A certain woman had a vivid dream. In it she saw a man with untidy long hair and bare feet sitting on a bench outside the post office. A voice said to her that if she were to ask this man, he would give her something that would make her rich forever. She woke and shrugged the dream off. But the next day while walking through town, she saw the man from her dream sitting on the bench outside the post office. Feeling somewhat foolish, she approached the man and explained her dream. He listened, and then reached into his rucksack. He produced an enormous gold nugget, saying, "I found this beside the road. Here, it's yours if you want it."

She looked longingly at the nugget. It was huge, sufficient to make her wealthy. That night she could not sleep, tossing and turning in her bed. At dawn she set off to find the tramp, who was sleeping under a tree in the park. She woke him and said, "Give me that wealth that makes it possible for you to give this treasure away."[1]

What do you think of Mike Riddell's illustration?

Read: Luke 16:1-13

When you think of money, what comes to mind first?[2]
What is your greatest struggle regarding money?
In what ways does our culture pressure us to love money?
How can the love of money hurt a person?[3]

Where are we in Luke

We are still in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:27). For much of the journey Jesus has been in conflict with the Pharisees. From 14:7 onwards Jesus has shifted his focus to teaching what following him really means. The polemic against the Pharisees continues though, with them being portrayed as negative examples. Immediately after today's passage, they are once again depicted in a negative light (Lk 16:14).[4]

Context and Introduction

During this time Jesus has been instructing his disciples about Kingdom values. Bierz, in his sermon a week ago, talked about culture change, and how Jesus was bringing about culture change in his disciple, teaching them Kingdom culture. Some of these teachings include:

- Humility, eg. Not seeking social status (parables on seating at a banquet),
- inviting those who can't reciprocate
- the cost of discipleship
- How God values those that society deems valueless

[1] Mike Riddell, *Godzone*, (Oxford: Lion, 1992), 40.
[2] Some questions in this study taken from T. Wright, & P. Pell, *Luke: 26 Studies for Individuals or Groups* (London: SPCK, 2011), 99.
[3] Some questions in this study taken from *Adult Questions for LESSONmaker* ((Lk 16:1–15) (Logos, 2024).
[4] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1260.

This Kingdom culture turns the world's values upside-down: the first will be the last.; things that the world considered worthless, are now worth something.

Today's reading continues that discipleship with a parable, and some teaching about, the proper handling of wealth. Jesus addresses this teaching to his disciples, although the Pharisees do overhear it, as they respond with sneering in verse 14.

This section is connected to the previous by the repetition of the word 'to squander' (διασκορπίζω, diaskorpizō). Just as the prodigal son squandered his father's money, the shrewd manager has squandered his master's money in this parable.

The parable of the Shrewd Manager (as in the NIV) is one of the most difficult to understand. Pretty much everything in it can be, and has been, interpreted in multiple ways. So, we will first focus on the verses following the parable, which focus on wealth, and its use.

Luke 16:10-13

Read: Luke 16:10-12

These verses are saying the same thing slightly differently. The "very little" that whoever is dishonest with in verse 10 is the "worldly wealth" that we must be trustworthy with in v11. The "worldly wealth" is "someone else's property" in v 12. Worldly wealth, that is, money and everything we own are of small value or "very little" in comparison to the true riches that God offers us, which is eternal life. In fact, worldly wealth is someone else's property, God's property, not our own.

Read: Matt 6:19-21; Luke 12:33; Luke 18:22
What other teachings of Jesus about money can you think of?

Read: Luke 16:13

The word used in this verse for master is κύριος (kyrios), the same that is often translated as Lord. If mammon is our Lord, Jesus can't be.

In verse 13, note that the word translated as "wealth" is mammon (μαμωνᾶς) which comes from either Hebrew ממון (māmôn)or Aramaic ממונא (māmônā'). 'Fitzmyer (p. 1109) suspects that the best explanation for the meaning of the word is that it is from the root which means "firm" or "certain" … Therefore, mammon is "**that in which one puts trust**," which could be money, property, wealth.'[5] Jesus uses the phrase "unrighteous mammon" , which the NIV translates as 'worldly wealth'.

[5] C. A. Evans, *Luke,* Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 199), 242.

Apart from money, what are some other things that we can put our trust in?

What are some things that the World would consider an unwise use of money, but would be seen as wise in the eyes of God?
What main principle should govern the way we use our resources? (16:10–12)

What difference does it make to view money as a trust rather than as a possession?

Why is it impossible to serve two masters? (16:13)
Why is it so difficult to keep a proper perspective on money?

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager - Luke 16:1-9

Let's briefly go back to the parable now.
See the back page for some cultural notes.

The steward is relying on a reciprocity ethic (one good turn deserves another and earning favours) to secure his future.[6]

Remember that this parable is not an allegory, and we should not be tempted to identify the master as God and identify the manager as the disciples or even Israel as Tom Wright would suggest. Scott McKnight summaries the passage well:

> This parable is not an allegory in which the rich man is God but an analogy between one situation (a rich man and his manager shrewdly preparing for an earthly future) and another situation (kingdom disciples shrewdly preparing for an eternal future). The parable does not teach disciples to cheat. Rather, it uses cheating to raise morality from a worldly way of life with the rich man to a kingdom way with God. The logic is simple: if worldly managers use their noggins to ready themselves for a future, so kingdom people need to use their noggins even more for the future kingdom of God.
> Plus, there's an urgency in the story. The manager has been accused of "wasting" the rich man's possessions (16:1). His time is short, and he plots how he will survive beyond his day of reckoning. He uses his position in the business to cancel or decrease indebtedness, and so makes friends of the debtors, who will somehow help him after he is fired. This urgency transfers to kingdom living like this: the time is now to make your decision about how you use possessions. [7]

[6] [6] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34,* WBC 35B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1193), 800.
[7] Scott McKnight, *Luke*, New Testament Everyday Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HarperChristian Resources, 2023), 250-251.

Jesus is telling his disciples to be shrewd about how you use the money and wealth that God has entrusted to them. Use it for God's purposes, that is, to support the poor, to support the spreading of his kingdom in the world.

At the end of the parable about the dishonest manager, Jesus says, shockingly, 'Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.' (Lk 16:9 NIV).

Notice, too, that Jesus knows from the beginning of this story that he will be comparing the "people of this world" with the "people of the light" (16:8, 13). In that deep contrast is the secret to this parable: kingdom people are people of the light, and they are to decide now to live in this world shrewdly by investing, not in this world as the rich man and his manager did, but in the kingdom of God with "true riches" (16:11).[8]

We are to be shrewd to gain friends with the wealth and resources that God our master has entrusted to us. What are the friends that we are to gain? Those who can't pay us back, those who need to see the love of God and see the goodness of his kingdom. We are to be as generous as our master is to spread his love and mercy. We are to be faithful and trustworthy to use that money, and wealth according to how God would use it.

Read Luke 14:12-14 for an example of the kinds of friends that Jesus wants to us to gain.

As we have seen in verses 11-13, investing in the Kingdom of God involves:

- Generosity
- Faithfulness with money
- Serving God and not money

How does Jesus want us to use money? (16:9)
What did Jesus mean when He said, "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves"?

What does this mean for us?

In Jesus' teaching about the culture of the Kingdom of God, he tells us to hold on lightly to possessions lest they take a hold of us.
The following is from a book called Consumer Detox, from the chapter headed 'Openhanded':

From *Consumer Detox,* 'Openhanded'

Adventures past

So what does this look like?

Luke gives us an openhanded history of the early church:

[8] McKnight, 250-251. Referring to Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* Anchor Bible 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1109.

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. [Acts 4:32-35]

Full-on sharing-powerful stuff. But this isn't enforced communism. Luke explains that it's because "God's grace was so powerfully at work."

A century or so later a defender of Christianity, Aristides, shows how this habit of radical sharing was alive and well in the church:

> He who has gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a brother.... And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.

That really hit me when I first heard about it. They didn't just give their spare food; they fasted for each other. If this sounds unreal, it's worth knowing that even the critics of Christianity, like the outspokenly cynical Lucian, agree that the church was like this:

> The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death.... Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another.... Therefore they [consider] all things... common property.

Obviously this incredible openhandedness wasn't without dangers. But the point is that they went on a journey, mistakes and all. And many of those who looked on saw that some kind of grace earthquake had impacted history. What else could explain such radical generosity?

None of these accounts are absolute blueprints for the church. The first disciples and these early believers worked out how to express grace differently.

Still, something incredible was going on in those early days

that looked like divine love in action.

The question is: *What would that look like now?*

Adventures present

There must be as many ways to be openhanded as there are people (there are plenty of ideas in the Detox Diary at the back of this book). For five years now in the Breathe network we've been collecting stories of what this could look like today.

Real stories, simple acts. Ordinary people with God's extraordinary grace working through them.

Some of them cut the hours of their lucrative city jobs to serve their local church.

Some of them banded together to provide for a family where the breadwinner had been laid off.

Some, finding themselves single, cut back on carefree city life to help

foster a child.

Some of them found creative ways to share housing.

Some opened their homes to asylum seekers.

They give. They give increasing proportions of their income. Or second homes. Or their skills to help local charities.

They sacrifice. They give up mobility to commit to a local area. They surrender business-class seats to raise money for others. They sleep their children in shared rooms to make space for hospitality.

They move. From the suburbs to housing estates. From rich Western nations to the ends of the earth. And back again, from time to time.

Open hands.

Open homes.

Open hearts.

Sacrifices that bring life. Adventures in generosity that are only just beginning.

We can join them. We can open our hands.

How come? Only because we have this personal assurance: God is able to give us more than could ever be taken away.[9]

How do you think God wants you to change the way you handle your resources?
How do you need to change your attitude toward your wealth?

At the back of Consumer Detox there are some exercises. Here is one, that you may consider:

ACTION: The great sale

Take a deeper step into the flow of giving and receiving. Sell something and give the money to the poor. Something valuable-as valuable as you dare!

NOTE: Buying an immediate replacement for what is sold defeats the object of this action.

Other openhanded suggestions:

- Look again at the examples at the end of the chapter. What challenges or inspires you?
- De-clutter your house and give away what you don't need.
- Adopt a generous lifestyle. How can you fund such a lifestyle? By making thrifty choices (e.g., buy secondhand, take less ambitious vacations)? By earning more? By looking after money better?
- Be vulnerable: Are you willing to live with less financial power and depend on others more? Are you able to receive? Do you ask for what you need? (After all, asking gives someone an opportunity to be blessed through giving!)
- Practice good hospitality (if you're in a position to offer it): Is your hospitality frequent or rare? Is it exhaustingly showy or joyfully simple? Is
- it exclusive or adventurous?
- Find ways to swap and share locally (e.g., www.streetbank.com).[10]

[9] Mark Powley, *Consumer Detox: Less Stuff, More Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), 208-210.
[10] Powley, 240.

Cultural Background

The amounts of the debts

The amount of the debts in the parable are very large, although suggestions of the exact figures vary. One hundred *baths* of oil (a bath is a unit of measurement) would be equivalent to about 800 or 900 gallons (3000 litres), the yield of possibly 150 olive trees and equivalent to the wages of about three years for the average worker. One hundred *kor* of wheat would be almost 1100 bushels (30 tons), probably enough to feed 150 people for a year, the produce of 100 acres, and equivalent to seven and one-half years of labor for the average worker.[11]

The Manager

The man is almost certainly an agent rather than a slave. A slave would not be simply dismissed from service but would receive some form of punishment and assignment to unpleasant work. This parable assumes the custom of the day that a man's agent acts in his stead, and whatever the agent does is as if the man did it himself. Derrett points to the three great maxims of Jewish laws on agency: a man's agent is like himself, there is no agency for wrongdoing, and it is a legal presumption that an agent carries out his mission. What the agent does is as if the master did it himself.[12]

Reciprocity

The other assumption of the parable is an ethic of reciprocity, which was a fixed element in the Mediterranean world. Generous or benevolent acts brought with them an expectation they would be repaid, as Luke 14:12–14 shows.[13]

From the point of view of the debtors, the steward will have used his last moments in office, by means of an act that was quite within his powers, to show generosity to them on a grand scale. In accord with the demands of Greco-Roman reciprocity ethics, they would feel honor bound to repay a good turn with generosity also of a high level.[14]

Shrewd

The word for acting 'shrewdly' in verse 8 is φρονίμως (phronimos). Bailey points out that this is translated as חָכְמָה (ḥokmah) in all the older Oriental translations. So he argues the original

[11] K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2008), 406.
[12] Snodgrass, 406.
[13] Snodgrass, 406.
[14] Nolland, 800.

Aramaic word must have been ḥokmah, with the meaning in this context of 'cleverness and skill employed in self-preservation'.[15]

Whose Money

J. D. M. Derrett argued that the actions of the steward were not dishonest: he merely his canceled the interest hidden in the contract, which was not permissible for Jews anyway. Although both the owner and the steward were deprived by the reductions, it was money to which they were not entitled. The steward's action makes the master look like a righteous man in the eyes of the community. If the master repudiates the steward's action, he reveals his own ungraciousness and his lack of righteousness. [16]

J. A. Fitzmyer differs only slightly from Derrett in arguing that the manager has foregone his own (usurious) commission to win favor.[17]

Kenneth Bailey rejected the approaches of Derrett and Fitzmyer, arguing on the basis of *m. Baba Batra* 10:4 that the contracts would be public and known to the master. The steward experienced mercy when first found out and with his reductions risked everything on the master's continuing mercy. Again, the owner can reject the reductions and make the debtors angry or accept them and the praise that would follow.[18]

With regards to these options, Snodgrass states:
nothing in the text prepares the reader for such an assumption. From a literary standpoint no parable proceeds with information necessary for interpretation only implied. As du Plessis notes, "the reader can never be left in ignorance without paying the price of ending up with a warped interpretation.… **Without any other information from the text the reader has to accept that the manager acted dishonestly**.…" His comment is a verification of the principle that an interpretation based on what is not there is almost certainly wrong. [19]

[15] Kenneth E. Bailey *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) Poet & Peasant 105-106.
[16] Snodgrass, 407.
[17] Snodgrass, 407.
[18] Snodgrass, 407.
[19] Snodgrass, 410-411. Emphasis mine