PARABLES

The Parable of the Shrewd Steward and **A Poem on Material Wealth and God**
(Lk. 16:1-8 and 19:9-13)

Introduction

There are two parts to this parable.

- The dishonest but shrewd steward/manager
- A poem about material wealth and God

Part One

The Parable of the Shrewd Steward

Of all the parables the Lord Jesus taught, the parable of the shrewd manager is the most puzzling. For this reason many different interpretations have been given. Each one is trying to explain the teaching of the parable in the light of its ethical implications. It is assumed to be puzzling because:

- It implies that the Lord Jesus encouraged a compromise with evil.
- It implies that the Lord Jesus approved of a programme of shrewd self-interest – "gain friends" even if you have to use unethical means.
- It implies that a good model for life is this shrewd scoundrel who feathered his nest at the expense of the man who trusted him!

Julian the Apostate (the Roman Emperor ~ AD 362) used this parable to argue the inferiority of the Christian faith and its founder. Ahmet Deedat said much the same thing in his attempts to discredit the Lord Jesus.

Why did the Lord Jesus use a dishonest, but shrewd, manager as an example? It is true that nothing pleases ordinary Arabs more than a "David and Goliath"–type story where the weak beat the strong and the poor win over the rich or when a clever fellow wins out over 'Mr Big'. We westerners are not so different for we enjoy Tom and Jerry cartoons and Robin Hood-type stories. We are usually surprised to find a dishonest man as a hero! The typical Middle Easterner is surprised that the hero is criticized.

The Lord Jesus tells stories of other dishonourable people:

- A neighbour who doesn't want to be bothered at night
- A man who gains someone else's treasure by buying the field it is buried in

The cultural background to the story

The Jewish people were repeatedly told by God, not to charge their fellow-man interest on money, on food or on anything else that could earn interest. ***"If you lend money to one of My people among you who is needy, do not be like a money lender; charge him no interest."*** [Ex. 22:25; also Lev. 25:36 and Deut. 15:8; 23:19]

God taught His people social responsibility and forbade usury. The implication was that the usurer was a robber and should be treated as such.

Human nature being what it is many practices developed over a period of time are often aimed at circumventing the law of God. For example: rich people would appoint a trust-worthy person as manager. This manager was given full power to act in the name of his master. He was responsible to his employer, but should he (the manager) get involved in usury, not the master but the manager would be brought to trial. But at all times a rich person stood to gain from the usurious transactions his manager had negotiated. Should such transactions be contested in court, the rich man would go free, for the manager would have to take full responsibility.

However, managers were given ways to protect themselves that even the Pharisees and the teachers of the law condoned and against which the judges could do nothing except recognise them as "necessary evils". The way round the usury law was for the manager and the borrower to draw up a statement in which the debt **and** the interest on the debt were listed in one total figure. Here is an example of a note: *"I will pay Reuben 10 kor of wheat on the first day of Nisan. If I do not, then I will pay 4 kor of wheat in addition next year on the first day of Nisan."*

This would be declared an illegal contract and would get me into court. But if the note said, *"I owe Reuben 14 kor of wheat"*, this would be perfectly legal. What happens on the 1st day of Nisan? Reuben gets 10 kor of wheat, if not; the following year he gets 11 kor and so on until all 14 kor is paid.

In a real example of this, in AD 33-34, Herod Agrippa faced near bankruptcy and instructed his manager, Marsyas, to borrow money from someone. Marsyas went to a banker who forced him to draw up a bond stating that he had received 20,000 attic drachmas. In reality, however, he received 2,500 drachmas less. The interest was added to the principal sum and the borrower would have to pay the full amount even though he had received a smaller amount. The bond itself did not provide details.

Interest rates for borrowed wheat in the 1st century A.D. went as high as 20%, with an added 5% for insurance against price fluctuations and depreciation of the value of the product. If the commodity happened to be olive oil, the interest rate was 80% plus 20% insurance costs totalling 100%! The risk in lending olive oil was great. Olive crops are rather unpredictable and the quality of the olive oil varies from year to year depending on the size and quality of the olives. Cheap oils from other sources could be added to olive oil and methods to determine its purity were inefficient.

A manager was in a position of trust and confidence for he controlled his master's assets and was usually a member of his household (a relative). He represented his master and had full authority to deal with debtors as he thought fit. Debtors had to abide by the stipulations laid down by the manager for they were responsible to him alone.

Should the manager show that he was incompetent or inefficient, and if he was a member of the family, then he would be quietly removed to some other role? But if he was a non-family member, and especially if he had "stolen" money and was considered untrustworthy, the master would summon him to give an account and he would then be dismissed. He would have to leave his master's employ with no possessions of his own and – more importantly – with no honour. He would not be welcomed anywhere and would not be able to find a job wherever the rumours about him had spread.

The story that Jesus told

A few things to note:

1. The parable was told to **the disciples** (v. 1). Perhaps some of them (maybe Matthew) had made a good living out of other people's financial affairs and they would have really appreciated this story that the Lord Jesus told. But remember that the Pharisees also heard the story (v. 14) and others were listening too. We read (v. 14), ***"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard these things and ridiculed Him."*** The parables were a series of

stories told on the Sabbath beginning in Luke 14:1 and ending in Luke 17:10. Perhaps the Lord Jesus gave them in Perea in the afternoons in the last month of His ministry on earth.

2. We need to ask some questions:
   - Is the master an honourable man or a partner with his manager in the crime of usury?
   - Has the manager obliged debtors to sign bills for greater amounts than their actual debts? All will assume that the manager will get his "cut" in all debt collection. This is typical in contracts in the Middle East today and is usually called "commission". The debtors would assume that some of what they paid would go to the manager. On top of this, managers would often receive "a little something under the table" from some of the debtors. In the Middle East, these "somethings" are usually given at feast times. However, he will be criticised if he demands them!

     The problem is that what is written on the bill is what the debtors must pay at the specified time. The master, the manager and the debtor all know what is written. If a manager tries to inflate the bill, the debtor will complain bitterly to his master. If the manager has been cheating the debtors by 20% to 50%, he will be hated. When he falls from power, he will have to flee that whole community and go to work far away. No further deception will be accepted. Ask in any village in the Middle East and people will tell you the same thing.
3. Note that someone informs on the actions of this manager, but the manager doesn't know who! So the master is part of the community – i.e. doesn't live in some distant city – and probably many people in the community know of the actions of the manager.
4. Under Jewish law, if a manager sells for more or buys for less than the price specified in the contract, any extra profit goes to the owner and not to the manager.

So what is going on in this story?

The Lord Jesus told a story that could very well have occurred and was familiar to His hearers. It was a story of a rich man who had appointed a manager to look after his business. The rich man owned a large amount of land and the manager was a land agent. He was paid a salary for this. The debtors were poorer people who had rented part of the land for which they must pay fixed amounts of produce. The word in Greek that is translated 'manager' is also used for 'estate manager'. (Arabic versions of the Bible use *'wakil'* = estate manager.)

The owner placed complete confidence in this manager. But when he learned that the manager was wasting his possessions, he called him in and told him to get his books audited and to find some other employment for clearly he was robbing his master.

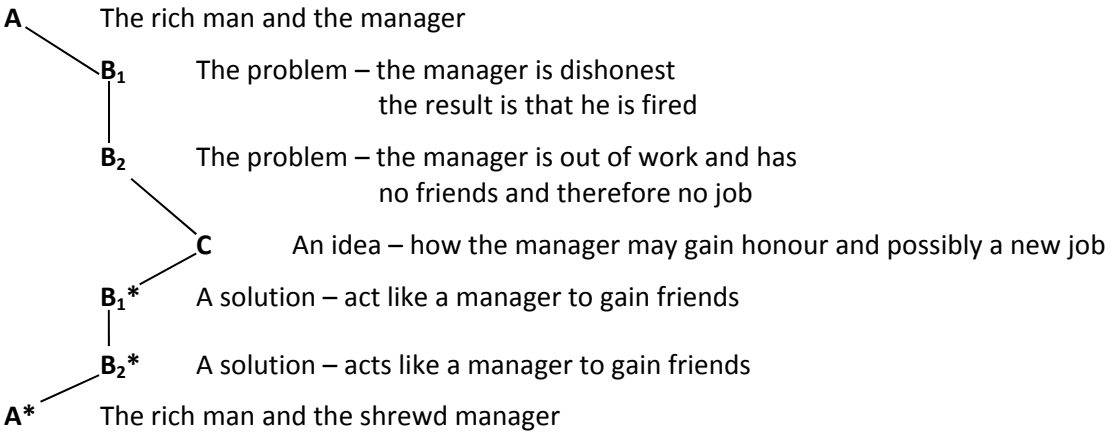
Levant farmers were required to pay a fixed portion of the crop that was grown, irrespective of the yield. The amount was due at harvest time, but they **owed** that amount the day they signed the contract. This was the usual practice.

The amounts due are large – ***"One hundred measures of oil"*** amounts to 868 gallons of olive oil or 3,946 litres. On average, one olive tree bears about 120 kg of olives. When crushed this would give about 25 litres of oil. So the amount of olive oil owed by the debtor would have to come from an orchard of more than 150 trees. ***"One hundred measures of wheat"*** is equivalent to about 1000 bushels. This corresponds to what about a hundred acres would produce in the 1st century. It is much more today!

The master probably doesn't know the exact amounts the manager is getting. But he does know exactly what is due to him. Anyone who gets rich in the Middle East has devoted extreme care to his source of wealth and he cares enough to fire the dishonest manager. But in the end, his master commends the manager! Why?

The Structure of the Parable

This has a fairly typical parabolic form as shown:



So what does the text say?

"What is this I hear about you?"

This is a very typical way of speaking in the Middle East. It isn't a direct form of speech, such as, *"I accuse you of embezzlement"*. Indirect speech is used. The implication is, *"For some time I have been hearing a number of things about you!"* Clearly the reports have come from sources that the master considers reliable. Now the manager doesn't know **what** the master knows. Neither does he know who told his master about his actions. So, intelligent man that he is, and not wanting to incriminate himself, he stays silent. But the question has been asked. It is rude not to reply! The master fires the manager on the spot. [The present tense of the verb is used.] The manager has to hand over the accounts and is dismissed from his job.

This is a great kindness for he would have expected to publicly denounce the manager and send him to prison. Even worse, he could have sold the manager into slavery with his wife and all his children in order to recoup his losses. Why instant dismissal with no notice? Because the master is afraid of this sort of action by the manager – the clever manager might embezzle more!

The manager knew the charges brought against him were true. He had abused his master's trust and he couldn't plead for mercy. He knew that a successor would take his place. What did the future hold for the manager? He had to depend on his own ingenuity. He was not physically strong enough to do manual labour. Becoming a beggar was out of the question. It was too humiliating and he could not live with the shame. He realised that self-effort on his part would not work. He needed to cause other people in the community to think honourably about him. Suddenly he called out, *"I've got it!"* He knew what to do. He would make his master's debtors indebted to him so that on his dismissal, they would welcome him into their homes.

Because word of his dismissal is not yet common knowledge in the community, the manager has some room to manoeuvre – perhaps an hour or two – before he hands over the accounts. What is surprising in the Middle Eastern context is that the manager doesn't loudly and insistently protest his innocence for the usual ploy is to defend yourself and blame everyone else.

Some possible alternatives of what he might have said:

1. *"Bring out these lying accusers. Let me challenge them and we will see if these cowards have the courage to tell their lies in front of me."*
2. *"It is not my fault. I have done my best, but I can't be everywhere on your estate. The people I work with – the farmers – are all thieves!"*
3. *"Beloved master, I have served you for many years. My father served your family and so did my grandfather. Surely you are not going to terminate this beautiful record of faithfulness over many generations over a little misunderstanding about money!"*
4. He could have decided to say nothing and get all the leaders/debtors in the community to go to the master and plead his cause. This would have cost him something.

So the manager of walks out of the interview offering no defence at all. Amazing! So he is admitting:

- *"I am guilty.*
- *The master knows the truth and he knows that I am guilty.*
- *The master expects obedience and disobedience brings judgment.*
- *I will never get my job back by offering excuses.*
- *My whole energy must be focused on the future!"*

From Adam until today, when confronted by God, we offer excuses for our sins. None of them are any good, but like Adam we still offer them.

What is surprising is that the manager is fired and not jailed. He isn't even scolded by the master. So his master is very **unusually merciful** and **unusually generous** to his manager. Middle Easterners today are usually very surprised at this.

His problem is how to get another job. Since he has been dismissed for theft, who is going to hire him? He has lost all honour. He can't dig. Farming involves digging. To his credit, he considers a menial task, but he can't do it physically. He can't beg because in the community there is only an acceptance of beggars if they are blind or greatly physically disabled with broken limbs or back. The manager has no such problem.

The only answer: **risk everything on the quality of mercy he has already experienced from his master.** If he fails, he goes to jail. If he succeeds, he will be a hero in the community.

The key to his actions is that most people don't yet know he has been fired. They will know soon, so he must act quickly before he hands over the books of accounts.

The Strategy

He "summons" two of the debtors. He tells two servants to go to each one of them and summon these relatively rich tenant farmers. (Why relatively rich? It is implied because of the large sums involved.)

The first debtor comes and the manager asks him how much he owes the master. He answers, ***"One hundred measures of oil"***. The manager tells the debtor to take the bill stating the amount owed and reduce it by half!

The next debtor is asked the same question. ***"How much do you owe?"*** His answer is, ***"One hundred measures of wheat"***. The manager tells him to take his bill and reduce the amount by 20 measures!

In both instances large sums of money are involved. Both debtors assume the directions came from the master. This is what the manager hopes they will assume. It isn't harvest. The amount they owe has been set, but the bill is not yet due. Notice that the manager calls

the debtors in one by one because he doesn't want them to talk to one another and grow suspicious. The debtors are not even greeted and no pleasantries are exchanged. To the first he says, ***"Write quickly …."*** and to the second, ***"And you …."***

This is shocking to Middle Easterners in a culture where spending time sharing pleasantries is important. The reason for this is that the manager **must finish** before the master finds out what he is doing! The debtors mustn't think they are being deceived. But the debtors write the amounts because they know the illegal interest rate for borrowed olive oil is 100% and for borrowed wheat 25%. They gladly change the totals to the amounts they actually owe the master. They don't falsify the figures. Rather, in their own handwriting, they show how much they have to pay. In short, because the usurious rates were lifted, **honesty prevailed!**

If they had known the manager was trying to deceive them, they too would have been in trouble. Possibly they would lose that harvest and future possibilities of renting land. But in fact, the parable has no criticism of the debtors. The debtors assume everything is legitimate, because they believe the manager still has his job. Note how the manager implies that he is still employed by the master. ***"How much do you owe <u>my</u> master?"*** The implication is that the master has authorised the change of the bill. Again, the implication is that the manager should have all credit for removing usury from the debt and making his master appear to be a religious and law-abiding citizen!

What happens next? When the manager presents the account books to his master who had subsequently learned about the altered transactions, he is **praised** because he has acted **shrewdly**! The master reflects on the two alternative courses of action:

- He can go back to the debtors and explain it was all a mistake. The manager has been fired and the changes are cancelled. But if he does this, he will be cursed for his stinginess and for being irreligious like the dishonest manager. The debtors' joy will turn to anger. The master will lose a lot of honour and possibly end up in prison himself.
- He can keep silent. He can accept the praise being showered on him and allow the clever manager to get away with it! The master is a generous and merciful man. Such generosity brings **very high honour** in the Middle East. Perhaps the master can already hear the cries of jubilation outside his house as people begin to thank him for his generosity and kindness.

So he reflects and then says to the manager. ***"You are very shrewd!"*** Why? Because the dishonest manager has managed to heap lots of honour on his master. **He risked everything on understanding the grace and mercy of his master.** The master pays the price for the manager's salvation.

The word "shrewd" is used of ants, badgers, locusts and lizards in Proverbs 30:24-28. It is the shrewdness of self-preservation. In this time of crisis, the manager is fully aware of the hopelessness of his situation. He is aware of only one way of salvation – the mercy and generosity of his master.

Now the debtors have lots of good will for their master. Before they were only thinking of the illegal usury being forced on them. The manager must have placed the master in an extremely favourable light if he spoke words of praise to his dismissed manager. The community has procured a huge economic windfall as all the debtors/tenant farmers also get all the usurious rates lowered.

What happens next? We don't know! The story has no ending! Was the shrewd manager re-instated? This is very similar to the story of the two sons and the amazing father that immediately precedes it. This is like a 'Tom and Jerry' story. The little mouse matches wits against the big cat and wins! At the end of the story, the Lord Jesus calls the manager ***"a son of this age"***. His morals are deplorable. But as ***"sons of light"*** we too must trust in the mercy of God for our salvation.

A story is often told in the Middle East. It happened in the days of Sultan Saladin. A murderer was condemned to death and he kept on crying out, *"I want to see the Sultan."* Finally, he was brought into the presence of Sultan Saladin. He said to him, *"O, most gracious Sultan, my sins are great, but the mercy of the Sultan is greater!"* He was released.

In 1960, a similar event took place in Jordan. The wife of a condemned spy asked an Arab leader in Jerusalem for advice on how to free her husband. He told her to wait outside the King's palace in Amman for King Hussein's motorcade to pass and to throw herself in front of the King's car. He told her explicitly not to plead her husband's innocence. He said, *"You know he is guilty and so does the King. To offer excuses is to destroy all hope. Throw yourself on the mercy of the King!"* The lady did as she was told. King Hussein knew what was expected of him in noble, honourable, kingly behaviour and the spy was released! The Jordanians were very proud of their King for this act!

So the dishonest manager is not commended for his dishonesty, but for knowing where his salvation lay!

What are the spiritual implications of the parable?

It is an appeal to have insight into and faith in the nature of the Kingdom of God. Note the parallels between this parable and the previous parable of the two sons (Lk. 15:11-32):

- The younger son throws himself on the mercy of his father just as the dishonest manager throws himself on the mercy of his master.
- Both the younger son and the manager get to a crisis point where they begin to consider their future.
- Both the manager and the younger son betray a relationship of trust.
- Neither the younger son nor the manager offer any excuses.
- The word "waste" is used of both men.
- Both the younger son and the manager experience extraordinary mercy from the father/ the master.
- Both stories have a missing ending! What did the older brother do? Did the shrewd manager keep his job?

So, what is the message for us? Jesus summed up this story in a comprehensive statement,

"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Please note:

- The manager had gained a reputation of being dishonest.
- He realised his future was at stake, so he took action in order to have a future.
- He sought approval and honour by being honest and generous to his master's debtors.
- He didn't cling to worldly wealth, but generously gave "his cut" to those who were indebted to his master. The money he gave away was not his or even his master's.

Therefore the people of light:

- Should not set their hearts on worldly possessions. They can be generous and give some assets away. They can afford this because these assets don't belong to them, but to God.
- So giving away our money is just redistributing the wealth that God has entrusted to us.

- This story is an illustration of Mt. 6:19-20, ***"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."***

- This understanding of our assets is also found in the Old Testament. King David prayed in the presence of God's people, ***"But who am I, and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You and we have given You only what comes from Your hand."*** (1 Chron. 29:14)

- The Lord Jesus also says ***"the people of light"*** should be focused on the **reality of the future** for we will all be "dismissed" in death. We should look forward to our eternal home. A time will come when money is a thing of the past and irrelevant to the future. Preparation **now** for that day **should be our focus**. ***"When death comes, man's spirit returns to God who gave it."*** (Eccles. 12:7)

- Finally, in the long run, honesty and integrity is the best policy for all. If people who don't profess to serve God realise that His standards are fundamental to a healthy society, then how much more should we! Yet too many believers opt for saying one thing and doing another. James has a strong warning for believers who opt for a double life, ***"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."*** (James 4:4)

Summary

In an unforgettable, backhanded way this parable shows a number of things:

- Something of the nature of God – the splendour of the grace of God in which alone the believer must trust. God is a God of justice, mercy and very great personal integrity (honour). His sense of justice leads Him to dismiss us as sinners. But His mercy is shown in His decision to let us go our own way – rather than sell us or imprison us. His mercy is also shown in that He agrees to pay the price of our salvation.

- Something of the predicament of man – we are all dishonest and self-serving. Even as believers, we so easily forget "the coming of the Kingdom".

- **The ground of our salvation** is clearly shown. God (the master) is a God of judgment and mercy. Because of his evil ways, man (the manager) is caught in the crisis of the coming Kingdom. Excuses will achieve nothing. Man's only option is to entrust **everything** to the unfailing mercy of our generous God. We can be confident that He will accept to pay the price for our salvation Himself. The shrewd rascal was wise enough to place his total trust in the quality of mercy experienced at the beginning of the story. That trust was vindicated! We need the same kind of shrewdness. The manager overcame the problem of his sin by relying on the known character of his master. The grace and mercy of God is the only hope for us.

  By grace we are saved through faith. By grace alone we will be able to stand when we have to give an account of our service to the Lord Jesus. We will cast ourselves at the feet of the Lord Jesus who, in His mercy, has saved us and who alone, ***"Is able to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy"***. (Jude 1:23-25)

- **The manager's willingness to act**: the manager has the courage to act. It is a huge risk, but one he takes and he reaps the rewards.

- Notice the contrasts:

	Sons of this age	Sons of light
Who:	Pharisees	Disciples
Motive:	The love of money/love of self	Love towards hurting people – in some measure reflecting the love of God Himself
Method:	Use money for earthly goals	Use money for heavenly goals
Result:	Clever today but fools for ever	Apparent fools today but glory for ever

Part Two

A Poem on Material Wealth and God

Introduction

'Mammon' is an Aramaic word usually translated 'wealth' and in particular **'material wealth'**. This poem is on the topic of material wealth and God. The poem has three verses and the author is the Lord Jesus.

The Structure of the Poem

"I say to you

Verse 1

A ***for yourself make***

B ***friends***

C ***from the material wealth of unrighteousness***

C* ***so that when it fails***

B* ***they may receive***

A* ***you into eternal tents.***

Verse 2

D ***The one faithful in little***
also in much is faithful

E ***and the one in little unfaithful***
also in much unfaithful is.

F ***If therefore in the unrighteous material wealth***
faithful you are not,

F* ***the truth***
who to you will entreat?

E* ***And if in what is another's***
faithful you are not,

D* ***the what-is-yours***
who will give it you?

Verse 3

G ***No servant can serve two masters.***

H ***Either the one he hates***

I ***and the other he loves***

I* ***or the one he is devoted to***

H* ***and the other he despises.***

G* ***You cannot serve God and material wealth."***

Verse 1: material wealth and God

Again, this is an inverted parabolic structure and the key to the verse is in the centre/focus of the parabola.

The normal person usually thinks that material wealth is going to be ploughed into property. ("earthly tents") for this helps in securing "earthly life". But **A** and **A*** are set in contrast: "earthly tents" vs "eternal tents". See Psalm 61:5, ***"I will dwell in your tabernacle for ever"***.

Verse 2: material wealth and truth

The climax of this verse warns us that a person should not be trusted with the truth unless he proves trustworthy with material wealth. **D** and **D*** speak of faithfulness and in the centre material wealth and truth are contrasted.

In the Aramaic, there is a play on words, a pun and another device:

"The one faithful in little,
also in much is faithful.

And the one in little unfaithful.
Also in much unfaithful is."

It is a beautifully styled poem in Aramaic.

Verse 3: material wealth and God

This is a different treatment from verse one, but the subject is the same. The focus of verse one is material wealth. The focus of verse three is love and devotion. So the three verses are centred on God, material wealth and truth. The purpose of material wealth is to build treasure in heaven and you cannot serve both God and material wealth.

What does it mean?

The subject of the poem is taken up by the Lord Jesus in story form in "The rich man and Lazarus". The theme of "The shrewd manager" is the crisis precipitated by the return of the Lord Jesus. That story is a warning of the crisis to come. The poem is more about material wealth and the life to come. What connects them is verse 14, ***"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him."***

The story of the shrewd manager is about the splendour of God's grace in which alone the believer must trust. The poem speaks of the relationship of faithfulness to material wealth, God and truth. No dishonest man can be trusted with God's truth.

Material wealth in itself is neither good nor bad and it belongs to this life only. What will happen to us in the future life depends on what we do with our material wealth now. Make sure you get your material wealth to serve you by bringing your friends into a community that will survive beyond death. Nothing reveals the thinking of a man more clearly than the use he makes of his money. Material wealth spent for selfish reasons brings us no benefit.

The Lord Jesus makes another connection between faithfulness, money and truth. If we are to be faithful in the use of material wealth, then we must be faithful in the big issues – the truth about God, about eternity and our part in it. As the Lord Jesus said, in His Kingdom Manifesto, ***"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you."*** (Mt. 6:32-34)

So the issue is: are we serving God or are we serving material wealth and all that it brings of power and prestige? When wealth controls a man, it ruins him. When God controls a man, the man controls his money and he becomes a blessing to many people.