

LUKE 16:1-13
DODGY DEALINGS?

One of the most-often misquoted Bible verses says this: “Money is root of all evil!” I can see why people say that. Money appears so much at the heart of corruption and scandal; “follow the money!” seems to be a journalist’s tag-line when trying to bring a story to light! Find the money and you will find the heart of corrupt behaviour, or dodgy dealings. Banks have come in for criticism because of their mishandling money and for making it hard for us to get our money. We are shocked by how much money sportspeople are paid, especially footballers in England’s Premier League, place that is just awash with money; it doesn’t make them bad people but the rest of us look on in wonder, maybe in envy? Money is a marker in debates about gender equality: I went to hear Carrie Gracie at the Book Festival, as she talked about her fight with the BBC for equality with her male colleagues and that inequality was most obvious in the fact she was being paid less to do the same job.

The Bible is much more subtle in what it actually says: “*The love...*” (1 Timothy 6:10) Money itself is just a commodity; the issue really lies in our attitude to it. There are 2 choices for us in our attitude to money: we can either be greedy or generous. We can either let our desire for money dominate our lives, or we can use money to make friends and serve God. When it dominates our lives and we become greedy to keep what we have at all costs and accumulate more and more, come what may, that is when it becomes the root of all evil; our love for money then shapes our lives, dominates the kind of people we become; and it is not pretty. The love of money creates a divided world: Amos speaks out against corruption and the heart of that is the way in which rich people abuse those who are poor; some footballers earn more in a week than it takes the rest of us 5 years to earn; when we compare that with people who are poor in some parts of Africa, then the comparison becomes just awful.

Jesus had more to say about money than almost any other subject. He saw quite clearly how much this desire for money, wealth and possessions can take over our lives. “*No servant...*” (Luke 16:13) “Mammon” is an Aramaic word meaning wealth or profit; Jesus uses it to describe how money can become a rival to God in our affections. Rich societies find it harder and harder to find a place for God in their lives; they can solve their own problems; they can build fine houses; they don’t think they need anything and certainly not anything that God can offer; the accumulation of wealth and keeping it becomes the overriding preoccupation. The richer a society becomes, the less time and space and regard for God there is; it is not always true, but so often wealth becomes all-consuming and shapes and drives people’s lives, and shapes and drives society; we can be financially rich, but spiritually poor.

Jesus tells a parable that has money at its heart and in its purpose. It is a strange story. It features a man whose job it is to manage his master’s money and property but he seems to be failing in his responsibilities. The master is about to sack him. This creates a crisis: “*What shall...*” (Luke 16:3) The future looks bleak for him; losing a good job would be a disaster for him. Then he has a bright idea: “*I know...*” (Luke 16:4) and puts his plan into action. “*he called...*” (Luke 16:5ff) We have to work out why this man is shrewd and clever, rather than being a cheat and dishonest! His master congratulates him! Charging interest on debts for Jews was forbidden, but it is just possible that there was a loophole which the master had found. “You owe me 400 gallons of olive oil, but I’m charging you 800” and it was not money interest so maybe not strictly forbidden, but it was certainly dodgy. So when the manager rewrites the bonds to cancel 400 gallons of oil and 200 bushels of wheat, he is simply writing off the interest payments. His master sees how clever his manager is and can’t complain because it has opened up his own dodgy dealings!

The manager has made friends for life. There was no benefits system in first century Israel. When he loses his job, there is nobody to look after him; if he doesn’t work, he has no choice but to beg and is ashamed to beg. By his shrewdness he has made friends for life; these

people who have had their debts reduced are so indebted to him for his work, that they will look after him. If he comes to visit, they will welcome him into their homes; if he needs fed, they will feed him. He has made friends for life by his shrewd dealings, clever not dodgy.

This is point of this strange story. *"I tell you..." (Luke 16:9)* What does this mean? Well, first of all it does not mean that we buy our way into kingdom of God. There is a whole way of thinking in some parts of the world that we can do exactly that: it is called "the prosperity gospel" and some will tell you that by giving money to them and their enterprise then you will be blessed by God in eternity and may even expect to be rich in this life too. There are pastors, mainly American, who travel to preaching gigs in their \$60million private jet, funded from donations given to them by people who want to be prosperous. This "prosperity gospel" is a perversion of the gospel, and taps into this basic human instinct for being rich, and shows nothing more than a base instinct for greed.

Jesus' teaching is much cleverer, much more subtle. *"Use worldly..." (Luke 16:9a)* How do we do that? This is about giving and being generous! Giving and being generous is a good way to live; this is the kingdom of God way to think about money and possessions. God has given us money and possessions and we are glad; we are stewards of these good things; they are ours to look after and use for God's glory and for the good of others. That's a different way of thinking; not being greedy but being generous; not taking/keeping for ourselves but giving to help others. By that giving, we make friends, friends who will also be part of God's kingdom and will welcome us into what Jesus calls *"eternal dwellings"*, welcome us because they are glad to have received from our giving, our generosity. This is a new idea for us, perhaps, but...

This is Ruth. Ruth lives in a small village in Nigeria; there are long periods in the year when there is no food and she and her family go hungry; the church is trying to help, supported by Tearfund. There is a self-help group in the village where Ruth can save some money each month and in the last round of giving out of money she was able to make her crops better, grow more corn cobs, buy a pig and some chickens, but there are still times when there is little food.



I've never met Ruth and I never will. But here's what happens when we give money to Tearfund. Our money gladly given is put to use by Tearfund to work in places like Ruth's village, to support the local church to do work they are doing, to give a little cash that will be a seed fund to start the self-help group, or to help make their farming better. Ruth's life will be better; Ruth's faith will be stronger. We have never met Ruth and Ruth has never met us, but by our giving we have made a friend in Ruth who will thank God for those people who gave money to Tearfund to allow her life to be better. By our giving and by our generosity, we have made a friend for ever.

In a few moments we will have our offering. We give money as part of our worship and the vast proportion of that money goes to support the ministry and mission of the church in our community. We make contact with someone who is troubled by life, who needs help, or support, to find their way in life. The Church gives them that support and they find what they need, maybe even come to faith; we may never meet that person but we have made a friend, a person who may go away thanking God for the people who made it possible for them to find grace and meet Jesus. We could multiply that over and over – there is a whole group of young people who are grateful to those who gave sponsorship to allow them to attend a Scripture Union camp or holiday over the summer, to allow them to have a good time and a holiday and to hear about Jesus. We make friends by our giving and by being generous; we may never meet them, but they are glad that we are generous.

Money: it is something to accumulate, to keep, to store away and make sure that we have as much as we possibly can and be greedy? Or is it something to use for the sake of others, to give and be generous? Do we want to have more money at any cost? Read Amos 8 and see why that is a bad idea! Or will we “use your...” (*Luke 16:9*) This is the kingdom-of-God shaped view of money: money is a gift from God; we are stewards of that gift; let us use this gift wisely and generously, for good of others. We will make friends for life and eternity! Your choice!