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Through the Needle's Eye

By David Servant

Chapter Four

A Steward, A Rich Man and a Beggar

Luke 16:1-31

If you have made it this far that is a very good sign. Be encouraged. God must be helping you in answer to your prayers.

Although we've laid a foundation, there is still more that Jesus wants us to learn about stewardship. Many questions still loom, but we must take our time. We have been so "brain-dirtied" that the plain biblical truth is difficult to swallow. This chapter, like the last three, is guaranteed to make you examine your lifestyle in light of what Jesus commanded. Perhaps it seems as if I'm overdoing it. Keep in mind, however, that so far we've only covered two passages of Jesus' words about stewardship, and in this chapter we'll study a third. So if I'm overdoing it, Jesus did as well. I would prefer, however, to think that Jesus knew what He was doing. So please begin with another prayer for God's grace and help as we continue through the needle's eye. Remember that on the other side of the needle is unspeakable joy on earth and in heaven.

A Forgotten Word

Our present state in this world is perhaps best described by a word that has practically disappeared from the English language, the word *steward*. A steward is one who is entrusted with what belongs to another. He is thus faithfully expected to use, according to the owner's wishes, what has been committed to him, and therefore he must periodically give account of his stewardship.

Every person, saved and unsaved, is in some sense a steward of God.¹ All of us have been entrusted with a God-given life, and God expects that we will live our lives according to His will. We are also given opportunities, talents and treasures, for which all of us must one day give a full account. Those who prove themselves unfaithful will forfeit their stewardship eternally. Those who are found faithful will hear their Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21). Only those who have been faithful to their Master will enter His joy.

¹ See Matt. 25:14-30, a story Jesus told about three stewards. At the end of the story, two stewards are rewarded and one steward is cast into hell. Thus, God considered the unsaved person to be a steward.

In Jesus' day, wealthy people often employed stewards to look after their financial affairs. If a steward was entrusted with a sum of money, his responsibility was to invest it wisely in order to reap profits for his master. Unprofitable stewards enjoyed little job security.

Jesus once told a story of an unfaithful steward who found himself suddenly unemployed. The story served to illustrate several truths of eternal significance regarding our financial stewardship before God. We would be wise to listen to and heed what Jesus taught:

Now [Jesus] was also saying to the disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.' And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light" (Luke 16:1-8).

We don't know the exact details, but somehow it was discovered that this particular steward had been unfaithful, "squandering" his master's possessions. Because he could no longer be trusted, his master understandably terminated his employment. At the same time, however, he requested an accounting from his steward so that he would know what only the steward knew: Exactly how much did his various debtors owe him?

The Plan

Armed with this knowledge, the unfaithful steward realized that he had a short window of opportunity to do something dishonest that could benefit him in the future: He could fudge the figures of his accounting and decrease the debts of each of his master's debtors. They, in turn, hopefully feeling obligated to repay his favor, would open their homes to him in his unemployment.

So he called his master's debtors together. Amazingly, the steward knew little more than his master did concerning the amounts that each one owed. He had to ask them for the amounts! That, of course, is something he should have known, and it gives us some insight as to why he was dismissed.

The steward then significantly reduced the debts of each of his former master's debtors with their full cooperation. All of them were knowingly stealing from the master. After presenting the falsified accounting to the master, the unemployed steward went whistling on his way.²

² It has been suggested by some that the steward only reduced the debts of his friends by his own commission, which he now realized he would never be paid by his master. This is of course speculative, but if it is so, the steward and his debtors did not consequently conspire to steal from the master, and the master's praise of his steward's shrewdness could have been quite sincere. Regardless, the steward had been reported as squandering his masters' possessions, and it seems odd that he apparently didn't know how much his master's debtors owed.

When the master eventually discovered how shrewdly his former steward had acted, he praised him, being a shrewd fellow himself. He had been beaten at his own game, but his losses weren't significant so he took it all in stride. Jesus commented: "The sons of this age [the unsaved] are more shrewd in relation to their own kind [other unsaved people] than the sons of light [the saved]" (Luke 16:8). Thank God for that!

The Application of the Story

After relating the story, Jesus then supplied the application to His audience. His application included at least three points. Here is the first one:

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings (Luke 16:9).

Because this first point is puzzling, it is often ignored. Jesus, however, must have meant *something* by it, and so we would be wise to give some thought to its meaning. When we do, we soon see that there is only one possible interpretation that makes sense.

Jesus was not, of course, endorsing the sinful deeds of the unfaithful steward and his friends. He was not encouraging us to lie, buy favors with someone else's money, or cheat our employers. That should be obvious. However, there is one sense, and only one sense, in which Christ's followers should imitate the steward in Jesus' story.

Just as the unfaithful steward wisely (albeit shrewdly and sinfully) prepared for his future by making friends by the means of money, so should Christ's followers. We've all been entrusted with some "mammon of unrighteousness" (so-called because money is so intrinsically linked to the world's evil). We, too, should "make friends" with it, that is, use it for the good of others, particularly to relieve and assist believers. That way, when "it fails," as will all our money on the day we die, "they," that is, those whom we have assisted and who have gone to heaven before us, "may receive [us] into the eternal dwellings."³

Incidentally, if God is going to call the entire populations of ancient cities to testify against certain groups of people at their judgment (see Matt. 12:41), wouldn't it be good to have some fellow believers at your judgment, those whom you assisted on earth to stand as witnesses on your behalf? That is, those who could say of you, "I was hungry, and he fed me," "I was naked, and she clothed me," and so on?

The Second Point

Jesus continued:

He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? (Luke 16:10-12).

Trust is something that generally must be earned. Parents observe how their children handle small responsibilities before entrusting them with larger responsibilities. Single people, as they fall in love, risk less at the beginning of their relationship, until they are

³ There are only two "eternal dwellings" of which Scripture speaks: heaven and hell. Since Jesus was speaking to His followers, telling them to make friends with money so that those friends would receive them into the eternal dwellings, this seems to be the most reasonable interpretation of this passage.

certain they can trust their beloved with their whole heart. Employers read résumés and references to determine if a potential employee can be trusted. Before banks lend money, they check a person's credit history. They've all learned that they can predict someone's future by studying his past.

In Jesus' story, the steward was discovered to be unfaithful. He thus lost the trust of his master, who realized that if he continued to employ his steward, he would only suffer greater losses. And he was correct in his assumption. His steward proved himself to be even more unfaithful after he lost his job, shrewdly stealing from him even more. The steward's character didn't change.

"He who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much" (Luke 16:10). Although we all know and apply this most basic truth in our dealings with others, we often forget that God is at least as smart as we are. If we are unfaithful to God on earth, whatever makes us think we would be faithful to Him in heaven? We might fool ourselves, but God is not fooled.

If we love and serve mammon on earth, He knows we wouldn't love and serve Him in heaven. If we don't obey Him in the use of "unrighteous mammon," He will not entrust us with "true riches" (Luke 16:11), just as He said. What else could "true riches" be but ultimate salvation and eternal life?⁴

Jesus went on to say, "If you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (Luke 16:12). "That which is another's" corresponds to the master's money, and "that which is your own" corresponds to the steward's continued employment. Once the master found out that the steward was squandering *his* money, he certainly wasn't about to continue giving the steward *his* paycheck. If we squander God's money that He has entrusted to us, we will forfeit our opportunity to be His stewards as well.⁵

The Final Summary of the Parable

Finally, with one phrase, Jesus summarized everything that He was trying to convey about His followers' stewardship of money, something He had said at another time:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Luke 16:13).

This famous phrase summarizes what Jesus has already more specifically said. We are either serving God or mammon, loving one and hating the other. Our actions reveal who has our allegiance. Most of us claim to be serving and loving God, but our lifestyles often reveal that we actually love mammon. We aren't serving God in one of the most fundamental ways He requires, thus proving that we really don't love Him. We can't imagine sacrificially sharing our wealth with the poor or giving up our possessions, because we love what we have, and we want more. Money is really our master, and as

⁴ Naturally, some interpreters attempt to soften Jesus' warning so that it is heavenly rewards, not heaven itself, that unfaithful people risk forfeiting. However, when we read Jesus' statement in the entire context of Luke 16, particularly considering His warning about the impossibility of serving two masters just two verses later, as well as His story about the fates of the rich man and Lazarus (which we are about to read), we must question the validity of such a softening. Are we to believe that one who is untrustworthy with his money, not using it according to God's will, who thus "serves mammon," making it his true master, proving his love for it and hatred for God (as Jesus said), will be a citizen of heaven, where the God whom he hates reigns? Is all that he forfeits certain heavenly rewards? Is that what Jesus is teaching in this chapter?

⁵ Jesus taught this very same stewardship principle in the Parable of the Talents, which concludes with the warning, "For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (see Matt. 25:14-30).

Jesus declared, no one can serve two masters. Either we will love one and hate the other or vice versa.

The Pharisees who heard Jesus' parable and its application scoffed (see Luke 16:14), and Luke tells us why: They were "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). They were the very ones who needed to hear what Jesus was saying! *But what do you suppose they would have answered if you asked them if they loved God?* Certainly they would have answered in the affirmative. Like so many who profess to love God today, they were completely self-deceived, thinking they loved God, while actually loving money.

Jesus then told them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts" (Luke 16:15a). How appropriate are Jesus' words to scoffers in the church today! Many are the ways that we justify our greed in the sight of others! The list seems endless. Here is a sample of a few of the justifications I've heard, many of them from pastors:

"If those heathen countries would turn to Christ, God would bless them with prosperity just like He's blessed our nation!"

How do you suppose the hundreds of millions of poor, yet devout Christians in developing countries would feel about such a remark? And is wealth always an indication of God's blessing? Are drug smugglers wealthy because God is blessing them? Are we really to think that America is so wealthy because God is rewarding us for our righteousness? Do we not lead the world in sin and export our filth everywhere? Could part of the reason for our great prosperity be our great greed? Could it be due, in part, to the exploitation of cheap foreign labor by American companies? Chances are, the clothes you are wearing right now were manufactured overseas in a garment factory where the employees are happy to work for what we would consider slaves' wages. Have you ever considered the reason that so many products are so inexpensive for us is because others pay for it by giving their time so cheaply to manufacture it?

"If those lazy people in those poorer countries would work hard like I do, they'd have plenty too!"

That is a gross misconception. How about those hundreds of thousands of "lazy" Mexicans who labor in the fields of America as migrant workers? Why aren't most U.S. citizens willing to take those jobs? Or how would you like to sit under the hot sun, six or seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day, in a granite quarry in India with a hammer in your hand, breaking large rocks into pieces of road gravel? And when the sun goes down, you have barely enough money to buy your single meal for the day before you lay your head on a dirt floor in your tin shanty. Not only that, but your pre-teen children must all toil twelve-hour days rolling cigarettes on a factory floor, due to the fact that you had to borrow money to pay for emergency medical expenses. Most Americans have little idea of how hard people in poorer countries work.

"God wants us to be blessed with abundance! He wants us to enjoy all our material blessings and be happy."

As those indwelt by Christ, how could we possibly find enjoyment in selfish indulgence while 34,000 children die every day of preventable diseases and malnutrition, and while at least one-third of the world has yet to hear the name of Jesus? Why isn't our longing to see the gospel spread to unreached peoples greater than our longing to indulge ourselves with more material things? Is it possible that we have equated happiness with temporarily-satisfied greed?

"God wants me to live in an exclusive neighborhood so I can reach my wealthy neighbors."

May I ask, *How many have you reached so far?* Is that how Jesus reached the wealthy? And how can you explain to your unsaved neighbors, as you encourage them to follow Christ, that your own lifestyle stands in opposition to what Christ practiced and preached? How do you tell them that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God?

"I must buy a new car every year because I need reliable transportation."

Are you saying that every used car on the road is unreliable?

"Solomon was wealthy and God didn't condemn him! In fact, the Bible says God made him rich!"

How can we rightfully justify amassing wealth like Solomon in light of Jesus' command to sell our possessions and give to charity, not laying up treasures on earth (see Luke 12:33)? Are we permitted to annul everything Jesus said on the subject of wealth because of the practice of one biblical figure? And even if we ignore what Jesus said, why don't we likewise justify amassing wives like Solomon?

I might add that God specifically told Solomon that He would make him rich because he *didn't* ask for wealth, but rather requested wisdom to serve God's people (see 2 Chron. 1:11-12). God wanted Solomon to use his divinely-given wealth to serve Him and others, as any wise person would. Thus He commanded Solomon to build a great temple and forbade him to multiply horses, wives, gold or silver for himself, all of which he ultimately did (see Deut. 17:14-20; 1 Kin. 4:26; 10:26-27; 11:1-3). His seven hundred wives (and three hundred concubines) ultimately turned his heart away from God so that he became an idolater, just as God had warned (see 1 Kin. 11:4-10). Solomon couldn't have supported so many wives if he had not been so rich, and so it can be said that his wealth was his downfall. He didn't use his wealth to love his neighbor as himself. Rather, he loved himself and effectively robbed one thousand men of the joy of marriage. The world's wisest man became the world's greatest fool. Is he to be our role model?

More Common Justifications

"The tenth commandment only forbids me to covet my neighbor's goods. I'm not coveting what belongs to anyone else; I only enjoy what is mine."

The Bible not only forbids us from coveting what is our neighbor's, it also commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, which means God wants us to share our wealth with the hungry and naked. If we don't, we may not be coveting, but we are guilty of greed, keeping in our possession what God says should be in our neighbor's possession. It could even be called stealing.

"You sound like a communist, trying to redistribute everyone's wealth and remove all incentive to work!"

First, if our sole incentive to work hard is to enrich only ourselves, then our incentive is pure selfishness. No matter what we do, Christians are supposed to do their work heartily, "as for the Lord rather than for men" (Col. 3:23), and should labor "in order that [we] may have something to share with him who has need" (Eph. 4:28; see also Acts 20:35). Communism always fails because unregenerate people don't do their work as unto the Lord; they are selfish, and thus they don't work motivated by a desire to share with others.

Second, I am not advocating subsidizing the lazy, sinful lifestyles of other people, or enabling them to continue in their immorality or irresponsibility. Scripture says, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thes. 3:10). Many people should be left to go hungry so they will be motivated to repent. The book of Proverbs has plenty to say to sluggards.

Third, I am not advocating the "forced charity" of communism, but the free-will generosity of those who are now indwelt by Christ.

Fourth, I *am* advocating helping truly needy people, those defined in Scripture as not having food or covering, not those who can't afford brand new cars or furniture. I'm also advocating using our God-given resources to spread the gospel to the third of the world that has never yet had a chance to hear it once. *Which true follower of Christ could find fault with such a goal?* This doesn't even remotely resemble communism.

“Shall we all live in grass huts?”

This comment is usually a smokescreen used by those who are unwilling to scale down or sacrifice in the least. They aren't concerned about having to live in a grass hut; they are concerned about relinquishing any of their luxuries.

“When we drive new cars and have houses full of nice furniture, it is a testimony before the world of how our God loves us and supplies our needs! If we drive old cars and have worn-out furniture, it sends a message to the world that our God is poor, or that He doesn't care about His children.”

This is just another smokescreen to justify our greed, an attempt to make selfishness virtuous.

How many unsaved people, upon seeing your new car or nice furniture, have said, “Wow! God really loves and takes care of you! Can you tell me how I can be saved?” Why do we fool ourselves that unsaved people, upon seeing our nice possessions, which many other people own who make no profession of faith, have even a fleeting thought about God? They simply assume that we have a good-paying job or that we are deep in debt like everyone else who believes the American lie and is thus pursuing the American dream. Might we not make a greater impact upon the unsaved if we stood out from the world, demonstrating contentment, repenting of greed, and giving generously? Jesus did command us, by the way, to let our lights shine so that men might see our good works (not our great greed) and by so doing, we would glorify our God (see Matt. 5:16). What would be the impression upon your neighbor who asked you why your big house was for sale, and you told him, “I've become a follower of Christ and repented of my greed. I'm no longer living to impress other people of my success by what I own, plus I want to have more to share with the poor. So I'm scaling down to a smaller, but fully adequate house”?

Incidentally, why is the church growing in so much of the Third World, where poor Christians can't show off their new cars and furniture to prove to their neighbors how much God loves them, yet the church isn't growing at all in the wealthy West?

“I tithe! That is all God requires!”

Are we to believe that an old covenant commandment to tithe nullifies Christ's new covenant commandments, for example, His commandment that forbids the laying up of earthly treasures? Is it possible to tithe and still lay up treasures on earth? Obviously, yes. The New Testament reveals that although the Pharisees scrupulously tithed and even gave alms to the poor, they were still lovers of money (see Matt. 5:20 with 6:2; 23:23; Luke 16:14). Incidentally, those under the Old Covenant were commanded not only to tithe, but to provide for the poor (see Deut. 15:11). Just because one tithed did not mean he had obeyed the second greatest commandment. The tithe was little more than a tax, primarily for the support of the priests.

“The important thing is that we are thankful for all that God has given us. That is what is important.”

Certainly being thankful is important, but did Jesus say that the second greatest commandment was to be thankful? By being thankful, does that release us from our responsibility to love our neighbors as ourselves, as well as obey all the rest of the commandments?

“It doesn't matter how much you have, just as long as you hold it loosely.”

This “Christian cliché” is the epitome of twisted logic and self-deception. It means that we can keep whatever we want, as long as we are willing to give it away! An unwilling willingness! Doesn't the fact that we keep most of what we have clearly indicate our unwillingness to give it away? We've deceived ourselves if we think that we're holding loosely what we never give. Willingness to obey God is revealed by actual obedience. Disobedience to God reveals unwillingness to obey Him. What could be more obvious than that?

“All that I possess means nothing to me.”

If it means nothing, why is your life devoted to it? Why do you work so hard to own it, maintain it, protect it and insure it? If it means nothing to you, then why don't you sell it and use the proceeds to provide what will mean everything to your beneficiary? To a starving person, food means everything. To a hell-bound person, salvation could mean everything.

"There are other sins that are just as bad as greed!"

Does that make greed acceptable?

"We are all at different levels of spiritual growth, you know. I'm just not at the same level as you are concerning my wealth."

Such a statement proves that one is not a disciple of Jesus Christ who declared, "No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). If one is not a disciple of Christ, neither is he a Christian. The modern notion that one can be saved without being Christ's disciple has no basis at all in Scripture.⁶

Moreover, when do you suppose that you actually will achieve that level to which you currently have not attained? If you don't achieve it now, adjusting your heart and repenting, you are only fooling yourself if you think you will do so in the future. You won't. By hardening your heart to the clear commands of Christ now, you are only strengthening greed's grip on your heart and increasing the darkness that clouds your mind. Jesus didn't say to the rich ruler, "Don't concern yourself with your greed, selfishness and disobedience to the second greatest commandment. Perhaps in the future you will arrive at a higher level of spiritual growth."

"It was God who has blessed me with my job and my wealth. If He didn't want me to enjoy my wealth, then why did He give it to me?"

Isn't it possible that God has given you more than you need so that you can share with those who have needs? One day you, like the Rich Fool of Luke 12, will have to give an account to Him.

"I tithed back in the days when I had nothing."

That is certainly praiseworthy. However, if you are resting on the laurels of your former self-denial, and your current tithe requires no real sacrifice because of your prosperity, you are making a grave mistake. Does your former obedience give you the right to currently disobey God? Does your previous self-denial hide your current self-indulgence from God's eyes? (If you don't know the answer, read Ezekiel 18:21-32.)

Jesus Continues...

Jesus had still more to say that day on the subject of money and possessions. Still speaking to the scoffing Pharisees about wealth, He continued, "That which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). Why the disparity between divine and human perspectives?

The unregenerate world admires those who "make it to the top," gawking at their luxurious possessions and expensive lifestyles. They congratulate their friends when they "move up" or exhibit their latest acquisition. Position, power, prestige and wealth—these are what the world highly esteems, but God sees things in a vastly different light. He beholds all the selfishness, pride, envy, greed and ambition. People see a mansion, and He sees a pig sty. The masses adore a beautifully adorned woman wearing clothing and jewelry worth thousands of dollars, and He pities a poor woman who is dressed in spiritual rags. Folks gape at a man driving his shiny new luxury automobile, and God weeps for a proud peacock on parade.

But before we condemn the ultra-rich, how much of what we do with our money is motivated by the same sins of selfishness, pride, envy and greed? If everyone in the world were blind except myself, what would I own? The difference between what I

⁶ See chapter 4 of my book, *The Great Gospel Deception*, for a thorough discussion of this subject.

would own and what I do own is what I own to impress others. Revivalist Charles Finney used to ask Victorian-era congregations, "Why do you spend so much time preparing your outward appearance to attend church on Sunday and so little time in preparing your spirit before God? You say that you go to worship, but do you really go to be worshipped?"

Take a look around your church's parking lot next Sunday when you leave. Which cars would you be ashamed to drive? Why would you be ashamed? Is it not because you want to convey by your car how successful you are?

Drive around some less affluent neighborhoods. Which houses would you never think of living in? Why not? Is not your pride a primary reason?

Another Story with an Unmistakable Meaning

Jesus' mercy is so great. In a desperate attempt to provoke the thinking of the hard-hearted, money-loving Pharisees who were scoffing at His message about money, Jesus next related a story about a rich man who went to hell. It is so simple to understand that only a theologian or prosperity preacher could miss its meaning:

Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us." And he said, "Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." But he said, "No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" But he said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:19-31).

Why did this rich man go to hell? He himself knew *exactly why*. It was because he never repented. He stated that he knew his brothers had to repent if they were to escape his fate (see Luke 16:30).

Specifically, as the details of the story make so clear, the rich man went to hell because he never repented of greed.⁷ *All greedy people go to hell*. And Jesus couldn't have illustrated what greed is any better than He did, by juxtaposing the rich man and Lazarus. Greed is the selfish use of one's money and possessions. The rich man had an expensive wardrobe and "gaily lived in splendor every day" (Luke 16:19). With his

⁷ I heard a famous evangelist, speaking about this story, say, "The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich any more than Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom because he was poor!" That sounds so logical, but it is so misleading. Lazarus' poverty was not the reason he went to Abraham's bosom, but the rich man's wealth had a lot to do with his going to hell. He went to hell because he was rich and didn't share his wealth.

abundance, he could have easily relieved some of the distress of sick and starving Lazarus whom he must have seen at his own gate. But because he was selfish, he didn't have compassion. He preferred to spend his money on continued vanity and selfish indulgence rather than keep a starving man alive.

What is the sin of a man who ignores the plight of a starving man and has the means to help him? By withholding what could have helped a starving man to live, has he not made a decision that will cause the man to die? When people are starved to death in concentration camps, do we not consider their captors to be murderers also? When people starve *outside* of concentration camps, are not those who knew of their plight and had the resources to have kept them alive responsible for their deaths? God will hold them accountable. Was not the greedy man in Jesus' parable guilty of murder? How does he differ from any greedy person?

Deliver those who are being taken away to death, and those who are staggering to slaughter, O hold them back. If you say, "See, we did not know this," does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work? (Prov. 24:11-12).

Hell for the Greedy

Hoping to arouse the minds of the scoffing Pharisees and everyone else who would hear His story, Jesus revealed something of what hell will be like for the greedy.

The rich man was "in torment" and "in agony in [the] flame" (Luke 16:23-24). He knew he was being punished for his sins and had no hope of escape. Any visions he had previously possessed on earth of a God so loving that He need not be feared had vanished from his mind. Now he understood the true nature of God's love—a universal love from which justice flows.

The rich man didn't have the courage to ask for even a cup of cold water (realizing that was a vain hope), and asked only for the smallest bit of mercy—just a single drop of water to cool his tongue. But even that miniscule request was denied. Justice now triumphed over mercy.

We can only speculate on why the rich man specifically requested for Lazarus to perform that small act of relief. You would think he would be ashamed to ask for any alleviation from Lazarus, of all people, in light of how he ignored Lazarus' plight on the earth. What could have motivated him? Could it have been because God allowed him to see only Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, in keeping with the divine promise that everyone will reap what he sows (see Gal. 6:7)? Was not the rich man now in a position of longing for help from Lazarus, just as Lazarus was once in a position of longing for help from him? Abraham even said to the rich man, "Remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25). Their circumstances had been exactly reversed.

Giving up all hope of even the slightest relief, the rich man began thinking of his five brothers who were still alive and just like him. He knew they would join him in hell unless they repented, and so he attempted to intercede on their behalf. *Some of the most earnest evangelists are in hell.* But his request was denied, not because Abraham didn't care, but because he knew how hard-hearted the rich man's five brothers were. If they would ignore what God said through Moses and all the prophets, they wouldn't be persuaded to repent even if someone rose from the dead. Since Jesus spoke those words, Someone has risen from the dead, and His resurrection is not enough to convince many of those who profess to believe in Him that they need to heed His words about greed and repent!

Finally, take note that nothing is said about how the rich man gained his money. Not a word is said about his gaining it illegitimately. He may well have gained it by

inheritance or by running some kind of business. But he was guilty of greed because of what he did with his wealth. He didn't use it to love his neighbor as himself, just like millions of wealthy people who live in luxury and profess to be Christians. They think they aren't guilty of greed because they gained their money honestly. (We will later consider just how difficult it is to gain wealth without breaking the second greatest commandment.)

How We Might Be Like the Rich Man

What do you suppose would have been the fate of the rich man if Lazarus had been laid, not at his gate, but on the street corner a hundred yards away, so that the rich man didn't see him quite as often? What if Lazarus had been on the other side of town, and the rich man only saw him occasionally on his journeys? Was the rich man's responsibility to relieve Lazarus changed by his proximity or number of encounters?

Clearly, the rich man's responsibility to assist Lazarus was based on his knowledge of Lazarus' plight and his available resources. John mentioned both aspects of our responsibility to relieve suffering brethren when he said, "But whoever has the world's goods [available resources], and beholds [has knowledge of] his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in Him?" (1 John 3:17).

I might use the excuse, "If suffering people were laid at my doorstep like Lazarus was laid at the rich man's doorstep, I would do something to help them." But what difference does it make if they are at my doorstep or on the other side of the world? If I know of their distress and have the means to help them, what valid excuse do I have not to help them? If I ignore their plight, am I not just like the rich man in Jesus' story? How am I any different than the man who wished to justify his disobedience to the second greatest commandment by asking Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). And if I only help those who are laid at my doorstep, does that not reveal that my motivation is likely to be evil? If I didn't assist those on my doorstep it would make me look bad in the eyes of my neighbors. Better keep up the "Christian" image, you know.

Likewise, how often do we attempt to salve our consciences by sharing small portions of our abundance? Again, our motives are often selfish. We want to feel good about ourselves, and so our giving is like taking a drug that numbs us. As we throw a little money to the poor we deceive ourselves into thinking that we really are good people after all, and then go right back to living in self-indulgence. Is that really loving our neighbor as ourselves?

Do you recall the time that Jesus and His disciples were sitting opposite the treasury, observing the people who were putting money into it? Scripture tells us, "many rich people were putting in large sums" (Mark 12:41). It is interesting that the whole contribution process was set up so observers would know what every contributor was giving.

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which was equal in Christ's day to about 1/64th of a day's wages. (What do you make in seven and a half minutes?) Jesus then commented to His disciples:

Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on (Mark 12:43-44).

Jesus was not impressed with those who gave out of their surplus. Their giving required little, if any true selfless love or self-denial. But isn't that the picture of so much of the giving that is done by professing Christians today? We give only what is easy to give.

Amazingly, so many of us claim we can't afford even to tithe (an old covenant standard), yet our self-deception is exposed by all we can afford. We can afford to spend thousands of dollars a year on non-essentials, vanities, interest payments and self-indulgence, all the time claiming to follow the One who once asked, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Guilty Again

So you should be feeling quite guilty by now. Don't become angry with me! All I've done is read the Bible honestly. God's Word has produced the guilt you feel. That means *God* is making you feel guilty. His goal is to make you holy, like Jesus, perfectly obedient to His will. Once our excuses are all stripped away, there stands our greed, naked and exposed. Then there is nothing to do but repent.

If you've made it this far you must keep reading. In the next chapter we will begin to consider the practical working out of our obedience to Christ's words regarding stewardship. That is where joy begins!

For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for a lifetime;
Weeping may last for the night,
But a shout of joy comes in the morning (Ps. 30:5).