

Investing for the Future

Luke 16:19-31

I've got a short multiple-choice quiz for you. You sit down to dinner and the phone rings. It's a telemarketer. You're on the government list, but this one gets through because they're collecting for charity. They're raising money to build an orphanage in Zimbabwe. Can she send you some raffle tickets for purchase? What do you do?

- a. Pretend you've got a bad connection and hang up.
- b. Buy some time – tell her to ring back after dinner.
- c. Say "no" – you don't gamble.
- d. Say "yes" – and write "return to sender" on the envelope when it arrives.
- e. Say "yes" – because this is an opportunity God's brought across your path.

Question 2. It's the Red Shield appeal. You're actually home when they ring the doorbell. What do you do?

- a. Keep quiet and pretend to be out.
- b. Send a child to the door with the story that you're in the shower.
- c. Send a child to the door with 50 cents.
- d. Tell them you give to your denomination's charitable organisations.
- e. Give them everything that's in your wallet.

That's the end of the quiz. I told you it was short. The issue of giving to the poor is one that comes up fairly regularly – and it can come up in a variety of ways. We get charitable organisations ringing up or knocking on our doors. Sometimes we pass poor people in the streets – people begging or people who are obviously homeless. Sometimes we have poor people as our friends. Some-

times we draw your attention to organisations at church – such as Christmas gift catalogues or emergency relief opportunities.

It raises all sorts of issues for us.

- Yes, we do have money and other resources. But we also have responsibilities that need to be met from those resources. It doesn't make sense for us to give away all our resources so that we need to go out and beg in order to survive ourselves.
- We are part of a particular culture. Certain standards are expected within that culture. In some parts of town, those expected standards may be higher than in other parts. Will a failure to meet those standards damage our Christian witness with our neighbours? Or is fitting in with those standards already a failure of our Christian witness?
- We also have responsibilities for Christian mission. There are non-Christians who can help the poor as well as we can – but they won't fund Christian mission. Only we can do that.
- Yet also, as Christians, we should express God's love to the poor. And, as both James and John tell us, that's not simply a matter of blessing them or praying for them – it's a matter of taking practical steps to alleviate their poverty.

And we know it's not always straightforward – sometimes we come across professionals. Early in our time in PNG, one Saturday afternoon, Lesley answered a knock at the door. It was a man from the nearby village. He wanted some money to buy some soap so he could scrub up for church the next morning. Instead of giving him money, she gave him some soap. He didn't look too happy as he

walked away.

At Morisset, we were having a church working bee one Saturday morning – trying to tidy up the church grounds. A relatively young man (around 20) approached us, wanting money for a train fare back to Brisbane. We offered to take him down to the local station and buy him a ticket. He had some reason why you could only get a ticket to Newcastle at the local station and he'd need the money to buy a ticket once he got to Newcastle. We tried to find out if there was some organisation in Newcastle open on a Saturday where he could get the money once he got there. We tried a few other things without success. It took over an hour of listening to his story and trying various options. In the long run, we did organise a way of accommodating his request without giving him actual cash. He wasn't happy with that. He stormed off complaining about how we'd wasted so much of his time.

So this whole matter of giving – and especially giving to relieve poverty can become very complex. There are all sorts of issues involved in it – all sorts of possibilities and permutations and deceptions – many more than what I've touched on briefly this morning. There are all sorts of dangers for the unwary – and for the wary.

- One of the dangers is that we use those complexities to justify inaction – there are just so many issues involved and so many pitfalls that we put it in the too hard basket and do nothing about it.
- Another of the dangers is that we use those complexities to disguise the real issue: namely, our love of money. We don't want to give to others because it means we'll have less to spend on ourselves or less security for ourselves.

The Great Reversal

Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees – to this group of people who, according to verse 14, loved money. They overheard a story about the proper use of money – and they sneered at that. Now Jesus tells them a story about the improper use of money – a story that contains a very serious warning for them.

The first character in the story is the rich man. Some people call him Dives, but that simply comes from the Latin word for rich man – he's not named in Jesus' story. However, his wealth is described.

- Purple was an expensive dye – it emphasises the man's wealth.
- The fine linen speaks of the quality of his clothes.
- The two together highlight the public display of his wealth – he doesn't buy his clothes in BigW; he's got the designer labels clearly showing.
- And he eats well. It's the idea of enjoying Christmas dinner every day. Good food. Rich food. Sumptuous food.

The overall inference is that this rich man lived like a king. He was wealthy. He enjoyed himself. In other words, he used his wealth to invest in himself. He's the one the Pharisees will identify with. He's the one we often aspire to be like.

The second character in the story is Lazarus. The contrast between him and the rich man couldn't be greater.

- The rich man's rich; Lazarus is a beggar.
- The rich man has fine clothing; Lazarus is clothed with sores.
- The rich man is full of good food; Lazarus would

be happy if he could get some of the stuff that simply fell from the rich man's table.

Even the rich man's dogs are better fed than Lazarus – and they finish off their meal by licking Lazarus' sores.

Now, some of the commentators go into a lot more detail about that last bit.

- Was the stuff falling from the rich man's table just the crumbs – the leftover food? Or was it the bits of bread used by the rich man to wipe his greasy hands?
- Were these dogs that are mentioned the wild dogs that roamed the streets and formed the local garbage collection unit? Or were they the rich man's pets? Or perhaps his guard-dogs?
- Does Lazarus' contact with these dogs make him ceremonially unclean? As if he wasn't already that way because of his sores!

All sorts of stuff like that. I don't think it's relevant. It makes interesting reading. And it adds a bit of local colour to the overall picture – some cultural matters that are different from the way we do things today. But the main point Jesus makes is unaltered: it's the great contrast between the two. The rich man enjoys his wealth (he loves his money); Lazarus suffers.

Then the two characters die.

- The rich man, no doubt, had a great funeral: lots of people; lots of expense; top of the range coffin; marble headstone; that sort of thing.
- Lazarus was probably thrown in a ditch.

But the more important contrast is what happens the other side of the grave:

- Lazarus is escorted by angels to Abraham's side – to Paradise.
- The rich man finds himself in torment in Hades.

Now, if we've been reading through Luke's gospel, this doesn't come as much of a surprise to us. Rich people don't come off looking too good. For example, flip back to Luke 6:24

*But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.*

*Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

*Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*

And we've just had the bit that caused the Pharisees to sneer in the first place – Luke 16:13

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

So, the fact the rich man ends up in torment isn't particularly surprising to us.

But for those first hearing this parable – especially if they hadn't been following Jesus for very long – this would be a real shock. After all, the rich man is rich. Riches are a sign of God's blessing. This man's got obvious wealth. He's obviously blessed by God. So why's he end up in a place of torment. That doesn't make sense. It cuts across the cultural values.

And so, a legitimate question at this point is: Why? Why

does this particular rich man end up in Hades? Do all rich men end up in torment after death?

The answer to that question is "no". It's quite apparent from this story that Abraham's in Paradise. Abraham was a rich man in his era. His riches didn't result in him ending up in Hades. So it can't be that all rich men face an eternity of torment.

Is this something that changed with the coming of Jesus? Could it be that rich men in Old Testament times could end up in Paradise but, once Jesus came, it all changed? Maybe riches were tied up with the law and, now that we've been freed from the law, we've been freed from riches as well. I don't think that's the case. You only have to go back a few verses to what Jesus says in verse 9

I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

The problem isn't wealth itself. The problem's what a person does with wealth – whether they serve money or whether they serve God.

This story reinforces what Jesus said in verse 15:

You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

The issue isn't whether you can parade your wealth before men. It's not a matter of being able to display a luxurious lifestyle to prove you're blessed by God. It's easy to fall into that way of thinking – especially if the person also looks pretty religious. It's easy to become envious of those sorts of people. It's easy to get caught up in it all and want to live that way ourselves – to impress the

people around us. Jesus cuts right across that sort of thinking.

Again, remember back to verses 9 to 12. The test doesn't have to do with the quantity of money you have – the more money you have, the more you're likely to get in. Rather, the test has to do with your faithfulness in relation to whatever money you have – whether much or little. This guy failed the test. And so he wasn't welcomed into the eternal dwellings.

Again, Jesus challenges us as to how we use money. It's a theme you can find often enough in the Old Testament. It's the theme of the rest of this chapter. God isn't pleased with a self-indulgent lifestyle. God isn't pleased with a lifestyle showing little care and compassion for others. It's a call to God-honouring stewardship in the way we use our money. It's a call to invest in God's kingdom.

The Great Divide

The other thing Jesus emphasises in this story is that *this life* is the time for investing in God's kingdom. Perhaps you could imagine some of those sneering Pharisees from verse 14. They hear Jesus talk about money. They hear Him talk about God's kingdom being present. They hear Him emphasise the importance of letting that kingdom determine their priorities now. But, perhaps they think to themselves:

I'll worry about that later. While I'm living in this world, I'll use the money of this world to invest in the things of this world. When I pass on, then I'll worry about investing in the kingdom.

You could perhaps see a certain logic in that.

- This life is now. I need to make the most of what

this life has to offer. Enjoy the best food. Build the biggest houses. Go to the right holiday destinations. It'd be ungrateful not to get pleasure from the best of what God has on offer. Use the resources of this life to get the benefits of this life.

- The life to come – I'll worry about that when I get there. It'll have its own resources appropriate to that sort of life. I'll invest those resources in that kingdom when I get my hands on them.

The logic breaks down at one crucial point. Jesus says God's kingdom's already present. It's present because He's here as King. It's now you have to make every effort to enter the narrow door. The door to the kingdom exists in this life – not the next one.

The rich man in Jesus' story discovers that when he gets to the other side.

- He finds himself in a place of torment and presumably he can't find a way out of it. Maybe he's so used to his rich lifestyle that he just hasn't been bothered to get up off his backside and go looking for a way out – but even if he did, he wouldn't find one.
- That's clear in the dialogue about the drop of water for his tongue. Lazarus can't go over to deliver it. Nor could the rich man come to get it. There's a great chasm between the two destinations. It's not possible to cross from one to the other. You can't go searching around Hades looking for the narrow door to God's kingdom.
- What's more, there's no opportunity for investment. That time's past. He can't even make any investments on behalf of his brothers. He can't even warn

them about their current failure to invest in the right place.

This rich man keeps coming up with different requests. They're all denied. It's in this current life you've got the opportunity to find the narrow door. It's in this current life you've got the opportunity to invest in God's kingdom. Once death comes, those opportunities end. The choices you've made in this life last for eternity. The decision you've made about Jesus and His teaching is forever fixed.

The Great Con

In that regard, it's worth pausing here to consider what's said about sending back messengers from the dead. You often hear people saying things like:

It's so hard to have your faith. I admire that you can believe in God and Jesus and all that stuff. I just can't bring myself to do it. If only I had a bit more evidence – if God could give me a sign – then I'd believe.

Abraham says that's a load of baloney. It's a smoke-screen. The person may honestly think that – but they're actually deceiving themselves.

These guys had Moses and the Prophets – they had God's word. And they believed it was God's word. God's word told them all sorts of things. In particular, as far as what's relevant to this context:

- it made promises that pointed to Jesus;
- it told them about God's coming kingdom; and
- it told them how to treat other people – especially the poor and defenceless.

And it wasn't as if God hadn't confirmed His word. All sorts of signs are scattered throughout the Old Testament – and especially at the time of Moses. The issue wasn't

whether there was enough evidence and warning for them to change their ways. The issue was that this rich man and his brothers weren't willing to submit themselves to God's word and pay attention to it. Having a visitor from the dead wasn't going to change that. That's just a great con people use to deceive themselves – and anyone who'll pay attention to them.

If anything, it's even stronger today. We not only have Moses and the Prophets – we also have Jesus.

- Jesus gave us God's word in its clearest expression.
- Jesus confirmed it with signs and wonders.
- Jesus even rose from the dead.

He's the King in God's kingdom. And still people don't want to pay attention to what He says. It's not that there's not enough evidence for people to believe. It's that they don't want to believe. It's an issue of their wills.

- A heart that's willing to respond to God will hear the words of Jesus and submit.
- A heart that's unwilling to submit to God won't pay attention no matter what signs it's given. It'll always find an excuse not to believe.

It's like that with what Jesus says about money as well – which, after all, is the main focus of this chapter.

- Invest in God's kingdom.
- Be faithful with money.
- Don't serve money.

Those with hearts willing to submit to God hear Jesus' words, pay attention and use their money accordingly. Those whose hearts serve money will always find an excuse to avoid Jesus' words.

Concluding Comments

As we think about how this story applies to us, I think it's worth asking whether this rich man was surprised. When he finds himself in torment, is it what he expected? No, I don't think so. His culture conditioned him otherwise.

- He was a Jew. The Jews thought they had a special deal with God. Of course he'd end up in paradise.
- What's more, he was a rich Jew. He thought his wealth demonstrated God's rich blessing on his life. Surely someone that richly blessed by God had to end up in paradise.

So, his destination would be unexpected. Sure, as Abraham says, if he paid attention to Moses and the Prophets, he'd have realised where he'd end up. But he didn't pay attention to them. He merely paid attention to his culture's version of them.

We live in a rich country. We're part of a church in a rich country. We've become used to a fairly high standard of living within our Christian culture. Is it possible that we pay more attention to our culture's values about money – even our Christian culture's values – than we do to God's word. Sure, we know we're saved by Jesus' death for us – not by our generosity or lack thereof. But that salvation's supposed to change our lives. It's supposed to free us from bondage to the idolatry of money. We do well to ask ourselves whether it's possible that we're trying to serve both God and money.

How much should you give? The New Testament doesn't put a figure on it. Instead, it says the gospel determines how you live. That impacts our giving in several ways.

- First, there's this concept of investing in God's kingdom. Since the gospel's the most important

thing, we're called to invest in gospel work. That's one of the reasons God gives us money.

- Secondly, and closely related, you reap what you sow. If you sow to greed and materialism, that's what you reap – you don't reap God's kingdom.
- Thirdly, as Christians, we've died to the law. We don't give because we think it earns our salvation or somehow contributes extra to our salvation. We don't give on the basis of meeting some minimum required standard. We give because we are saved.
- Fourthly, we're encouraged towards generosity. When you ask: "How generous?", the example that's held up is Jesus – *though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich* (2 Cor.8:9).

I think it'd be much easier to live under the tithe. That way you knew exactly where you stood. Yeah, I'd probably still quibble about whether it should be 10% before tax or after. But at least you'd be able to work it out. Under this new system, I could be giving 50% and still be considered uncommitted and hard-hearted. The fact that I still think like that shows God's still got work to do in changing my heart to be generous.

I certainly don't think I can hold myself up as a great example. Nor do I think I've got all the answers in this area. For example, for a few years now, I've had a dream of returning overseas as self-funded volunteer missionaries. While we were in PNG we saw people doing that. Now, in order to do that, we've got to build up a sufficient capital base for us to be able to fund ourselves – through superannuation schemes and the like. In other words, we've got to accumulate a certain level of wealth to pull it

off. The struggle for answers comes at two levels:

- First, the practical: how much accumulated wealth is enough?
- Secondly, the theoretical: given this teaching on money here, is it appropriate to have this idea of self-funding as a goal? Am I looking for a certain amount of security apart from God?

That's the more pious area in which I struggle with this issue. There are plenty of less pious ones I'm not going to tell you about.

Another area to think about, and our last one for this morning, is our spiritual riches. I don't think this is in Jesus' mind at this point – yet the principle remains the same, doesn't it? Paul writes that we Christians have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Why does God give us those blessings?

- Yes, He gives them to us because that's what our salvation is.
- But does He give them to us so we can hoard them up for ourselves – sort of store them away in our wardrobe; take them out every now and then to admire them.
- Of course not. He gives them to us so we can be a blessing to others. They're to be invested in the work of God's kingdom.

And the nature of these riches is such that you can give them away quite freely without diminishing your own stock one iota.