

“True Riches”

Luke 16:1-13

In my junior high school English class, we had a weekly vocabulary test. I’ve always enjoyed words and reading and did well on the tests. Some of my friends – not so much. And they soon discovered the teacher was careless about keeping test sheets hid from prying eyes.

We had a split-session class. We had half the class before lunch and half of it after lunch. The test was given on the same day every week in the first part of the class, and then we’d all go to lunch. The teacher carelessly left the tests and the answer sheet lying on her desk. So some of my friends came back early from lunch and corrected their tests!

I didn’t have a desire to cheat on the vocabulary tests because I enjoyed them. But my friends needed a lookout in the hallway to make sure they weren’t surprised by the teacher in the act of correcting their tests. I’m ashamed to say, even though I knew better, I sometimes served as their lookout.

Why did I do it? First, I wanted their approval and acceptance; I wanted to be a part of the group. I also wanted to secure their cooperation if I ever needed help to get out of a tough spot. I was thinking ahead - how they could repay me for the help I gave them (although I wasn’t truly helping them). I can think of one incident where they did help me out of a predicament.

Now I hope my confession doesn’t shock you. I don’t make excuses for my behavior; it was wrong, and I acknowledge it. As human beings we are all prone to sin. And the Word of God teaches us how to deal with that inherent sinfulness and find forgiveness for it. The Word of God also presents human beings, striving to live godly lives, with all their faults, weaknesses, and failures. It’s an accurate picture of humanity.

In our continuing study of Luke’s gospel, we come to chapter sixteen. In the first part of this chapter Jesus tells a parable about an unfaithful steward. As parables go, some feel this one is among the most difficult to decipher.

But let’s keep two things in mind. First, parables are designed to teach ONE MAIN point. Second, don’t separate the parable from its context. If we follow these two principles I believe we will understand that Jesus is teaching His disciples how to acquire true riches. So that’s what I’ve titled our study, “True Riches.” So please listen carefully as I read our text, Luke 16:1 to 13. That’s Luke 16:1 to 13, and I’m reading from the New King James Version.

In this text Jesus introduces several DISCIPLINES that will help us acquire true riches.

Before we begin to unpack this text let's think about the context and the setting. First, the context: the larger context is a continuation of a dialog that began in the house of a Pharisee all the way back at the beginning of chapter 14! Jesus' teaching in these chapters reveals the nature and characteristics of His kingdom. One other key is remembering who is in Jesus' audience.

The more immediate context is Jesus' teaching on the prodigal God and His gracious forgiveness for those who truly repent. As we look at the disciplines that help us to acquire true riches we'll make some connections with the context.

The setting Jesus uses for this parable was clearly understood by His listeners. But separated as we are by about 2,000 years and a different culture it's foreign to us. It was common in that day for wealthy landowners to rent out smaller tracts of land to individual tenants. The tenants worked the land and the rental charge was usually in the form of produce. In the parable we just read the rental fee was olive oil and wheat.

Most wealthy men, then and now, don't want to do the day-to-day hands-on work of management; so they hire others to do it for them. In this setting, the steward is a highly trusted individual whose responsibility is to see that the landowner prospers. As we will see, he is free to enter into contractual agreements with the tenants. The more successful the steward is, the more successful and wealthy the landowner.

Finally, let's also remember that we are dealing with a culture that makes choices based on the contrasting principles of honor and shame. These few details will make it easier for us to understand what Jesus is saying.

The First DISCIPLINE in Acquiring True Riches is,

The Discipline of Being Far-sighted

Our text opens with the steward being accused of wasting his master's resources. This same word is used to describe the actions of the wayward son in chapter 15 verse 13; "he wasted his possessions with his profligate living." Here the verb tense tells us this wasting of resources was continuing even as the accusation reached the master's ears! So the landowner calls the steward in and demands an accounting of his stewardship - because he's about to be fired. The

widespread knowledge of the steward's failure has brought great shame to the landowner. People conclude he's not a good judge of character or he'd never have hired this man.

The steward is immediately faced with a dilemma; what's he going to do? Having worked in a cushy, office job and living an extravagant lifestyle he's not well-suited for manual labor. And since the accusation of his wrongdoing is well-known, no other landowner is going to hire him as a steward. The only other option open to him is begging. The shame that accompanies that possibility horrifies him. So at first glance he really has no good options.

But then he has an idea. He will ingratiate himself with his master's debtors. He will do something for them that will obligate them to come to his aid when he loses his position. So, he calls in the first debtor and inquires about the agreement he had with the landowner.

The first tenant's agreement is for a hundred measures of olive oil; about 700 gallons. So he tells the man to take his agreement and change the amount to fifty measures. Remember he's still steward, he still has authority to transact business for his master, so he accepts this new contract that reduces the amount by half, about 350 gallons!

The second tenant's agreement is for a hundred measures of wheat; about 1,000 bushels. So he tells this man to take his agreement and change the amount to eighty measures. Then he accepts this contract reducing the amount owed by about 200 bushels.

Both of these actions will result in significant financial benefit to the tenants, and that's just what the steward planned! He was the bearer of good news. When he is finally expelled from his position he has a group of people who owe him some favors.

Now comes the interesting twist in this story; the landowner (not Jesus) commends the dishonest steward! Why? The text says "because he had done wisely..." The ESV renders it "for his shrewdness." In different translations of the Scriptures these two renderings predominate. However, in current usage shrewdness has negative connotations that are lacking here. The Greek word is *phronimos*. It means sagacious, prudent, sensible, and thoughtful.

This same word used in Matthew 7:24 to describe the man who not only hears the sayings of Jesus but obeys them. In Luke chapter 25 it's used to describe the virgins in the wedding party who made preparation for the future; they didn't know how long they'd need to wait until the Bridegroom appeared. They were looking ahead, and they are commended for their wisdom. Proverbs 14:15 says "*A simple man believes everything, but the prudent man carefully considers his ways.*"

So the steward was prudent, he was looking ahead, he was far-sighted. He knew the debtors would assume the reduction of their debts came from the landowner. That makes them grateful and more loyal to him. It's true; the landowner would have decreased wealth, but he would get the increased honor that's so important to him.

Notice what Jesus says next; *“the children of this world (or this age) are more prudent in their dealings with others of their own kind than the children of light are in their dealings with their own kind.”* People whose goal in life is financial success pursue it with single devotion. Henry Ford, the wildly successful automaker, said, “Work is the only pleasure. It is only work that keeps me alive and makes life worth living.” People like this are always looking ahead, planning how to use their money and relationships to make more money and accumulate wealth.

Jesus wasn't commending that approach. What He was advising was that we as His followers be far-sighted, that we take the long look. We, who have a much higher reward than earthly riches, should pour ourselves heart, soul, and mind into His service.

One writer said that the children of light “bestow less pains to win heaven than ‘the children of this world’ bestow to win earth – they are less provident in heavenly things than those are in the earthly – the world is better served by its servants than God is by His.” What a sobering indictment of casual Christianity!

Keep in mind the audience Jesus was addressing. That the Pharisees understood Jesus' message as being directed at them is indicated by their extremely negative response in verse 14 of this chapter. According to Paul's words in Romans 3:1 to 3, these men had been entrusted with the oracles or utterances of God; most likely a reference to the Law. They had failed in their stewardship and would eventually be removed from their position. They were much more interested in their financial and political future than their eternal future.

It is easy for us to sit in judgment of them; but are we any different? Are we not guilty of giving more time and energy to earthly pursuits than to the heavenly?

Let's notice further what Jesus says in verse 9. *“...make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”* When Jesus speaks of unrighteous wealth, He certainly cannot be condoning wealth gotten by deceit or dishonesty. To help us understand what He meant look at verse 11. There, Jesus compares unrighteous mammon with true riches.

True riches are those whose value is permanent and enduring; so the unrighteous mammon simply refers to the uncertain riches, the riches which cannot be trusted. Jesus says we should be far-sighted enough to use the uncertain riches (money and possessions), to secure eternal rewards. It is another way of reinforcing His command to “...lay up treasures in Heaven.” These earthly riches will ultimately fail; they’re only for time, for the present. But we are to use them in such a way that when they’ve served their purpose, they will, as it were, have purchased for us an eternal habitation or dwelling.

If you’re like me and you profess to follow Jesus, we must ask ourselves how well we’re doing with the resources God has entrusted to us. Are we exercising a similar or greater level of diligence in our service for Christ as the unbeliever does to accumulate earthly wealth? Are we using God’s resources, temporarily entrusted to us, to the greatest possible benefit for His glory? Will the things we acquire stay here when we leave, or will they go on before us to the security of our eternal rewards?

I don’t know about you, but I know that there is significant room for improvement in my life. Too often, my decisions about how to use money and possessions are based on the immediate - my wants and desires. I fail to take the long look. As a result I suffer, others suffer, and God does not receive the glory He so much deserves.

As one of the “children of light” I acknowledge and receive Jesus’ rebuke. My desire is to exercise greater prudence and foresight so I can experience the true riches Christ offers.

The Second DISCIPLINE in Acquiring True Riches is,

The Discipline of Being Faithful

It seems to me that this parable ends in verse 8; verses 9 to 13 are applications Jesus makes with respect to the parable. Having just compared the diligence of those who seek worldly wealth with the lack of diligence in the children of light; He moves on to the topic of faithfulness. These are closely related as we’ll see.

Jesus says clearly in verse 10 that if we’re faithful in the management of what is least we will also be faithful with much. The converse is also true; unfaithfulness in the small things will project a lack of faithfulness in bigger things.

Maybe you’ve experienced the reality of this in your own life; I certainly have. I grew up in a small, urban church fellowship. I remember as an older teen and twenty-something being

given responsibility to lead our Wednesday evening Bible Study. In that setting what I taught was heard by older members and church leaders. If I said something contrary to the plain meaning of the text, or something that ignored or violated the context, I could be, and was, challenged. It was a safe place to learn, grow, and develop the skills I use today.

As one whom God has given the spiritual gift of teaching, I found joy and satisfaction in studying the Scriptures and then sharing with others what I'd learned; in fact I still do! I enjoy sharing the Word with you. It's not always easy, because like this text, the Scriptures have some hard things to say; but when I was ordained I promised God and those who gave the ordination charge that I would be faithful in preaching and teaching ALL of God's Word.

As I was faithful with the opportunities given in my local church, other opportunities began to open for me. After many years, God gave me the opportunity of joining the staff at Heralds of Hope. For six years I served as assistant to Dr. J. Otis Yoder, the founder and first Bible teacher on our radio programs. Now I have the privilege of serving in that teaching role. But this would never have happened if I'd been unfaithful to the Lord and His Word in those early years in my home church!

I've met people who have a desire for a certain position of influence or leadership, but they've not been faithful in the small things, the smaller opportunities they've been given. Jesus' clearly says that unfaithfulness in little things precludes greater responsibility. This speaks to our motives. Why does a person want a position of influence or leadership, so they can serve others or so they can be noticed by others? Do they want personal acclaim or do they want to make others successful? I can assure you that selfish motives will always lead to unfaithfulness.

Jesus goes on to make the connection between earthly, temporary riches, and true or lasting riches. Again, faithfulness, or the lack of it, in handling material wealth gives a person a reputation. Do you think that anyone was going to hire the unfaithful steward to manage their property? Of course not! He wasn't reliable.

It's unfortunate, but many pastors and leaders have been unfaithful in handling finances. Eventually they were caught embezzling money from the church accounts. As a result they lost their money and their ministry – and their reputation.

What about you and me? Are we faithfully using the portion of worldly wealth God has entrusted to us? Jesus points out in verse 12 that what we have doesn't really belong to us; it belongs to another. It really belongs to Him, we are only stewards. And according to First

Corinthians 4:1 and 2, stewards will be called to account. Paul wrote *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one is found faithful.”*

G. Campbell Morgan relates how he was staying in the home of wealthy Christian. One morning at family prayers the father in the home prayed eloquently and fervently for the salvation of the lost and for the missionaries who were striving to reach them with the Gospel.

After the prayers were over, the father was startled when his ten-year-old son said to him: “Dad, I like to hear you pray for the missionaries.” Naturally, the father was pleased by the remark and said “I’m glad you do, my boy.” The boy then replied to his father, “But do you know what I was thinking when you were praying? I was thinking that if I had your bank account, I would answer half your prayers!”

It’s easy for us to pick on the wealthy, and excuse ourselves, because most of us assume we’re not included in that group. But if you live in the western hemisphere you are wealthy compared to more than 90 percent of the world’s population. I remember one time I was in a meeting and one of the men in that meeting said to me; “I wish I had a million dollars to give to the work of Heralds of Hope.” Another man in the group spoke up and said, “But what about the 20 dollars in your wallet?”

You see the issue isn’t the amount of resources we have; it’s our attitude toward them. We can love money and possessions for their own sake. That’s really love of self and it leads us to hoard our resources for selfish use and to the neglect of others. Or we can see the resources as belonging to God and use them for the benefit of others – and for His glory.

Faithfulness to a worldly mind is protecting what I have and watching the pile grow bigger. It is illustrated in Luke chapter twelve in the story of the rich farmer. “I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones. I will say to my soul ‘you can retire, kick back, relax, eat, drink, and be merry,’ you earned it and you deserve it.”

But to a redeemed mind faithfulness is being a sower. It is recognizing the potential for other’s benefit and God’s glory when I generously scatter the seed. It is being willing to sacrifice my comforts so the needs of others can be met; especially their need to hear the Gospel!

Proverbs 11:24 reminds us *“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.”* That’s the law of sowing and reaping. And Paul reminds us in Galatians chapter six that if we sow to the flesh, that is, if we use our resources

selfishly, we will reap a harvest of corruption. What we have will not last beyond this life. On the other hand, if we sow under the direction of the spirit we will reap everlasting life.

My friend, I can't overemphasize the importance of faithfulness. God, in varying degrees, has entrusted you and me with wealth, influence, position, skills, relationships, leisure time, and more. They are given to us to use here on earth in such a way that they will accrue eternal benefit – to us and to others. If we are unfaithful we will have to give an answer for it.

Do you remember the parable of the talents? Do you remember the fate of the man who was unprofitable to his master? The words of Jesus are frightening. *“And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

If you and I are going to acquire the true riches Jesus is talking about, it will only happen if we exercise the discipline of faithfulness.

The Final DISCIPLINE in Acquiring True Riches is,

The Discipline of Being Focused

In the final verse of our text Jesus states a fundamental, non-negotiable principle: no person can serve two different masters. No one can be entirely at the command of two different entities. This truth is at the heart of our understanding and acquiring true riches. Focus narrows our field of view and helps us keep our eye on the goal.

In the minds of Jesus' audience His statement was clear and without ambiguity. However, because our circumstances are different, there are many people today who think they can serve two masters. They want enough Jesus to escape eternal punishment and enough of the world's pleasures to tantalize their fleshly desires. But Jesus said *“if your eye is single your whole body will be full of light.”* And the apostle James speaks of being double-minded or two-spirited – which results in total instability.

We live in an era of distraction. In the physical world distraction can be life threatening. Texting or looking at some other electronic device while driving causes many deaths and countless injuries every year. In the workplace distraction diminishes productivity, impacts quality, raises costs, and can lead to personal injury. Researchers report greatly reduced levels of concentration in young people because they're so distracted by the constant movement of electronic media.

And, there are other ways to be distracted. Some men I know are distracted from the responsibility and privilege of training their children because of work, or sports, or hobbies. For the same reasons they won't accept responsibility in the local congregation. When their children grow up and reject what little teaching they did have, these men often blame the church or someone else; anyone but themselves.

Notice the strength of Jesus' language here. A man will "*either hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold tightly to one and despise the other.*" Hate and love are words with strong meaning and they are polar opposites. Holding tightly to something or to someone shows affection, kinship, value. Despising something or someone shows disgust, separation, and rejection. I believe the similarity of hate and despise contrasted with love and hold tightly simply reinforce the absoluteness of Jesus' words.

I was intrigued by the word other as it's used two times in this last verse. Often we think of 'other' in terms of quantity. We have one egg, we add another, and that makes two eggs. But the emphasis of the word here is not on quantity; it is on quality. It highlights the distinct or opposite character and interests of the selections. And what are the choices? God and mammon; or God and riches, material wealth. Jesus states unequivocally that you cannot serve them both!

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.

This is one of the hard sayings of Jesus. Oh, it's not hard to understand; it's just hard to accept and live by it. This truth touches me where I live. Way too often I try to do the impossible – I try to serve God and yet serve riches. With my mouth I say I'm serving God, but my daily choices indicate where my true focus is.

When I think and act out of my spirit, the place where God's Holy Spirit dwells in me, I want true riches because I know they are the only kind that will last. But I live in a human body with physical desires that compete with the desires of my spirit and God's Spirit within me. Only as I surrender my will to His and align my choices with His Word will I be able to truly serve Him with single-hearted devotion.

My friend, are you acquiring true riches? Are you far-sighted, looking ahead to see how to best use your resources for the glory of God? Are you faithful, realizing that one day you will be called to give an account of your stewardship? Are you focused, totally committed to following and serving Jesus?

It is only as you and I exercise these disciplines in the power of the Holy Spirit that we will discover and enjoy the true riches Jesus has for us. Let's pray.

Oh God, Heavenly Father, these are hard words from the lips of Jesus. They're not hard to understand, but I confess they're hard to obey. I feel the constant pull of the world with its false message of success. I feel the constant pull of my own desires crying out for gratification. And I hear the still small voice of your Spirit saying "follow me, do it my way."

Father, the words you gave us in this text through your Son are clear. It is now up to me and to my friend to decide what we will do with them. Give us grace, give us faith, to choose the only lasting riches, the true riches; those that come from serving you with singleness of heart, soul, mind, and strength. This I pray in the precious name of Jesus, Amen.