

CHAPTER 16

Overview of Luke 16

In chapter 16, Jesus continues his teachings, both to His disciples and to the Pharisees. He will first give a parable about a shrewd manager who squandered away his master's resources. This parable will apply both to His disciples and to the Pharisees. Jesus will then give a teaching on faithfulness, and how His followers are expected to utilize the resources God gives them. He will also make one of His most poignant statements in Scripture about serving two masters, thus defining a clear measure of the heart. This chapter will then end with a long parable called "The rich man and Lazarus." There will be an abundance of applications from this parable, including applications about money, caring, denial, rejection, and the afterlife. The disciple may find this parable somewhat disturbing.

1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this *manager* was reported to him as squandering his possessions.

What to look for in Luke 16

1. As you read each paragraph ask, "How is God speaking to me personally through His word?"
2. You will see Jesus continuing to teach with parables, of which there are two in this chapter.
3. Look for the parable of the "shrewd steward," and try to understand why his master called him shrewd.
4. Look for two lessons to be learned from the parable of the shrewd steward.
5. Jesus will teach an important lesson about divorce that the Pharisees will not like. It is a judgment against them.
6. Carefully read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and ask yourself if it applies to you.
7. Look for Jesus' teachings on life after death.

16:1 Whereas the previous parables (in chapter 15) were spoken to the Pharisees, Jesus, though including the Pharisees, now turns His attention to His disciples. However, one must not lose sight of the fact that the themes of the parables in chapter 15 are continued right into chapter 16. Remember that the chapter divisions were designated long after the Scriptures were written. Thus, in Luke's original text, the thought processes continue from the parable of the lost son to this parable, the parable of the unrighteous manager (or "unjust steward," in other translations). Unfortunately, this parable is one of the least understood and most misinterpreted of all of Jesus' parables. Because the unrighteous manager is praised, some have gone so far as to suggest that the parable is mistranslated, or even extra-biblical. As we will see, nothing could be further from the truth.

The key word that ties the two parables together is the verb "to squander" (i.e., to waste or misuse). Whereas the lost son "squandered his (own) estate," in this parable, the manager was discovered "squandering" the possessions of another, possessions he had been entrusted with by his master.

It will be helpful in interpreting this parable if one keeps in mind that the master is God and the unrighteous steward (manager) refers primarily to

the disciples. Those who owe debts represent sinners and tax collectors, or anyone, for that matter. The theme of this parable is a carryover of the theme of the previous parable—forgiveness. Whereas in the parable of the lost son, it was the father (God) who forgave the son who sinned, in this parable it will be the disciples who are charged with forgiving. Now, an explanation of the parable itself.

In biblical times, a wealthy land owner, or in this case, a rich man, had a manager at his disposal to carry out the affairs of the estate. Usually, it was a servant who had been raised in the household and was appointed to oversee the other servants and tend to financial matters. He was usually given a copy of the master's seal on his ring, thus giving him the authority of the master. Today, the equivalent would be power of attorney.

(Remember, too, that a parable is a story that is not necessarily based on fact, but *could be*. Hardly a day goes by in today's news that there isn't an article about a celebrity accusing their financial manager or CFO of fraud, embezzlement, or mismanagement of funds. This parable, therefore, is as true today as it was in Jesus' time. That will be important to remember when the discussion of forgiveness emerges.)

Besides the question of who owned the possessions, the other twist that sets this parable apart is that the lessons are pointedly directly toward the disciples. Whereas the parable of the lost son was designed to teach the Pharisees about love, restoration and grace for sinners, this parable is designed to teach the disciples about proper utilization of the spiritual resources that God is going to provide them through the Holy Spirit (which should have been applicable to the Pharisees as well). It ties in Jesus' teachings about earthly possessions as much as it ties in His teachings about regaining that which was squandered and preserving the position as a manager of God's resources. The interpretation of this parable hangs, not on being shrewd, but on the phrase "each one of his master's debtors" (v. 5).

2 "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.

4 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'

16:2 Verse 2 summarizes a story of household intrigue. The manager has been accused of wasting the master's money, something that he doesn't deny. This would be akin to repentance, his first act being confession that he is indeed guilty of not handling well what the master had entrusted to him. Note that the master does not cast him out of his household; he simply states that he is being demoted because he hasn't handled the master's assets well, that he is going to be replaced by another, and that he will no longer have access to the master's resources.

5 “And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he *began* saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

6 “And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’

7 “Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’

8 “And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.

9 “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

To the Pharisees who, as verse 14 will state “were lovers of money,” this parable will make immediate sense. But to the disciples, who had left behind all possessions, the underlying meaning must be something else, and will not be completely identified until verses 10-13. Nevertheless, Jesus is making an analogy between the proper utilization of “unrighteous wealth” and the “true riches” that will be given them for carrying out the matters of the kingdom, especially during the days of the early church that is to come. Yet, even at the time it is given, this parable has significance. The disciples have been given the authority and power to proclaim the gospel, heal, and cast out demons. How will they use those gifts? They have also been given the opportunity of a lifetime—to follow Jesus and learn from Him. How will they take advantage of this opportunity? They have also been taught that when they pray, they are to continually be forgiving others their debts. Will they indeed follow through with that instruction? The lesson will be that they need to be shrewd about the privileges, the gifts, and the teachings they have been given.

16:3 The first thing the manager needs to do is face reality. He needs to come to grips with the fact that he is about to have his master’s resources as well as his authority taken away from him. Therefore, he faces *the real risk of not being forgiven* for his mismanagement of his master’s resources. And, he needs to face the fact that he is limited in his own strengths and abilities. In fact, he was much better off having at his disposal the master’s resources than he will be relying upon his own. This is a clear warning to the disciples: once they are left alone in the early church, they cannot rely upon their own resources, or resort to the world’s ways, to carry out the affairs of the kingdom.

16:4 The second thing the manager does is to come up with a plan. The plan is simple: give grace and favor to others by forgiving them of his portion, or profit, from the debt. By doing that, he will put himself in a position where they will show grace and favor to him, thus in turn, forgiving him of what debts he may accumulate by relying upon their hospitality.

16:5-7 Even more powerful principles begin to emerge in verses 5-7, and center around the issue of debt. If one reflects back to the Lord’s prayer in chapter 11, one will notice the emphasis on forgiveness: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (11:4). In the kingdom of God, debt is synonymous with sin, and in this parable, earthly debt to the master is a type of spiritual indebtedness to God because of sin. *One of the greatest resources God provides His disciples is the ability to forgive,*

10 “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.

11 “Therefore if you have not been faithful in the *use of* unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true *riches* to you?

12 “And if you have not been faithful in *the use of* that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?

13 “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

and have that forgiveness recognized by God Himself. One will notice in the upcoming verses that the master *never demands the remaining part of what is owed.* In other words, *the whole debt is forgiven,* and it was initiated by the manager (i.e., the disciple).

16:8-9 Jesus has used the world’s “wealth of unrighteousness” to illustrate how the disciples are to be shrewd in exercising the “wealth of righteousness”; that is, forgiveness. There is no greater way for others to become indebted to you than to offer them forgiveness, and even more, to offer them God’s forgiveness.

In the parable of the lost son, the older son, unlike his father, was unwilling (un-shrewd) about offering forgiveness to his brother. The lesson for the disciples is that they are not to be un-shrewd about offering forgiveness to others. And, by offering forgiveness and therefore utilizing shrewdly the spiritual resources of the master (God), the unrighteous managers (disciples) will be “praised” by their master.

16:10-13 The illustration having been given in the form of a parable sets the tone for the spiritual principles that follow. It is the small ethical, moral, monetary, spiritual and relational choices that we make on a day-to-day basis that set the tone for the wider, more far-reaching decisions that inevitably come our way. Failing to notify the cashier that he has returned too much cash opens the door for justifying cooking the books at the company. Failing to tithe anything to the church sets the stage for exercising greed with one’s possessions. Indulging in a little pornography clears the way for an affair. Being faithful in “a very little thing” is as much a statement of character as being “faithful...in much.”

Verses 10-12 are an exercise in logic as well as human nature and the spiritual condition. Consistency of character can be observed in the handling of “unrighteous wealth” as much as anything. The term “unrighteous wealth” refers specifically to money and possessions. It is contrasted to “true riches” that are spiritual in nature and come from God Himself. If one is not able to handle money and material possessions in a trustworthy and loving fashion, why would God entrust that individual with heavenly riches such as spiritual gifts? And, conversely, if one is not faithful in handling well the spiritual blessings that have been given by God, why would He entrust that individual with earthly possessions?

Verse 13 is certainly one of the most powerful and poignant teachings of Jesus: no one can be in service both to God and to money or possessions. *There is no greater hindrance to becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ and a worthy bearer of*

lasting fruit for the kingdom than money and possessions. Period. Thus, there are many followers of Jesus, but few true disciples. More often than not, the need for financial security, the love of things, material comforts and conveniences, and the attraction to the things of the world keeps Christians from becoming true disciples or sacrificial followers of Jesus. That is why Jesus stated in 14:33, “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.” And it is why the apostle John wrote, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

If a so-called born-again, evangelical Christian does not give generously *and sacrificially* to the kingdom of God, he loves money and possessions more than God’s kingdom. If a Christian refuses a call to ministry or missions because he is afraid to give up his financial security, insurance or retirement plan, he will never fulfill his potential for accomplishing good works worthy of the kingdom; and, he will miss out on the greatest blessing of his life. If a Christian does not pray, does not study Scripture, does not put himself in service to the church or to the kingdom because he is too busy with his job, too worried about his status or potential promotion, or too concerned over how big his paycheck might be, he is like the individual at a church service who raises his hand to receive Christ, but never repents of his lifestyle of sin, and wanders away like the prodigal son. There is no getting around this statement by Jesus, for ultimately it is a call to love. It is a call to show love to God by putting one’s own financial needs and wants aside for the sake of the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Instead of being a servant to one’s money and possessions, the Christian must learn instead to have his money and possessions serve the kingdom of God. Then, and only then, will those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ gain the true riches from heaven.

14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

15 And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

16:14-15 “...Listening to all these things” refers back to the beginning of chapter 15 and the last four parables that Jesus taught. In verses 14 and 15, there are two subjects that result in the Pharisees rejecting the teachings of Jesus: “money” and being “highly esteemed among men.”

If you will notice, much of the subject of the parables is about money, something that resulted in their “scoffing at Him.” The reason for their scoffing

is obvious. The Pharisees taught that if you were rich, your money and wealth came from God and was His reward for keeping Mosaic law and the traditions of the elders. If you were poor, you deserved to be poor because, obviously, you had sinned. Therefore, Pharisees felt that because they were righteous, they deserved to have money.

It was stated by someone that men strive to become wealthy for two reasons: power over women for sex, and power over men for admiration and respect. Jesus will soon describe the former when He chastises the Pharisees about divorce (v. 18). In verse 15, He focuses on the latter, the need for esteem among men.

The efforts by the Pharisees to “justify” themselves “in the sight of men” are almost too numerous to list. They controlled who could and who couldn’t offer sacrifices in the temple. They devised hundreds of laws restricting work on the Sabbath, which including healing. They wore elaborate robes and vestments and phylacteries to make themselves appear spiritual and holy to the public. Instead of fulfilling their mission of keeping people separated from the pagan world, they separated themselves from the people and began acting like the pagan world. They held over the peoples’ heads the threat of pronouncements, judgments and labels of “unclean,” “outcast,” “sinner” and “blasphemer,” thus keeping even devout people in fear of exclusion from the temple. Whereas in most societies it is government that holds power over people, in this theocratic Jewish society, it was the religious authorities who held power over people. Even worse, in holding this enormous power, they inevitably “justified” themselves before others. Their pride completely overruled any sense of the need to repent. Their pockets completely validated their negligence of the poor. Their power completely justified their hunger for esteem.

But before we condemn the Pharisees who justified themselves before men, the American evangelical is just as guilty. Hiding behind the veil of free enterprise, capitalism, the American dream and a Western work ethic, many Christians justify their wealth and affluence “in the sight of men” by believing that they “have worked hard for” and “earned” what they have. The poor are poor because they choose to be poor. Therefore, a sense of entitlement can often be found in the American evangelical community. That might explain why the average charitable giving of the American Christian is less than three percent of their income, while at the same time, living with an income and lifestyle that represents the top one or two percent of the world’s population. Such justification of wealth and privilege by the American Christian represents nothing less

than a hardness of heart toward the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind, to say nothing of the advancement of the kingdom of God through missions.

Jesus' response to the hardness of heart of the Pharisees is not to focus on their narcissistic behaviors, but to direct their attention to their hearts. Men may observe their outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. Somewhere in the emergence of the sect of the Jewish priesthood, they had placed the issue of the heart on the back burner, focusing instead on the letter of the law. Unlike David, who was "a man after God's own heart," they were men seeking the esteem of others. Their hearts had become cold and hardened, leaving little room for compassion and no room for loving your neighbor as yourself. Such lust for the esteem of men "is detestable in the sight of God," for in seeking to please men, they had failed to serve men with love. Unfortunately, this hardness of heart toward others is not foreign to the evangelical community today. The quest for power over others, the theology of health, wealth and prosperity, the lust for charismatic spiritual gifts, the hunger for mega-this and mega-that are almost too numerous to list.

Regardless of the era, the heart of man changes little. Times and context change only the specifics.

16:16-17 When gospel writers refer to the Law and the Prophets, they are referring to the Old Testament. Basically, the Law referred to the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Prophets, on the other hand, included all the Major and Minor Prophets, and, most of the time, all the historical and poetic books as well. The phrase "Law and Prophets" was a convenient way of saying, "All those parts of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) that Jewish theology is based on."

Unfortunately, the Pharisees also included the Hebrew *interpretations* of the Law and the Prophets, what is now called the Talmud in its earlier, unwritten form. These writings were also referred to as "the traditions of the elders." It is from these writings that the additional Sabbath laws were based. Even more unfortunate is the fact that the Pharisees and scribes attributed to "the traditions of the elders" the same spiritual authority as the Law and the Prophets, making them equal to Scripture in authority and practice.

Verse 16 is a source of much lexical and interpretive discussion on its meaning. In Greek, it literally translates, "The Law and the Prophets until John..." The words "were proclaimed" were added by the editors of the NASB to help the reader understand the passage. They may or may not be

16 "The Law and the Prophets *were proclaimed* until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

17 "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the law to fail.

correct; it's their best guess based on context. The added words could just as well have been "were preached" to fit the rest of the verse. The problem is that there is no verb in the phrase, and its construction places the emphasis on the Law and Prophets, not John.

The second part of the verse is also perplexing, and results in even more interpretive challenges. The construction of the verb "forcing" could be "forcing himself" into the kingdom (middle voice), or "being forced" into the kingdom (passive voice).

Here are two possible ways to translate and interpret verse 16 using quite a bit of literary license. Please bear with the author:

"The Law and the Prophets pointed the way toward the kingdom of God until John the Baptist appeared on the scene, the last of the Old Testament prophets. But since John preached, the good news about the kingdom of God has been preached by Me with outstanding results, and people are falling over themselves trying to enter into it."

(This interpretation is based on the middle voice, and pictures a mob scene outside a Target on Black Friday.)

Here is another possibility: "Until John the Baptist, it was the Law and the Prophets that pointed the way to the kingdom of God. Now, the good news about the kingdom of God is actually being preached so that the Law and the Prophets are no longer needed to point the way...it's here now! Indeed, it is your own mishandling of the Law and the Prophets that are forcing people into the kingdom. The people are hearing something much better from Me."

(This interpretation is based on the passive voice, and pictures a crowd of protestors running for shelter from police with fire hoses.)

Lest Jesus' audience assume that He is nullifying the law of Moses by preaching the gospel of the kingdom, **verse 17** clears up any misconceptions: every "stroke of a letter of the Law" will be fulfilled. The NASB word "stroke" is the term used for a Hebrew "tittle," a small decorative part of the smallest Hebrew letter, the *yodh*. The equivalent in the English alphabet would be the dot over an "i." In other words, everything written in the Old Testament *will come to pass*. What was true in Jesus' day is true today and tomorrow and in the age to come: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8).

16:18 Now Jesus addresses another way in which the Pharisees abused their position and power. The subject is divorce, but the real issue is lust. This little verse, elaborated on in much more detail in Matthew's gospel, is loaded with irony.

18 "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery."

Let's look at verse 18 clause by clause. First, "Everyone who divorces his wife...." Divorce was not forbidden by Mosaic law (Deut. 24:1-4). As Matthew elaborates, a justifiable cause for divorce was unfaithfulness; that is, adultery. And, as Jesus qualifies in Matthew, God allowed a provision for divorce because of their "hardness of heart." In other words, even if the wife repented (assuming she was the one who had the affair), love, forgiveness and reconciliation was overruled by anger, vengeance and shunning, and the husband could proceed with the divorce.

But here is the problem. Just as the religious leaders had defined hundreds of laws as to what constitutes work on the Sabbath, so they declared as law numerous reasons a man could divorce his wife. The irony is this: the Pharisees, while condemning Gentiles as being unclean and less than human, nevertheless adopted Greek standards when it came to divorce, and wrote those very standards into their law books! And the Greek standards were this: you can divorce your wife for any reason, similar as it is in America today. The only difference? In the Greek world, a woman could ask for a divorce. Unfortunately for a Jewish women, only men could seek a writ of divorce. Therefore, a Pharisee could ask for a writ of divorce if he didn't like his wife's cooking. He could divorce her if she didn't please him sexually. He could divorce her if he didn't consider her as pretty as some other woman, thus not measuring up to his artificial standards of beauty. And the list goes on and on.

But now we come to the second part of Jesus' statement that points directly to the heart of the matter. The true motive behind divorce by the Pharisees was to sexually experience another woman, nothing short of lust. Therefore, Jesus adds that if a Pharisee divorces his wife, on whatever grounds he may come up with, and marries another woman, he commits adultery, a violation of the seventh commandment. This statement by Jesus would naturally infuriate the Pharisees, for in their mind they had come up with a very clever way to have as many wives as they wanted, only instead of multiple wives like those awful Gentiles, their system involved serial wives. In other words, by using a legal system in the name of God, they were no different than the very "sinners" they condemned. The Pharisees justified their lustful acts with law, thereby blinding themselves to the fact that they were even worse sinners. This must have infuriated Jesus.

The last part of verse 18 points to even greater hypocrisy: wife swapping. When a Pharisee divorced his wife, a lesser Pharisee might find the divorced wife quite attractive, perhaps even more attractive than his present wife. Therefore, serial divorces

19 “Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

20 “And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,

21 and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

22 “Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

23 “In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 “And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send

resulted in serial marriages resulting in serial acts of adultery.

At the heart of the topic of marriage, divorce and adultery, is the issue of love. Jesus’ statement in verse 18 goes right to the heart of the matter: love was overruled by lust in the name of the law. Whereas God’s law is designed to teach the nature of true love, the Pharisees had distorted God’s law to satisfy their own lust. It is a very sad commentary on the religious hierarchy in Jesus’ day, just as it is a very sad commentary on today’s view of marriage and divorce.

There is one last comment that needs to be made on this verse (and is consistent with Matthew’s version). Some churches teach that if there is a divorce, no matter who is at fault, no matter what is the reason for the divorce, and no matter whether the couple was Christian or not before the divorce, it is a sin to remarry, as remarrying constitutes adultery. Some remarried couples who have come under this teaching actually contemplate divorcing one another so as not to be living in sin! This is an absurd conclusion, an even more absurd teaching by the church, and is tantamount to modern-day Pharisaic legalism and oppression. It is bondage to an interpretation taken completely out of context.

Here is this writer’s take on the matter: *stay in whatever state you are in!* If you were divorced and have remarried, whether Christian or not at the time, *stay in your present state*, especially if there are children involved. Re-divorcing from a re-marrying does not a re-repenting make! If there has been sin involved, such as adultery, then it needs to be acknowledged and confessed. Then move on! Do not make a difficult matter worse by subscribing to a spurious teaching that requires divorcing from a remarriage.

16:19-31 Chapter 18 ends with a troubling parable. On every level, it is disturbing in its outcome, first by the consequences of ignoring God’s command to love your neighbor as yourself, and second, by the failure of those to accept truth about who Jesus is in spite of all the evidence. The end of the parable represents a fulfillment of the “unpardonable sin.” (However, see note on 12:10 regarding the term “unpardonable sin.”). This parable is directed not just to the Pharisees, but to anyone who, for one reason or another, fails to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior in spite of all the evidence. It cuts right to the chase of rejecting Jesus, and prophecies, in a terrible way, the end of the sect of Pharisees.

16:19 “Now there was a rich man....” This parable will be one of many contrasts, beginning with the two main characters. The rich man is characterized three ways: he is rich (meaning quite

Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’

25 “But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.

26 ‘And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.’

27 “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house—

28 for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

29 “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’

30 “But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’

31 “But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

wealthy); he is well-dressed in purple (a color reserved for royalty) and fine linen (*bysus*, aka sea silk), both of which were costly and hard to come by; and he lives in splendor (he has a large household of servants providing sumptuous food and fine wine on a daily basis). These three descriptors define a lifestyle of pleasure. He not only has great affluence, but he buys whatever he wants whenever he wants. He obviously lives in a mansion surrounded by a wall designed to keep out uninvited guests. He is nameless, however. The Pharisees, many of whom were rich, would immediately identify the rich man as “the good guy.” Their initial interpretation would be that this was a man blessed by God, who was probably righteously keeping the law in order to deserve such divine favor.

16:20-21 By contrast, there is Lazarus, the poor man. Lazarus is the only person given a name in Jesus’ parables. There are two reasons Jesus chooses the name Lazarus. The first is obvious: not too many days from now Jesus will raise His friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, from the dead. This fact will have more significance at the end of the parable. But there is a second reason. Lazarus is Latin for the Hebrew name Eleazar. Translated, Eleazar means “God has helped.” Thus, by giving the poor man the name Lazarus, Jesus is immediately countering the belief of the Pharisees that it was the rich man whom God had helped, not the poor man. In the eyes of the Pharisees, the poor man was poor because he was under God’s judgment, and the rich man was rich because he was under God’s favor.

It was customary in biblical times for the poor to gather at the gate of the rich in hopes that, as the rich were coming and going, they would drop alms on their blanket, such as one would see people today dropping money into a Salvation Army bucket at Christmas time. Notice, too, that Lazarus was in genuine need. He “was laid at (the rich man’s) gate,” meaning that he was unable to get there by himself. Caring others had to place him there. It is quite clear, then, that Lazarus must beg for money to buy food. In those days, this would have meant that Lazarus was not far from death.

Lazarus was also covered with sores. He obviously could not afford to pay a physician for balm or ointment. Lazarus’s sores, most likely caused by malnutrition, festered and became painfully infected, oozing pus which stray dogs found tasty, making the infection worse, for a dog’s tongue is full of bacteria. It would not be long before Lazarus’s sores resulted in sepsis, or infection of the blood. One must not assume the dogs were like household pets. Most likely they were covered with fleas and ticks. Not only were dogs wandering scavengers, trying themselves to survive, but dogs

were considered unclean. Jews often referred to Gentiles as “dogs,” a severe insult signifying that Gentiles were sub-human. Not only would the sores themselves make you ceremonially unclean, but to have a dog lick your sores would make you even more unclean.

Lazarus was also starving to death. All he could think about was where the next morsel of food was coming from. Yet he isn’t asking for much...a crumb would be a delicacy.

Thus, in three verses, we see stark contrasts between someone who was well supplied to take care of himself, and did so, and someone who had no one to take care of him, and left so.

16:22 The contrasts continue into the death of each man, a sobering reminder that life does not end with a last breath. Just as Lazarus “was laid” at the gate of the rich man, he is now “carried away” by angels. He may have been poor, but there was always someone to care for him.

Lazarus is carried “to Abraham’s bosom.” This is a Hebraism for heaven. Ironically, it is a picture of dining, for in the Jewish meal, the most important guest reclined near the bosom of the host; that is, right next to him and sometimes, right up against him. In other words, Lazarus is now feasting in “splendor” in heaven.

In contrast, the rich man is not carried by anybody other than those who buried him in the ground. Lazarus and the rich man have now traded places. Lazarus is “living in splendor every day,” and the rich man is being “laid” at the gate of Hades.

16:23 The rich man now finds himself in Hades, totally conscious and totally aware of his surroundings. Whereas in his earthly life he was living in splendor every day, now he is living in torment every day, and there is no end in sight. The notion that the rich man would end up in Hades would have been particularly abhorrent to the Pharisees, being the exact opposite of conventional rabbinic theology.

Hades was considered the abode of the dead. It is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *Sheol*. The common teaching of the rabbis was that after death, both good people and wicked people gathered in Hades to await the final judgment. However, Jesus immediately corrects that theology by teaching that only the wicked go to Hades, and the righteous go to heaven. The New Testament, therefore, teaches quite clearly that Hades is synonymous with hell, the place of everlasting torment.

Parables are meant to teach a spiritual principle, and therefore not every detail can be taken literally. Therefore, that the rich man “lifted up his eyes,” and “saw” Lazarus is simply a way of saying that, in some manner, the rich man was conscious enough to

perceive that his situation was not the same as Lazarus's; Lazarus was in heavenly splendor, and he was in hellish agony. What *can* be taken literally is something the New Testament teaches clearly: hell is a place of everlasting torment. The exact nature of that torment is unknown, but one part of it may be the knowledge that, had the rich man lived his life differently, he wouldn't be eternally separated from heavenly splendor. While on earth, he *had the opportunity* to live his life differently, but he chose not to. Few things create more mental anguish than to know you had the opportunity to change your life for the better, and passed it up.

16:24 The rich man, in his agony, cries out to Abraham, not Lazarus. Lazarus is out of the picture; he is shielded from the agony of others, nestled in the bosom of Abraham. Note, too, that the rich man refers to Abraham as "Father." Such a reference clearly indicates that even though he is a Jew, being a child of Abraham didn't automatically grant him access to Abraham's bosom. This would, of course, be a direct insult to the Pharisees who taught that, by being descendants of Abraham, God would automatically grant them special privilege, thus ensuring eternity in heaven. Jesus is stating in very clear terms that simply being a descendant of Abraham does not guarantee access to Abraham's bosom. It takes more, as we will see later in the passage.

The rich man cries out for "mercy," just as Lazarus would have cried out for mercy from the rich man going in and out of the gate. Yet the rich man showed no mercy to Lazarus and ignored his pleas.

The rest of this verse is filled with a vivid picture of the agony of being eternally separated from God. This writer has worked in hospital burn units, and of all the traumas experienced by patients, burn victims suffer the most. Burns to the face and mouth are particularly painful, as the lips and tongue are extremely sensitive to touch and occupy large areas of the cerebral cortex that registers sensation. Burns to the mouth and tongue leave one with a constant thirst, but drinking even water is painful and never satisfies the thirst. Swallowing is also painful. Therefore, the rich man's request for just a drop of water is extremely realistic and vividly illustrates the agony from the never-ending "flame."

Whether or not eternal fire or flame is actual or metaphorical, we don't know. Hell is most often illustrated by fire, but hell is also described as "outer darkness." We do know, however, that because burns are so painful and agonizing, flame and fire are appropriate illustrations of what it is like to be in hell...it is torment.

16:25 The contrast in afterlife is placed in the context of the situation before death—"good things"

versus “bad things.” Note that the rich man “received” good things. The clear implication is that he was given the good things by God. It is also implied that Lazarus did *not* receive good things, indicating that the lives of both men were under God’s control. Speculating a little more, one might suggest that God gave the good things to the rich man in order to test him on how he might use the resources God gave him—to serve himself or to serve others. But now the situation is reversed and, unfortunately for the rich man, worse. Whereas a change of circumstances could have taken place before death, had the rich man been willing to share his good things, after death there is no more chance to change the situation. The reason for this is found in the next verse.

16:26 Verse 26 clearly indicates that before death, some people have the opportunity to change their circumstances, but others do not. Lazarus did not have the opportunity to change his circumstances, but the rich man did. Those with greater possessions have the greater opportunity to do greater good. Those who have no possessions, the poor, are at the “mercy” of those who have the greater possessions. However, death takes away all opportunities to change, all opportunities to share, and all opportunities for the rich to show love to the poor rather than themselves. Why? Because death results in “a great chasm fixed”; that is, when all possessions are lost through death, there is nothing left to share, and no avenue left for the rich to show love to the poor. Even more importantly, God has designed life and eternity in such a way that only during our earthly life can we choose to change our circumstances. Once earthly life ends, our choices to change are taken away. Therefore, life on earth is a spiritual proving ground to “love your neighbor as yourself.” During life, eternal destination is determined by the choices we make. Once life is over, eternal destination is decided by God based on how we lived our earthly life, and that destination does not change.

16:27-29 The rich man, realizing that his circumstances are not going to change, therefore increasing his torment, pleads on behalf of those closest to him on earth—“I have five brothers.” Why does Jesus use the number five? There is nothing mystical or allegorical in the number five. Five is a number used frequently throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Numbers 7:17-83) to denote a sufficient or adequate amount; that is, not too many, not too few. Jesus therefore used the number five frequently for His Jewish audience.

The plea on the rich man’s part to warn his brothers implies that they, too, were wealthy and “living in splendor every day.” Abraham’s response

is not encouraging: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” Moses and the Prophets is the same as “the Law and the Prophets,” only personified. Jesus is clearly stating that if the Pharisees truly understood and followed the Old Testament, they would not only recognize Him as the Messiah, they would have been living their lives differently. They would have followed Moses’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18), and they would have heeded the words of such prophets as Zechariah when he wrote, “Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor...” (7:9-10). Jesus is saying that the brothers (implying the Pharisees) have all they need from God to make the right choices in life. Unfortunately, the rich man will admit that Moses and the Prophets is not enough, which in itself is a condemnation of the brothers and an insult to God.

16:30-31 The rich man, admitting that his brothers ignore and neglect the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, takes another tack. He requests Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead. If his brothers saw someone rise from the dead, then surely they would believe, repent, change their ways, and not end up in eternal torment. Abraham’s response is truly disheartening. Even if the brothers witness someone being raised from the dead, it will not be enough to persuade them. This fact, which is in effect a prophecy, becomes reality when Jesus raises His friend Lazarus from the dead. The Pharisees did not accept Jesus as the Messiah in spite of the evidence. And, with the exception of a few like Nicodemus, this tragic scenario will be played out once again when Jesus Himself is raised from the dead.

There are a number of lessons in this parable that require readers’ attention. First, the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” permeates all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. It is found throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets. And, for readers of the New Testament, it is, as James describes it, “the royal law.”

Second, there is a lesson on material possessions. Especially in American culture where capitalism reigns through free enterprise, there is the strong tendency to believe that everything we have, we’ve earned through hard work. Whereas part of that work ethic is true—no one succeeds without hard work—lots of people in the world work even harder and have much less. The follower of Jesus Christ must understand that everything earned comes from God. Therefore the onus is for the one who has much to give much. The more you have, the more you give. The more you earn, the more you share.

Third, this parable is ultimately a parable about love. The rich man loved only himself. His lack of love for others, especially the dredges of the earth, led to a narcissistic lifestyle of comfort and pleasure. He saw the poor as getting what they deserve. He considered the poor as not worthy of his time or possessions. He might share his blessings with those of like kind, but he would certainly not waste his resources on those who didn't deserve it. It was his lack of love for others that was his eternal undoing.

Fourth, there is the lesson that God loves and cares for the unlovable. Those individuals or groups in life that do not meet up to our standards, who are lowly by the world's standards, who have dug their own pits and can't climb out, who are poor and destitute and orphaned, God loves. God loves the prisoner, the drug addict, the homosexual, the adulterer, the beggar, those living in ghettos as well as those living in mansions, the Islamic fundamentalist, the terrorist, the suicide bomber, the thief, the murderer, the porn star and whoever else the righteous may consider not worth their time or resources. And God loved the rich man. Why? Because God knows all about eternity, and what it means to be eternally separated from Him by a great chasm fixed. As the apostle Peter writes, God does not want anyone to perish, but for everyone to have eternal life (2 Pet. 3:9). The consequences for dying without Jesus Christ in one's heart are just too terrible.

Fifth, there is the lesson that there are eternal rewards for loving your neighbor as yourself, and eternal consequences for failing to do so. The rich man failed this command, and suffered greatly for it. In this parable, the failure to love was the rich man's undoing.

Lastly, it does not appear that the eternal consequences for the rich man were the result of his simply being wealthy. His problem was that he used his wealth to satisfy himself and to live in "splendor." His judgment came from the fact that he hoarded his wealth for himself. Therefore, his judgment was based on the observation that he completely ignored the needs of those around him, in spite of the fact that he was aware of their need. In the bigger picture, God blessed him with wealth *for the purpose of giving to those in need*; that is, the poor. Instead, he kept his blessings to himself, thus ignoring the needs of those around him.

Questions for Your Personal or Group Reflection

1. In this chapter, how has God spoken to you through His word? Of the many principles presented in chapter 16, what principle stands out most to you? Once you identify the principle, what do you intend to do about it in the form of action?
2. When you first read the parable of the “shrewd steward” (“unjust steward,” “unrighteous manager”), before you read the commentary, what struck you as odd about it? Did it seem like Jesus was praising someone who had acted in a selfish or conniving manner? Why do you think the master praised his manager? After answering these questions, how do you relate personally to this parable? Is it applicable to you? How?
3. How do you intend to personally apply Jesus’ teaching, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much”? How does your answer affect your priorities of where you spend you money, how you spend your time, and how you approach your relationships?
4. Relate personally to Jesus’ teaching, “No servant can serve two masters.” Tie your response into the last word of the verse, “wealth.”
5. Identify the three important teachings in verses 14-18. Apply each teaching to your own life.
6. Identify three important teachings from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Make a list of all the contrasts that you can find in the parable.
7. Does the parable of the rich man and Lazarus make you uncomfortable? Why? If the parable makes you uncomfortable, what changes do you plan on making in your life from what you’ve learned from that parable?

The Discippler's Commentary
Fill-in Outline for the Disciple
Luke 16

Chapter 16 is composed of a parable, four teachings, followed by another parable. The parables are like bookends to the teachings. All the teachings and both parables focus on the issue of _____.

16:1-9 – First parable: this is the parable of the _____

- This parable is related to the parable of the lost son through the word _____

- This parable is also related in theme regarding the subject of _____

- The key phrase is “each one of his master’s _____”

- The point of the parable: forgiveness of the debt of others brings _____

16:10-13 – First teaching: be shrewd in the use of _____

16:14-15 – Second teaching: never use wealth (“mammon”) to be _____

16:16-17 – Third teaching: these truths are clearly stated in Scripture and will be _____

16:18 – Fourth teaching is a teaching to the Pharisees about divorce, a type of _____

16:19-31 – Second parable: this is the parable about the rich man and _____

Write down one way God is speaking to you today through His word:

The Discipler's Commentary

Answer Outline for the Discipler

Luke 16

- Before giving the answer to the introductory statement below, ask the disciple if he or she can identify the prevailing theme of the chapter.
- Second, ask the disciple what part of chapter 16 stands out the most. In most instances, the disciple will refer to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Chapter 16 is composed of a parable, four teachings, followed by another parable. The parables are like bookends to the teachings. All the teachings and both parables focus on the issue of money.

- Help the disciple discover this by pointing out the two parables and the four teachings.

16:1-9 – First parable: this is the parable of the shrewd manager.

- Ask the disciple to read the parable and try to explain it. Most likely, there will be some questions on the part of the disciple, especially as to why the manager's master praised him for his shrewdness.
 - There may need to be explanation of how masters, or businessmen, worked in those days. There are illustrations in the commentary that refer to modern-day comparisons.
- This parable is related to the parable of the lost son through the word "squanderer."
- Have the disciple refer back to the parable of the lost son (prodigal son) in chapter 15. Have the disciple identify the similarities.
 - Have the disciple explain how each main character "squandered" the resources given them. (Note: in the parable of the lost son, it was his own possessions he squandered. In the parable to the shrewd manager, it was his boss's resources he squandered.
 - Have the disciple retell the actions the shrewd manager took with his master's debtors. See if the disciple can figure out why he did what he did.
- This parable is also related in theme regarding the subject of forgiveness.
- Make sure the disciple understands the concept of forgiveness.
 - Have the disciple find the concept of forgiveness in this parable and in the parable of the lost son.
- The key phrase is "each one of his master's debtors."
- Have the disciple identify who are the "debtors" in this parable.
 - Raise the issue of authority. Note that the master certainly had the authority to forgive debtors, and the parable implies that the manager was also given authority to forgive debtors.
 - Ask the disciple how this relates to the statement about forgiveness in the Lord's prayer.
 - Ask the disciple if there is anyone in his or her life whom they need to forgive.
- The point of the parable: forgiveness of the debt of others brings praise from God.
- See if the disciple can determine why the master praised the manager.
 - Ask the disciple this question: "How important is it to God that we forgive those who have sinned against us?" Then ask "Why is it important to God?"

16:10-13 – First teaching: be shrewd in the use of spiritual and material resources.

- See if the disciple can follow the logic of verse 10 concerning faithfulness. Ask the disciple to give some examples or illustrations.
- Have the disciple state in his own words the meaning of verse 13. Ask the disciple if he plans to make any changes in his life as a result.

16:14-15 – Second teaching: never use wealth (“mammon”) to be praised by men.

- Ask the disciple what is the meaning of the following phrases:
 - “who were lovers of money”
 - “were scoffing at Him” (Why?)
 - “who justify yourselves in the sight of men” (How and why do they justify?)
 - “that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God”
- See if the disciple can come up with any contemporary examples. (The discipler may need to have some of his own! Examples include fame, notoriety, praise, recognition, man or woman of the year awards, etc.)
- It is important to help the disciple learn that praise from men and accomplishments in the world are meaningless to God. What is important to God are things the world may never recognize, or even scoff at, such as becoming a nameless person in an unrecognized ministry.

16:16-17 – Third teaching: these truths are clearly stated in Scripture and will be fulfilled.

- Explain to the disciple the term “the Law and the Prophets.”
- This teaching by Jesus in verse 16 will definitely need some explanation. The discipler should try to keep it more simple than the commentary!
- Explain what “one stroke of a letter of the Law” is. The point is this: everything in the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets) will be fulfilled!

16:18 – Fourth teaching is a teaching to the Pharisees about divorce, a type of greed.

- This verse may raise some anxious questions by a disciple that has been divorced, and especially if they are remarried. The discipler will need to explain the context in terms of how the Pharisees were using the law to justify “serial” adultery.
- Let the disciple know that there are many, varying interpretations of this verse, especially when compared to Matthew’s version. The disciple should be aware that the opinion of some churches is that divorce of any kind is never justified. And, worst of all, there are some churches that will always accept the husband’s story, but not the wife’s (regardless of the circumstances), and the wife may be asked to leave the church. The disciple, especially if a woman, should avoid such churches.
- Should the disciple have encountered a church that teaches remarried couples should divorce because they are living in adultery, help the disciple understand how illogical the notion is that divorcing one another will solve any problem or make one any the less sinful. (In fact, the sinful party here is the church that is teaching that notion.)

16:19-31 – Second parable: this is the parable about the rich man and Lazarus.

- Ask the disciple if the parable makes him or her feel uncomfortable. Ask why.
- Have the disciple retell the parable in his or her own words.
- Ensure that the disciple understands the meaning of key words, especially what “Abraham’s bosom” and “great chasm fixed” means.
- Ask the disciple to tie in the theme of money with this parable.
- The disciple should understand that the rich man is not being condemned because he is rich, but because he did not respond to the needs of those around him, and that he hoarded his riches for himself.
- Ask the disciple if he or she grasps the consequences of being destined to Hades versus the “Abraham’s bosom.”
- Ask the disciple if he or she sees themselves as financially or materially blessed. If the answer is “Yes,” ask them what action they plan on taking after reading this parable.
- Ask the disciple if they understand the meaning of verses 30 and 31, and how that related to the Pharisees. Ask the disciple how these verses relate to people today. If people were to witness Jesus raising Himself from the dead today, would they repent?