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Investment for Eternity

A Study of Luke 16: 1-13

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Pastors are sometimes dismayed at the multiplicity of their duties. The burden lies not in their number but in the difficulty with which many of them seem to relate to the ministry of the Word and the one thing needful. The task which threatens this relevance most seriously is the fostering of Christian giving, or as it is called secularly, fund raising. The effort to supply Christian motivation through familiar terms like "stewardship" and "liberality" becomes wearing to pastors and people alike. Yet the need of "raising money" does not slacken. As the work of the church expands, the need for money grows apace. This study purposes to review the saying of Jesus which deals head on with the spending of money for purposes of the Spirit. The extract is couched in the form of a parable and uses a daring analogy, yet it is fresh and explicit. Luke 16:1-9 is the Standard Gospel for Trinity IX (the Swedish system uses it for the same Sunday, vv.10—15 in a parallel series). Even when not used as a preaching text, it provides basic material and a point of departure for the consideration of Christian giving in which the pastor need not feel himself a fund raiser or a beggar but a counselor for long-term investments.

1. *A special phase of stewardship.*—The parable revolves about the figure of a man who administrates property that does not belong to him, a "steward." This is a familiar lesson: The Christian manages money and property that does not belong

to him but to God; therefore he should return at least a large portion of it to God by donating it to the work of the church. In Luke 12:40-48 this aspect of the Christian's life is discussed by our Lord, with special reference to being ready for the unexpected return of the Master to Judgment. Frequently the concept of stewardship in the New Testament focuses on a more precise concern, namely, on being a proper housekeeper of the heavenly gift, of the kingdom of God, or of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 25:15 ff.; Luke 19:13 ff.; 1 Peter 4:10,11). In this parable the object of the stewardship is indeed property and money, and a lesson is that the steward is to be faithful (16:10-12). But the accent is on the purpose for which money and property are handled. At once this accent is useful; the Christian is to be a steward not just in general because God wants it but because a high and eternal purpose is involved in his handling of money.

2. *Shrewdness.*—Some commentators have been embarrassed by the assumption that our Lord approved of the deceitful and wasteful steward in the parable. He probably does not do so. The record takes pains to distinguish between the judgment of the employer of the steward (v.8) and the application of the story by Jesus (v.9) by a shift in person. The employer praised the steward for his shrewdness, for using his head, and Jesus seizes upon this trait of shrewdness as an illustration of a desirable Christian trait. Customarily the

praise of the employer has been thought to have been directed toward the shrewdness of the steward, who was so clever that the employer had to admire him even though he lost money through the steward's cleverness. Erich Kiehl has surmised that the steward could collect the outstanding contracts at whatever rate was advantageous to himself, according to the Palestinian system, and that his cleverness, for which his employer praised him, was that he was willing to take a smaller immediate profit for himself in exchange for the good will and guarantee of support after he would be without a job. Hence the "injustice" of the steward alluded to in v. 8 is the wastefulness of v. 1 rather than a fraud in vv. 4 to 7. Even without this explanation of the employer's approval the point which Jesus makes is clear: what is good about using money is the achieving of a long-term gain, a continuing influence on people, rather than squandering it quickly.

3. *The two ages.*—At once, however, it is important to explore Jesus' procedure in making this application. It is not the simple "go and do thou likewise" of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37). For the steward in the story is operating on a level of human existence which St. John calls the world (1 John 2:15 ff.) and which Jesus here terms "this age" (v. 8). Note parallels in Luke 20:34; Matt. 12:32. In Jewish thought "this age" began with Creation and ends at the final Judgment. The people of "this age" are those "that live for this world, whose heart is attached to what this earth affords in the way of comforts, enjoyments, and satisfactions" (Arndt). In contrast to this dimension of life is the "age to come," or simply, "*the age.*" This is uniquely the

sphere of God. It goes on forever after the Judgment, and hence in v. 9 it is translated simply "everlasting." The people who live in this dimension are "the children of light" (v. 8). Note the concept in John 12:36 or 1 Thess. 5:5. When Jesus makes an application of the point of this story, He draws an analogy between the trait of shrewdness exercised in the earthly or temporary dimension and that which the disciples as the children of light are to practice in their own eternal dimension. Parables which similarly bridge from the worldly to the heavenly sphere in St. Luke are the friend at midnight (ch. 11); the elder brother (ch. 15); the unjust judge (ch. 16); the lost sheep (ch. 15); and we have noted the watchful steward (ch. 12).

4. *The mammon of unrighteousness.*—

The trait which Jesus is inculcating is the shrewd use of the mammon of unrighteousness. This is money and property, the legal tender familiar in business dealings among people who live only on the temporary level of life. It itself is utterly temporary in quality (Matt. 6:18-21); it is of its essence that sooner or later "it fails" (v. 9, preferable to the Textus Receptus reading "ye fail"). Jesus finds the subject of the parable exercising exemplary shrewdness in the use of money as far as his sights went. Actually the mammon of unrighteousness makes fools out of people, particularly as they forget its passing nature (Luke 12:15-21). It becomes a peril because it competes for the allegiance that is owed to another (v. 13). Perhaps this is the meaning of "unjust" (v. 8) — a man who was guided altogether by considerations of profit and loss, of selfishness and of the treasure that vanishes, rather than being "rich toward God," a child of light.

Nevertheless it is the purpose of this parable to train disciples in a use of earthly money that is suited to the eternal dimension of life.

5. *Shrewdness toward people.* — The wisdom and shrewdness that Jesus recommends is not simply long-term and forward-looking. But it has to do with people, and Jesus chooses the terms of his parable to illumine this point clearly. V. 8 might be translated more accurately: "The children of this age are shrewder toward their own people than the children of light are toward theirs." In the *quid pro quo* operations of worldly people (cf. Matt. 5:46) the steward could expect debtors who profited from his discounts to show some favors in return. In the relation of God's people and the children of light to their own kind, what happens? One answer is that Jesus is not censuring the children of light; he simply does not expect canny use of money in their case. But this seems to be counter to His own application in vv. 9—11. He is counseling to shrewd and astute use of money by His own disciples. He intimates that they may not be as able at it as they should be. It comes with a touch of irony that He finds them outranked in shrewdness by the man of the world. He wants them to spend money for the purpose of making friends. This has been interpreted on a purely secular level: "The friendship of those we have helped will be our lasting possession, while the money, health, time we gave up to secure their friendship will not be for long anyhow" (Findlay). Evidently He is thinking, however, in terms of the everlasting age.

6. *Return in heaven.* — Most commentators assume that Jesus is speaking of a

friendship that will be returned in heaven, "in everlasting habitations" (v. 9). People who have profited from the way that Christians used their money in this present world will make a return in heaven. "They should give alms to the needy and thus procure a place in heaven through their intercession before God" (Dausch). "All those that have received any form of benefit from the money of the Christian brethren and sisters will then speak for them before the throne of God, testifying to the gifts which they enjoyed here in the world by the kindness of the members of the church that were willing to share with the less fortunate in the possession of this world's goods" (Kretzmann). Those whom Christians have made friends through their money "meet them at the portals of Paradise and escort them to the throne of God, and there testify what good things they have received from them" (Stoeckhardt). These pictures must, of course, be thought of as metaphors. Luther attempts to unravel the direct meaning: "Our property will not help us into heaven, when we fail and have to leave everything on earth, but when we make of unrighteous mammon righteous, that is, when we bring mammon from the wrong to the right use; and when we help the poor . . . we demonstrate our faith and witness that we are upright Christians and heirs of eternal life."

7. *The fellowship of friends.* — Our Lord is helpful in placing a more precise interpretation upon the return to be rendered by the friends made through the money of Christians. They receive the giver into everlasting habitations, He says (v. 9). In the earthly dimension, people would receive the steward, take care of

him, shelter him. In the heavenly counterpart friends give a heavenly welcome and reception into a habitation that is God's special gift to them all. The opposite of "receive" is to rebuff, remain separate. To receive means to welcome as a guest and companion, to accept hospitably. That this involves testimony to God about the earthly behavior of the giver is not the immediate point. Rather does v.9 imply a life together on the heavenly plane of existence, in the kingdom of God, bound together by the ties of the holy Christian church and in the fellowship of the body of Christ (note 3 John 10 and the picture of Matt. 25:31-46). The other cue for this accent is the word "friend." As the Christian invests his money properly he produces friends in God's sphere of existence, people related to him by more than neighborly ties and who are in the business of giving up their lives for one another (John 15:13 ff.), friends not in terms of the world but of God. (James 4:4)

8. *The heavenly age is then and now.* — Does αἰώνιος of v. 9 imply exclusively life beyond the grave? It certainly does imply that at least as the parallels of Matt. 25:31 ff. and Luke 12:13-48 indicate. But the αἰών is eternal not only after the grave but before it. The heavenly habitation is in contrast to the earthly; it has to do with a life that begins before Creation and continues after Judgment Day, the life of God Himself. The dwelling that is of the age of God is the one into which we are put by Holy Baptism and for which Jesus has redeemed us on the cross (John 4:36; 6:54; 14:2, 3; 17:3). *The age is not exclusively the coming one, and in it the present and the future are not always chronologically distinct* (cf. Sasse and

Trocme). This means that where a Christian has spent his money shrewdly, for the sake of putting and keeping people in God's dimension of life and His eternal age, there he will find that people, his kind of people (John 1:12, 13) will "receive him." This may be soon and may begin in the family as parents bring their offspring to Holy Baptism; or it may be in the life beyond the grave.

9. *Faithfulness.* — Money usually is the tool of worldiness and lust and unrighteousness. But by using it thoughtfully Jesus' disciple is able to share the life of God's own age and time with the people "of his own kind" right out over the Day of Judgment and into the life that is to come. Thus money, which of itself is made to fail, can be transformed into treasures that last and that share God's eternal kind of life. This pericope drives home another point. Such use of money is an essential mark of the faithfulness of a disciple. Used only for this present time, money and possessions not merely collapse but are vehicles of greed, sources of unrighteousness, and men become slaves to them as they acquire or spend them. This slavery is not merely folly and silliness but unfaithfulness before God (Luke 12:20; 16:10-12). God gives His people resources and tasks that are of the stuff of this present and temporary age. But He does so with the intention that His man behaves himself toward these earthly things with a heavenly set of impulses and sense of responsibility. God's people are stewards for God in the handling of these things, and their handling of them is a measure of how their permanent and future responsibilities are to be assigned. Here the lesson of the pounds and the

talents intersects with this pericope. The present life, as it deals with temporary operations but under the control of the eternal God, and with obedience toward Him, is a preflight, a boot camp, an internship, a test run, that indicates the amount of responsibility which God will assign in eternal life. This is true of life in this present world and in that beyond the grave alike. For our lives with our fellow Christians in eternity involve a massive operation of love and care to our brethren that will be more exciting and exacting than that which we have known here. (1 Cor. 13:8-12; Luke 12:42-44)

10. *Astuteness and love.*—One of the reproaches leveled against this pericope is that it seems to set almsgiving and investment before us in prudential terms. Take care of people now, and you will get an eternal return. This seems to be the opposite of Jesus' definition of love in Matt. 5:46, 47. And yet quite the opposite is true. Jesus says that we are to invest our cash and property in such a way that a relation to the brethren which has everlasting quality be assured. Safeguarding the place of our brethren in God's dimension of life is indeed an act of love, in its highest meaning. Jesus depicts His people at Judgment as those who used their resources on earth in order to sustain one another (Matt. 25:31-46). In this parable the objective of the investment is not simply to get a future return in general—that is the impulse of the man of "this world"—but to establish people in a situation in which they exert God's own kind of "receiving," in which they love with God's kind of love. Here Jesus counsels to that exercise of love which nurtures love in others. Particularly where

the "everlasting habitation" is realized to exist not only beyond the grave but already here, in the families and parishes and businesses and communities where Christians live and where they spend their money so that others are sustained to live and love in God's sphere of life, there the counsel to nurture and not to self-interest becomes apparent. Matt. 19:16-30 shows Jesus busy bringing immediate control of wealth and advantage into consciousness as a test of whether the heart is alive toward God.

11. *The investment counselor.*—Jesus' words help the preacher do more than get people to give money in general. They focus on the use of money for the purposes of spiritual nurture of people. Just as the stockbroker will try to interest his client in investing money as a share in the ventures of industry, so the pastor will lead his Christian brother to spend money in the massive and long-term operation by which people are helped to live in God's dimension of life. The preacher must make clear that the heavenly dimension and age is already our true life. Eph. 2:6 or Col. 3:1-17 supply the language for making the heavenly dimension real and concrete, composed of person-to-person operations of men and women and children, nurtured through the Word of life spoken in the family or the church or the schoolroom, on mission front and at bedside. Spending money for these manifold human person-to-person activities helps men and women to serve their fellow Christians in the nurturing process. A cup of cold water is not too little in the process (Mark 9:41), and all the money in the world is not too much. The preacher is sensitive to the plight of people who shrink back into the

earthly dimension, who live in the "un-righteousness" and separation from God which is the natural habitat for money. He can make clear the magnificent transformation that occurs when money is directed into the nurture of God's people on the heavenly level.

12. *Masters of money.*—Christians are apt to sell the Savior short when they read or hear His counsel as to the use of money; "He didn't have any anyway." But Jesus' misgivings about wealth are as realistic as though He had experienced its handicaps (Matt. 19:20-30; Luke 12:15-21). He was tested in all things as we are, and the immediate cause of His death was a renegade disciple who had become avaricious enough to sell his Master for 30 pieces of silver. St. Luke brings into this context Jesus' criticism of the covetousness of the Pharisees and others (16:14-31). It is of prime importance to realize that Jesus teaches concerning more than misgivings and fears about property. He counsels to shrewd use of it! Christians have not been avaricious, and so they may have less practice than their earthly counterparts in being shrewd with money. Yet Christians may sometimes fail to use their heads about money toward heavenly ends because they are anxious to belittle money or to deny that they have it. The non-Christian wants to get a return from his money. Let the Christian do so too—return in the dimension in which he is alive toward God and toward the people who live in that dimension with him, the people of God's age.

13. *The uses of money.*—Old and New Testament alike set before us two major areas in which the money of God's people can profitably be invested. The first is

charity, providing for the needy. The first church in Jerusalem is an illustration of Christians gathering and disbursing their money for those in need. Many of our standard texts on Christian giving stem from the counsel which St. Paul gave in his epistles concerning giving for famine sufferers in Jerusalem. The giving of alms and the care of the poor is a commonplace in Jesus' teaching (Luke 11:41; 12:33; Matt. 19:21, 22). The second field for the investment of money toward eternal ends is the provision of Word and worship. The tithes of the Old Testament people of God supported the priests in their labors (e. g., Lev. 27). While St. Paul made a point of it that he had not preached for pay, he quickly counseled to reimbursement of servants of the Word (e. g., Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17) —not failing to rebuke avarice in preachers too (1 Tim. 6:5-11). Actually, as John 12:7, 8 imply, the thought for the total life of the brother need not attempt to concern itself for the physical care without the reminding of the Word, or vice versa. The church today has expanded both of these objectives in many directions. Modern methods of business, communications, and transport have made it possible to invest astronomic sums in church-directed welfare and charity, parish worship and education, missions and evangelism, and the training of pastors and teachers. All of them fit into Luke 16:9-12 when we realize that their ultimate objective is the finding, sustaining, nurturing of God's people.

14. *Motivations.*—A final and important question remains. Where does this pericope give the cues for thrusting the power of the atoning work of Christ into the consciousness of the prospective in-

vestor, so that he is minded to construct the heavenly association of God's people? The basic cue of the text lies in its use of the concept of God's age. The cues for Gospel thus emerge:

a. The age of God. This is the existence in keeping with the nature of God into which we are plunged through the work of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:11); the mode of life for which God has rescued us through the redemptive death of Jesus. (John 3:15)

b. Light from darkness. The evangelists apply motifs from Is. 9 or 42 or 60 (cf. Matt. 4:16; Luke 1:79) to describe the program of the Messiah by which men are brought from fear and bondage into the domain of God; St. Paul says it outright in Col. 1:13, 14: "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son, in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins." People brought from the darkness and sustained in the light behave in accordance with it. (Eph. 5:8)

c. Faithfulness over the trust of earthly money and therefore the promise of the charge over that which is true (v.11). The true, as contrasted with the temporary and earthly, has to do with God and His kind of life (John 6:32; 15:1), and thereto the Christian is empowered by Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, through whom and through whose atoning action he comes to the Father (John 14:6). The sayings concerning servants and householders in St. Luke stress that the lord puts the servant into his post and makes him ruler over all that he has (12:42 ff.). In St. Paul it is incorporation into the body of Christ, specifically into

His death and resurrection by Baptism, sustained by the Holy Supper, that fits for mutual fellowship and service. (E.g., Rom. 6, Col. 2, and 1 Cor. 11)

These cues imply that the preacher, intending to use this pericope as the text for a sermon, has the opportunity to present three facets of a central goal, each with its considerations of blight upon the merely earthly life and the rescue through the atoning work of God in Christ; e.g., *God's Plan for Investing Money*: I. Make it work for His kind of life; II. Make it work for His kind of people; III. Make it work in demonstrating His kind of faithfulness.

The investment counselor does not deal in small change. He feels that he does his client a service in putting major cash to work. The Christian pastor counsels his people to invest their money in a large way, yet astutely and cannily, namely, in the business by which the church establishes and sustains its people in the body of Christ begun at Baptism, which shall transcend world and time and continue through the age of the ages—"world without end."

References

Useful conceptual studies are in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1957); Sasse s. v. αἰών in G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, I (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933), 205—209; E. Trocmé in J. J. von Allmen, *A Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1958), pp. 423—426, s. v. "Time"; and Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. G. Buswell (London: Faber and Faber, 1960). An interesting special study is the unpublished doctoral dissertation (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1959) "The Parable of the Unjust Manager," by Erich Kiehl.

The Luther quotation is from the *Hauspostille* (Röhler) for the 9th Sunday after Trinity, from 1533, p. 404 (my translation; W. A. 37, 128).

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LAW-GOSPEL AND GOSPEL-LAW

Under this heading Professor Joseph H. Deibert in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (September 1962) urges his colleagues in the Christian ministry to preach the Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus. This, as he endeavors to show, should be proclaimed first and then the Law. He does not wish his essay to be interpreted as antinomian or amoral. "But the Christian preacher must avoid like the plague the noxious virus that God's love is conditioned by our moral achievements. He must proclaim the Gospel without ceasing, and in crystal-clear terms the Gospel message that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15)." Nothing in his paper is to be explained as universalism. "Those who do not respond to God's love will be lost. But will they be lost because we have not adequately reflected the love of God in our preaching or daily walk?" That is his concern. There is something very refreshing in the writer's emphasis on the preaching of the Gospel as the manifestation of God's saving love. It is gratifying also to a Lutheran reader that he quotes Luther so frequently on behalf of intensive Gospel preaching. He writes, for example: "The infant's very first contact with God is a graphic proclamation of the Gospel, for the Sacrament of Baptism is Gospel. When he is still a babe in arms, only a few days old, the

child is made a recipient of God's love in the Sacrament." However the writer evidently does not seem to understand the meaning of "Law-Gospel" preaching. Our Lutheran Confessions declare that the Law and Gospel should be preached "side by side." Just this happened at Pentecost when Peter addressed the disturbed Jews. His was not a "Gospel-Law" preaching, as the author suggests, but a "Law and Gospel" preaching. This was true also of Paul's preaching at Antioch as recorded in Acts 13:16-41. The author admits this indirectly when he says: "*Almost* [italics ours] the entire sermon is Gospel." The same is true of Christ's address to the Samaritan woman (John 4). Here too was "Law and Gospel" preaching. The expression "Law-Gospel" must never be understood as something mechanical or stereotyped: just so much Law and then so much Gospel, which permits no variation in its application. Certainly the remission of sins will not be believed if there is no conviction of sin. Dr. Walther's *Law and Gospel* is still worth studying. We agree of course that in Christian preaching the Gospel is the real objective and that the Law is only ancillary. But between the extremes of "Law-Gospel" and "Gospel-Law" lies the golden mean of "Law and Gospel."

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