Luke 16:1-13 // The Timing of the Shrewd

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0:00] I said last week that the passage that we had last week in Luke's Gospel was hard, not particularly hard to understand but hard to hear and receive and apply into our lives.

! The passage this week is hard because it's pretty tricky to understand what Jesus is on about at first sight and probably equally hard to apply into our lives as well.
So let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to think about his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word to us this morning.
We ask please send your Holy Spirit to help us understand what you're saying to us and to see our lives in light of the future you have promised.
Help us to see what really matters. Transform us to become the people you call us to be. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.
[1:01] Well, I wonder how many of you have seen the film Zootropolis. I think it's a fascinating film. Great characters, great storytelling. We watched it several times as the kids were growing up.

It has that catchy Shakira anthem, Try Everything, which now that I've mentioned it, it's probably made it stuck in your heads for the rest of the day if you know it.
But it's also a fascinating film to look at through a Christian lens. The city of Zootropolis brings together animals of every kind from every tribe, nation and species.
It's a slogan where anyone can be anything captures something of our culture's belief that we can become whatever we want to be as long as we can get over the kind of societal barriers that stand in our way.
And yet, beneath this optimistic vision of harmony, beneath the veneer, there's a much messier reality of prejudice, suspicion and hostility.
[2:05] Now, I'm not here to give you a cultural critique of Zootropolis. But there's something else about this film that struck me about it this week. The film's anti-hero, Nick Wilde, the shrewd, fast-talking fox who makes his living hustling popsicles, is remarkably like the sort of person that Jesus holds up as an example to us in today's parable.

Nick is savvy. He knows how to read people. He spots opportunities and works the system. The problem is what he does with those abilities.
He uses them to make money at other people's expense. Not exactly a model citizen. And yet, Jesus tells us a story in this parable about a man who's not exactly a model citizen either.
And as I say, I think it's quite a confusing parable at first glance. I don't know what you made of it as Innes read it for us. Well, let's take a closer look.
First, let's notice who Jesus tells this story to. And in the preceding passages in Luke, Jesus has been addressing the Pharisees and the crowds around and people who are resistant to him or people still working out what they kind of make of him.
[3:31] But look at verse 1. He tells his disciples this parable. These are people who have responded to Jesus' call. They're learning what it means to take up their cross and follow him as he makes his way towards Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there.

And now Jesus wants to show them what following him looks like in the everyday business of life. Because the gospel isn't just how we come into God's kingdom.
It's how we live, how it transforms us to live as we belong to its king. And here, Jesus brings that right down to earth. He focuses in on money, the resources we have, the choices we make, and what to do with what God has entrusted to us.
Because following Jesus affects every part of our lives, including our bank accounts. And Jesus is going to show his disciples how to live now in light of the eternal future that he's promised.

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So let's dive into the parable itself in verses 1 to 8. Jesus tells a story about a rich man who has a manager looking after his affairs.
[4:58] But the manager hasn't been doing a particularly good job. And in verse 2, the performance review arrives. The rich man calls him in. What's this I hear about you? Give an account of your management.

Because you cannot be manager any longer. In other words, you're fired. He's been given his notice. He's put on gardening leave in the modern parlance of corporate jargon.
And suddenly his future looks rather bleak. He's facing unemployment, loss of income. And for all that he comes across as a thoroughly dislikable and odious character, David Brent from The Office springs to mind.
We see in verse 3 that he's got enough self-awareness at least to know that he's not really cut out for manual labor. He's too proud to beg. So what's he going to do?
Well, in verse 4, he has a brainwave. Brainwave. I know what I'll do so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their homes.
[6:05] It's an ingenious scheme, if rather unscrupulous. He's going to make sure that when he's out of a job, there are people who will welcome him into their homes.

Friends in high places. People who've perhaps got a week or two at their second home in the country for him to stay at or a sofa to crash on at the very least.
How's he going to do it? Well, look at verses 5 to 7. He calls in the business contacts that owe his master money. People who've racked up enormous debts.
3,000 liters of olive oil in verse 6. Around 30 tons of wheat in verse 7. And he slashes their debts. He revises their bills so that they end up indebted to him.
He's using his master's resources to make sure that when he loses his position, he's got somewhere to go. He's being shrewd. Let's be clear.
[7:05] This is a pretty underhand way of going about things. This isn't his own money that he's being free and easy with here. He's using the wealth of the very man who's about to fire him to secure his own future.

And so the big shock, the big surprise comes in verse 8. The master commended the dishonest manager. Wait, what? The master commended him.
This is the man who's mismanaged his master's affairs and used his master's wealth to feather his own nest, robbing him blind in the process.
And the master commends him. It gets even more surprising. Because in verse 9, Jesus seems to tell his disciples, you learn from him.
So what on earth is going on here? Well, Jesus isn't suddenly suggesting that dishonesty is a good thing.
[8:11] He's not defending unethical business practices. In fact, in verses 10 to 12, he makes precisely the opposite point. Faithfulness and integrity matter enormously.

So notice exactly what the master commends him for in verse 8. Two different things are going on here. He's described as a dishonest manager.
And that just describes the man's character and the way he goes about things, the way he operates. But that's not what he's being commended for. He's commended for acting shrewdly.
Shrewdness is really about seeing a situation clearly, recognizing what's coming and acting intelligently in response. Jesus isn't commending his dishonesty.
Jesus is commending his shrewdness. And that's really what Jesus wants us to learn from, the man's shrewdness.
[9:20] So what does that shrewdness actually look like? How might that play out in our lives?
Well, let's think about what the man does. He acts now in light of a future reality he knows is certain.

Let me say that again. He acts now in the present in light of a certain future reality. He knows he's going to lose his job.
The day of reckoning is coming. He doesn't just sit there hoping for the best, hoping against hope that things will somehow kind of work themselves out like that. He recognizes what is coming.
He thinks ahead and he takes decisive action. And Jesus says that's how the people of light are supposed to live too.
Not by being underhand or dishonest, but by recognizing the concrete reality of what's coming and then ordering our lives now in light of that certain future reality.

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[10:26] It becomes even clearer when you look at the end of verse 8. Jesus says that the people of this world are more shrewd and dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

In other words, those around us who don't know God can sometimes very often actually be far more purposeful about their future than we as Christians can be about ours.
Just think about the effort that people put into securing the future that they want and aspire to. We're very serious about that. As a culture, people calculate what they need, compare pension schemes, check their investment, make sacrifices now to make sure that there's enough put away for the future.
And what is that glorious future that people are working towards? Perhaps a few rounds of golf a week or a leisurely stroll around Dobby's Garden Center, perhaps a cruise in a warm climate.
And after 40 years of hard work, why not? It sounds pretty appealing. But here's the interesting thing. We're prepared to order decades of our working lives around a future we hope to enjoy for a relatively short period in the wider scheme of things.
[11:50] Jesus asks us to think about whether we're applying that same kind of seriousness to an eternal future that matters infinitely more. People can be remarkably focused when something valuable is at stake.

And so here's Jesus' challenge to us. We know that this life isn't all there is. One day we'll stand before God, we'll have to give an account to Him.
A day of reckoning is coming. But if we're trusting in Jesus, we also know what a wonderful future awaits us in His kingdom.
We've been hearing about that future in Luke's gospel, the great banquet, the joy of salvation, the extraordinary welcome that we'll receive for those who belong to Jesus.
So if we really believe that that is the concrete reality of what's lying ahead, shouldn't it make a difference to how we live our lives now?
[12:57] People of this world live in light of the future that they want. Jesus calls us as His people to live in light of the future God has promised.

And that changes our perspective. The people of this world look to what they can gain now. The people of the light look to eternity.
And that horizon, that eternal horizon should shape how we order and navigate our lives today. Our money, time, our opportunities, our relationships, all the things that God has entrusted to us.
So here's the question that Jesus puts before us. Are we shrewd in this way? Are we shrewd in this way?
Are we intentionally ordering our lives around the future we say we believe in? Are we making decisions now because we are so certain of the promises that God has made to us?
[14:06] Are we simply drift along, letting the priorities of the world around us sort of shape and set our direction? Because Jesus' point is this.

If we really believe what we say we believe about the future, then it ought to make a difference to what we do today. So that's what we're going to think about next.
Jesus calls us to be shrewd about the future, to recognize what's coming and to live accordingly. But what does that actually look like for us?
Well, as I was preparing this sermon, I came across a statement from the actor and writer Stephen Fry, and he's describing the humanist perspective.
And he writes, the most immediate impact of living as a humanist is that we believe this life is all there is. So what we do and the choices we make really count.
[15:09] Now there is something important there in what he says. Our choices do matter. How we live matters. But listen to what Jesus is saying here. This life isn't all there is.

And so what we do with it now matters enormously. It matters eternally. And Jesus doesn't just leave that as some kind of abstract theological principle.
He begins to apply it to us, and he brings it right down to earth to something as ordinary and everyday and mundane, actually, as money. Because if this parable tells us to be shrewd in light of eternity, it ought to change how we use the resources that we've been given.
And in verses 9 to 13, Jesus takes that big principle from the parable, and he shows us three ways that that should happen.
We'll come on to them in a minute. But why does Jesus focus specifically on money? Why does he focus on money? Remember that Jesus has been forming a group of disciples around him, calling

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his disciples to follow him wholeheartedly, to count the cost and follow Jesus with all we are and all we have.
[16:31] And so how we use our money is actually a pretty good litmus test of how deeply that's sunk in, of whether that commitment to him has really taken root in our lives.

Because if we say that Jesus is our Lord, but our attitude to money is largely shaped by the priorities of this world, something isn't adding up properly.
Now, our money doesn't tell us everything about our hearts, but it does tell us something. And that's why Jesus turns to it here, I think.
Living in light of eternity should change not just what we believe, but what we do with what we've been given and entrusted with. And it begins with generosity, verse 9.
I tell you, Now, notice the big contrast there.
[17:36] Worldly wealth and eternal dwellings. The money and resources that we have in this life are temporary. One day, they'll be gone.

Now, in the Bible, we are called to be big-hearted, open-handed people to respond to the generosity that we've been shown in the gospel by having generous hearts.
And there's a broad theme of that in the Bible. And I think we've had an excellent example of God's people being generous in the recent heating appeal over some of the generosity, the open-handedness of people in response to that heating appeal.
But Jesus kind of narrows it in here with what he's saying because Jesus says that we can use those temporary resources for something with eternal significance.
We can use our money now in ways that invest in people for eternity. Now, we've just seen the manager in the parable act in light of a future he knows is coming.
[18:54] And Jesus says we should do the same. Not by buying our way into heaven. We can't do that. Our future with God is his gift to us through the Lord Jesus.

But we can use the money that God's given us to help others hear the gospel and come to know Jesus. And there's wonderful examples of this throughout church history.
And here's one of them. You might have heard of William Tyndale. He translated the Bible into English. But have you heard of Humphrey Monmouth?
I hadn't heard of him until this week. Well, Monmouth was a London businessman who recognized what Tyndale was trying to do to make God accessible to ordinary people.
And he took Tyndale into his home, giving him shelter and protection like that. And he supported him financially and introduced him, connected him with other like-minded merchants who kind of bought into that idea and could support his work financially.
[20:01] Now, Monmouth wasn't a name that went down in history. But he used what God had entrusted to him to help make that work possible.

Now, just think of the generations and thousands, millions and millions of people who've been able to read God's word in English because of the work Monmouth had helped support.
What an investment. What an internal investment. And this isn't just a story from 500 years ago. Many of you will have got to know David and Julie Robury and their family during their time with us at St. Silas.
They're heading back to Nigeria soon, God willing, where David works with Wycliffe Bible translators, helping the local people there to translate God's word into their own languages.
David and Julie were at the 9.30 service, but you could ask them over the next couple of weeks of ways that you might be able to support them. Or if you know somebody that would, they're hoping to get back to Nigeria in the next few weeks, but currently the financial threshold that they have to meet is not quite there.
[21:14] And I'm sure they would be delighted to hear from you if you're able to help them in that way at all. Just imagine the difference that could make. Somebody hears God's word in their own language, comes to know the Lord Jesus and put their trust in him.

And then one day in heaven, in eternity, you get to meet them like that. It's an extraordinary thought. Jesus gives us this extraordinary picture of people welcoming us into eternal dwellings.
Let's just imagine it for a moment. You arrive in eternity and someone you've never met comes towards you to greet you. And you're thinking, do I know this person?
I kind of wish it were a name badge Sunday here. And they say, well, this is going to sound a little bit weird, but it's wonderful to meet you. Thank you so much for helping me to hear about Jesus.

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You say, I'm really sorry. Help me out here. There's just so many new faces I'm trying to get used to. And they say, well, you know what? We never met while we were on earth.
[22:24] But you helped support the work that brought the gospel to me. You helped train the person who taught me God's word. You helped send someone who told me about Jesus.

And now, by God's grace, I'm here. What a thought. What an incredible thought. One day we'll get to meet people who welcome us into eternity like that.
Of course, very often we won't get to hear about the fruit of our generosity in this life. We may never hear those kind of stories until eternity.
But that's exactly why Jesus tells us to think beyond this life. So what if we were more generous towards the local church?
We could invest in training more people for ministry. We could resource more church planting, help more people hear the gospel throughout our city and nation throughout the world.
[23:28] So we should be asking a different question about our money. Not just, what can I afford? But what has God entrusted to me?

And how can I use it for something that's really gonna last? Because if we believe that the future Jesus is promising is coming, why would we live as though this passing world is all there is?
True shrewdness means seeing what matters most and putting our money to work accordingly. God calls his people to invest generously in people for eternity.
Now Jesus doesn't just speak about generosity, he also speaks about trustworthiness. Now do you see the principle in verse 10? If you're trustworthy with little, then you'll be trustworthy with much.
And Jesus applies that principle to money. It's tempting, I suppose, to think that what we do if our money isn't particularly spiritual, it's just the practical business of getting through life.
[24:43] But Jesus says otherwise. The way we handle money reveals something about us, something about our character, something about the kind of people that we're becoming.

And let's notice, it isn't about how little or how much we give, it's about what we do with it. And in Luke 21, a few chapters on, Jesus commends a poor widow for giving two small coins.
Her gift is tiny compared to the vast sums that the wealthy are giving. But Jesus says that she's given more than all of them because she's given sacrificially out of her poverty.
The question isn't how many zeros are at the end of a mount. It's what our giving reveals about our hearts. Jesus presses the point further in verse 11.
If we can't be trusted with worldly wealth, these temporary things that belong to this passing age, how on earth can we handle the true riches of God's kingdom?
[25:49] And in verse 12, Jesus gives another way to think about it. What we have isn't ours in an absolute sense. Let's just think back to the dishonest manager.

The money he was handling wasn't his. He'd been entrusted with someone else's resources. And he was uncountable for how he used them. Jesus says, we need to think about our own lives in the same way.
The money in our bank accounts, our homes we live in, the opportunities we've been given, the resources that are disposed. These are all things we've received from God, things entrusted to us by God.
So the question isn't simply, what do I want to do with my money? It's how does God want me to use what he's entrusted to me?
And that brings us to Jesus' final point in verse 13. No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.
[26:50] You cannot serve both God and money. It's pretty striking, isn't it? Jesus doesn't give us another command here. He simply states a fact. You cannot serve two masters.

You'll be pulled in two different directions. And try going in two different directions. You'll be doing the splits before long and that's gonna hurt. Bob Dylan put it memorably like this in his song.
You're gonna have to serve somebody. And Jesus is making a similar point here. It may be money or it may be the Lord, but you cannot serve both.
Because money isn't just something we use. It can become something we trust in. Something we look to for security or freedom.
When that happens, money stops being our servant and starts being our master, a God substitute. So don't you be that person who thinks you can balance both.

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[27:56] Jesus doesn't say it's difficult to serve two masters. He says you cannot do it. Jesus won't let us pretend that we can put God in first place while giving our hearts to something else.

We have to choose who and what will serve. This life isn't all there is. If we're trusting in Jesus, we have a glorious future that stretches beyond death to eternity.
And that future isn't something we earn by being generous or faithful with our money. It's a gift God has promised to us in Jesus Christ. But if we really believe and grasp that future is coming, it ought to change how we live now, what we treasure, what we give ourselves to, whom we serve.
So don't live as though this passing world is all there is. Don't cling to what won't last. Don't let money become your master.
Instead, be shrewd. Be shrewd about that future that's coming. Use what God's entrusted to you for the purposes of his eternal kingdom.
[29:15] Be generous, be trustworthy, and serve the Lord Jesus wholeheartedly because the people of this world live in light of the future they want.

Jesus calls you to live in light of the future that he's promised. Let's pray again. Father, we give thanks to you for your astonishing generosity in sending your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to rescue us and bring us back to you.
And thank you for the glorious future you've promised us in Christ when people from every tribe and nation will be united in harmony around him.
and so please by your Holy Spirit make us into a big-hearted people. Open our hearts to the gospel. Open our wallets to the gospel. Help us to see clearly the reality of what's coming and to live in light of that.
So change our perspective, Lord. Help us to see what really matters. Where we've been closed-hearted or stingy towards the gospel, please forgive us.
[30:36] help us to take this opportunity today to think again about our priorities and to reorder our lives and resources.

Help us to be faithful with everything you've given us, our money, our time, and the ways we serve. Help us to use what we have for what will last because we want to serve our Lord Jesus Christ with all that we are in his name.
Amen.ement of God's speed of God's skin of God's blood and our skin of God's blood and our blood fathers and our blood fathers and our blood fathers and our blood and our blood and our blood not our

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