesus informs them that they were not the custodians of the "true riches" as they supposed. He reminds them it is easier for heaven and earth to perish than for the smallest part of the Law to fail. The *tittle* or dot Jesus spoke of was a little hook-like mark found on some Hebrew letters to distinguish them from other letters.

And where did Jesus go for an illustration of their contempt for God's Law? Back to the creation command for marital fidelity and permanence! Why this? Because, like other parts of God's Law, the Pharisees had a way to work around this and do what they wanted – much like people do today. So Jesus didn't intend to weaken the force of the law in this allusion to the economy of His kingdom. Instead, in this unexpected way, He drove home its higher requirements with a sharpness the Pharisees couldn't miss.

During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry the views of Rabbi Hillel were predominant. His basic conclusion was - a man could divorce his wife for any reason. And it seems from Jesus teaching in other places that the Pharisees embraced this teaching in practice.

Jesus could have selected any example from the Old Testament Law, but He went back to the Creation to highlight this command and principle that existed long before the Law was given. Why? The rabbis had certain rules by which they would exegete and interpret the Scriptures. In rabbinic exegesis, something earlier was weightier. Jesus understood that rule, so he went all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2. According to the rabbinic rule, the passage Jesus was citing from Genesis was of greater authority than any later passage.

There's another reason Jesus went back to the beginning. Because violating the sanctity of marriage strikes at the very foundation of perpetuating truth and godliness – the family. When

the Pharisees, or anyone else, show contempt for the institution of marriage, they are showing contempt for the kingdom of God; for the relationship between Christ and His Church!

Since this exposition is not primarily about adultery, divorce, and remarriage I've said enough. The main point is this – in what ways are we who profess to follow Jesus actually skirting the clear teaching of His Word because we want serve self and increase our wealth, or status, or level of physical comfort? It may be easy to answer quickly and glibly that we don't do that. But take time for sober reflection and ask God's Spirit to search your heart. You'll most likely find some areas that need repentance and reformation.

We claim to be the keepers of the “true riches” and exhibit a veneer of spirituality, yet too often our lifestyle choices actually undermine the principles of God's Word. That's one of the results of choosing to serve mammon rather than God. And, that contempt for the clear commands of God's Word leads us to the second tragic result of serving mammon.

The Second Tragic RESULT is,

### **A Callous Heart**

To further illustrate His point Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived luxuriously; clothed in purple and fine linen - the most expensive clothing. Purple dye was colorfast (it didn't fade) and was THE rarest and most expensive dye existing in that time.

History also tells us the kind of linen the rich man wore had to be imported from Egypt or India. This kind of linen was used in Egypt in the process of mummification. One writer said it this linen was so fine it was sometimes called “woven air.” In other words, the rich man wore the “designer clothes” of the day. Only the best was good enough for him.

The Jewish Talmud informs us that during this time the High Priest's garments were also of the costliest material. And Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees in other places alludes to their richness in dress and lifestyle; their desire for attention and public acclaim.

The rich man had a luxurious diet too. He feasted every day. The description implies company, merriment, and splendor. So he didn't party alone; no, he had lots of guests and they all enjoyed his generosity. No expense was spared for the enjoyment for their enjoyment. But they were all carefully chosen from the same social and economic status as his.

Then there was the beggar; and he has a name, Lazarus. In most of Jesus' parables the participants are unnamed, but not this one. In giving the beggar a name, Jesus helps us identify

with his humanity and the severity of his condition. This helps us connect with his plight and makes us more sympathetic.

He was ragged, diseased, and destitute. Each day he was carelessly flung down, or dumped, (that's the essence of the word in the original language) by his carriers in front of the portico or gate of the rich man's estate. It was a place where he had to be seen by the rich man in his comings and goings. And his body was covered with open, oozing, untreated sores.

To add to his misery he was hungry. He desired the scraps that the rich man was throwing away. This is similar to what the lost, wayward son of Luke chapter 15 experienced. He wanted to eat the food the pigs were eating and no one gave him anything. Lazarus desired the scraps but it seems he had to compete with the dogs to get them. How hard would it have been for the rich man to have a servant prepare a plate of leftovers especially for this man once every day?

It seems the only extension of kindness and pity came not from human beings but from the dogs that came and licked his sores. What a poignant picture of his misery!

One can see a number of applications here. The rich man can represent the developed nations of the world where even those who are considered poor have more than enough food and clothing. Billions of dollars wasted every year on sports, entertainment, and leisure could alleviate the suffering of millions and provide clean water, adequate food, and medical care. But unfortunately the attitude of many is – out of sight, out of mind, and don't mess with my stuff!

I think of all the people in the world who've been displaced, uprooted from their homes and communities by the murderous activities of religious fanatics. The needs are so overwhelming we feel there's not much we can do; so too often we do nothing! That, my brothers and sisters is not acceptable. There are reputable ministries we can partner with to alleviate human suffering, and especially the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Christ. These are commands of Scripture and by ignoring them we do two things: show the callousness of our hearts and our contempt for God's Word.

That's the big picture, and in a sense is more abstract; the poor are nameless and faceless. But what about those God brings to your "front gate" that are in need? Oh they may not need food or medical care; but then again, maybe they do. Or maybe they need your time and a listening ear. They may interrupt your plans for the day and prevent you from reaching your goals. But remember Proverbs 16:33; *"We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how*

*they fall.*” God brings to you those he wants you to minister to; just like he had Lazarus at the rich man’s gate. Will you just ignore them or will you extend the heart and hand of Jesus?

We need to examine our hearts; if they’re callous toward those in need it may be an indication that we’re serving mammon and not God. If we are serving mammon we will experience one final result that cannot be changed.

The Final Tragic RESULT is,

### **A Calamitous Eternity**

*“And it came to pass that the beggar died...the rich man also died...”* The sobering words of Hebrews 9:27 remind us that *“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”* Can you imagine the desire of the beggar to be saved from his current condition?

Lazarus died - no mention of a burial; his body may have been thrown on the garbage heap. The rich man also died...and was buried. No angelic visitation was given to him. But we can surely imagine a lavish ceremony in keeping with his wealth and standing in the community. Eulogized for his wealth and status by men but rejected by God. And what happened to his wealth? It didn’t do him any good now!

Lazarus died and his soul and spirit were transported by the angels into Abraham’s bosom or Paradise. To rest on the bosom or chest of another person expresses special favor and intimacy. In John 1:18 we read *“No one has ever seen God, the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has revealed Him.* And in John 13:23, during the final Passover meal, the disciple John is reclining at the table leaning on Jesus’ breast. He was the beloved disciple, part of Jesus’ inner circle.

As we learned earlier in our study of chapter 14, part of the Jewish conception of Paradise was the privilege of partaking in the Heavenly banquet at the end of life. Jesus warned that those who gave initial acceptance of the invitation but then refused to come when the feast was ready would not be permitted to even taste of that meal. Now, here was Lazarus cleansed from his crippled, unclean, ulcerated body – reclining on Abraham’s breast.

Why was Lazarus comforted, because he was poor? Of course not! It was because he understood his need of God and rested his confidence on Him.

Both men were in Hades, the place of departed spirits. But in contrast to the intimacy and perfect bliss that Lazarus was enjoying, the rich man was in extreme anguish. The contrast cannot be greater! Jesus had warned them earlier in Luke 13:28; *“There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.”* The rich man now understood!

He was in anguish (this is an old word used for torture on the rack), and he cries out for mercy. Notice his attempt to claim relationship by saying “Father Abraham...” It was a well founded, but unavailing claim. He asks that Lazarus be sent...to give him a drink? No, only to dip the tip of his finger in water and put it on his tongue because he is in anguish because of the flame. How ironic; the one who showed no mercy in his life, now asks for mercy in his death.

The rich man’s request reminds me of a scene from Dante’s “Inferno,” the epic, 14<sup>th</sup> Century poem describing the torments of Hell. In one scene Adamo, the counterfeiter, horribly mutilated, and inhabiting the lowest circle of Hell, says:

“I had, while living, much of what I wished;  
And now, alas! a drop of water crave.  
The rivulets that from the verdant hills  
Of Cassentin descend down into Arno,  
*Making their channels to be soft and cold,*  
Ever before me stand, and not in vain:  
For far more doth their image dry me up  
Than the disease which strips my face of flesh.”

Now listen to the words of Abraham, “Son, remember...Son Remember...” Such tragic words; it could have been different. “In your lifetime you received the full measure of good things and likewise Lazarus received a full measure of evil things. But now he is comforted and you are **TORMENTED**. One writer reminds us “it is a great law of God’s kingdom, that *the nature of our present desires shall rule that of our future bliss.*” Did you catch that? “...it is a great law of God’s kingdom, that *the nature of our present desires shall rule that of our future bliss.*”

In other words, Abraham told the rich man, “Your request is impossible; you’ve made your choice. Furthermore, there’s a vast, impassable chasm fixed between us and you so that none can pass from here to you or from you to here.”

Finally, the rich man realizes his condition is hopeless. There's no escape and there's no possible hope of change or relief. So he asks for Lazarus to be sent back to his family members, his five brothers, to warn them so they wouldn't suffer the same fate. His response doesn't seem to be motivated by genuine concern, but rather bitterness toward God. "If only I had been sufficiently warned, if God had only given me clear evidences of the need for repentance, I would not have come into this place."

Abraham's response is instructive. "They have Moses and the prophets let them pay attention to them." In other words "they are sufficiently warned." To which the rich man responds with objection; "No, but if one went to them from the regions of the dead, they would repent." Jesus' argument has turned full circle; they showed contempt for the words of Moses and the prophets, they showed contempt for the Living Word who stood before them, and they would show contempt for Him even after He arose from the dead.

I believe the reference to "one [who] rose from the dead" is to Jesus; but it could also be a reference to Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. Do you remember what the Pharisees wanted to do after Jesus performed the miracle? John 12:9 to 11 tells us *"Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there [in Bethany]; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus."*

The response of the religious leaders proved the fallacy of the rich man's argument! It wasn't information they lacked; it was the will to believe and obey. They too would find themselves thrust out of the kingdom and replaced by the repentant publicans and sinners.

My friend, where do you find yourself in this picture? Remember, Jesus is speaking to those who were religious, who assumed an air of piety. He was speaking (according to Luke 18:9) to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.

Do you harbor a spirit of contempt for the teachings of Jesus and the Scripture? If you're like me you're quick to say "No, no, I wouldn't treat Jesus or the Word with contempt!" Really, what about living out Jesus' commands given to us in the Sermon on the Mount? Oh, you say they're not meant for today? Who gave you the authority to decide that? Remember Jesus said not even the smallest portion of the Law will be left unfulfilled; and the requirements Jesus gave for those who would be disciples in His kingdom go far beyond the letter of the Law.

It is so easy for us to be like the Pharisees and justify our actions; to explain why it's OK to disobey the clear teaching of Scripture in a particular instance. For example, Jesus said "*Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*" But I've heard people say "Oh, don't give that person anything; they'll spend it on booze or cigarettes." Or, "if that person wouldn't be so lazy they wouldn't need help." Just so you know, there are ways you can obey this command and still make sure what you give meets a real need.

But has it ever occurred to you in situations like this that God may have a greater interest in your response than in the other person's need? Jesus said earlier in this chapter that if you and I aren't faithful in following His commands about how to use our "stuff" we won't be entrusted with true riches. That makes our choices and our obedience pretty important, doesn't it?

And that same choice, to refuse someone in need, reveals a callous heart. "I'm not going to take my hard-earned money and give it to some loser!" The rich man in this parable could've made Lazarus' life a whole lot easier and he most likely wouldn't have missed what it cost. We don't get the impression he was antagonistic toward Lazarus; he didn't forbid the men to lay him at the gate. He just didn't care! He didn't take time to learn more about his condition and offer lasting help. He was too busy with his own life and possessions. That one hurts, doesn't it?

Just like Lazarus and the rich man you and I will someday leave this life. At that moment our destiny will be sealed. The rich man did not end up in torment because he was rich. Lazarus did not end up in the bliss of Paradise because he was poor. Jesus was not teaching a works-based salvation.

But He was clearly teaching that those who serve material wealth cannot, at the same time, serve God. His teaching and this parable show the end of anyone who tries to have it both ways. Remember what I said earlier? "*It is a great law of God's kingdom, that the nature of our present desires shall rule that of our future bliss.*" The rich man focused on his wealth and ignored God's command to care for the poor and the stranger. Now he was reaping his inevitable reward and there was no escape.

And sadly, though we have a clear warning of where these choices lead and what their results are, many still try to accomplish the impossible. It will never work. What is highly valued among men is detestable and loathsome to God. Whoever will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. That, my friend, is the peril of mammon.

Heavenly Father, I confess this is a hard word for me. In my spirit I want to serve you with all my being; but in my flesh I want a life of ease and comfort. But Jesus says I can't have it both ways! Oh God, I cry out to you for increased faith and grace to walk in obedience to your commands; to serve you and you alone. And I pray that for my friend who is listening.

Father, help me to honor you and your Word by my obedience; to exercise compassion for those in need; and to enter into that eternal bliss that is promised to all who by faith accept the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus as the only acceptable payment for their sin. This I pray for both my friend and myself in the precious name of Jesus, Amen.