

## Feeling Smug? God of Insight – Luke 16:15

### Scripture Reading: Luke 16:9-14

#### Introduction

You've no doubt heard the old saying, "One man's trash is another man's treasure"

After all, it's the whole basis of the garage sale and Goodwill Industries created its business model on the principle that someone will simply have to have whatever someone else has discarded and will pay to get it

And I'm amazed at how you can put most anything you want to get rid of out by the curb and be fairly confident that someone will come along in short order to pick it up

There's rarely a need to pay a garbage man to take an old appliance or piece of furniture

I remember joking with a friend who lived over in Burlington that he was lucky someone didn't take his mower when he ran out of gas down by the street and left it there while he fetched his gas can

It's true that one man's trash is another man's treasure but the inverse is also true and one man's treasure is often another man's trash and that's not generally a problem as it's just a matter of taste or preference

But when we read in **Luke 16:15** that "*what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God*" that should make us take notice and we should ask, "What exactly did Jesus mean by that?"

If you're taking notes, Roman numeral one is **how the Pharisees reacted** to the parables Jesus related, Roman numeral two is **how Jesus responded**, and Roman numeral three is **how we should respond**

But first, let's take some time to dig into what preceded Jesus' teaching so we can understand our passage in context

Looking back in the gospel of Luke we see that Jesus taught the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son in chapter 15

Then he began chapter 16 with what we know as the parable of the dishonest manager which is probably the most difficult parable found in Luke's gospel

I don't want to get bogged down in the details of the parable because that would take us too far afield from the point of our passage

But notice in verse 1 [**Luke 16:1**] that he was primarily teaching his disciples when he gave the parable whereas in chapter 15 [**Luke 15:2**] we see him telling the other three parables directly to the Scribes and Pharisees

And Jesus used the parable of the dishonest manager to make three important points to his followers:

That they should use worldly goods for what they are good for which is to have influence in the world, that handling their worldly goods faithfully would result in greater spiritual responsibility, and that they must choose their master because one cannot serve both God and money

And when we consider that list of lessons we nod and think they sound right and proper

But not the Pharisees

#### **I. How the Pharisees reacted**

Look with me at verse 14 [**Luke 16:14**] where we read:

*The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him*

We've been largely conditioned to view the Pharisees as bad guys

If they were characters in an old western movie they would always be the ones wearing black hats

But that's largely because we have the benefit of the distance afforded by time and culture and because we read about their constant disputes with Jesus

But in Jesus' day they were rock stars

They were the well-educated interpreters of the Mosaic Law and the power-brokers who controlled most of the activities surrounding the temple

And they were likely respected and feared in just about equal measure by the common folks

We need to always remember that Jesus and the Christianity he brought didn't come into a religious vacuum because a very powerful and pervasive cultural and religious system already existed and the Pharisees were the leaders of it

Jesus was an itinerant preacher from a backwater village who was attracting a large crowd of eager followers who heard what he was saying and were being convinced of the truth of his words

He was uneducated in any formal sense but spoke with authority as he challenged the established teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees

And it wasn't just some esoteric teaching or side issue that Jesus said they were wrong about – he went after them for missing the core message of the Old Testament Scriptures that foretold his coming and the coming of the kingdom

Jesus confronted them head on and people were listening to him

It's difficult when someone comes along and challenges what you are convinced is true but it's even more difficult when you are the one to whom people have been looking for leadership

And when Jesus came along and started teaching things that caused the people to call their expertise and esteem into question the religious leaders had two main choices as to how to react

They could have listened and considered what Jesus was saying and like the Bereans they could have searched the Scriptures seeking to see if there was any merit in it

That would have been the wise thing and they certainly could have done that

But, we see that they reacted in about the same way that most powerful people react when challenged – that is to say, badly

Look with me at verse 14 [**Luke 16:14**] where we see that the religious leaders were close enough to listen in as Jesus presented the parable of the dishonest manager and when they heard it *"they ridiculed him"*

The Greek word used literally means that they "turned their noses up at him"

It's the exact same word we find in **Luke 23:35** that describes the scene at the crucifixion when the religious rulers scoffed at Jesus as he hung on the cross ridiculing his claim to have saved others and taunting him to save himself

Rather than seriously considering what Jesus was saying, the religious leaders treated him with utter contempt

Really, those are the two responses that still remain today when one is confronted by Jesus and his message

One will submit to Jesus' authority and order their life by what he says or they will scoff at it and go a different way

It's sad, but most people still choose the way of the Pharisees and turn their noses up at the gospel

Let's look now at how Jesus responded to the reaction of the Pharisees

## **II. How Jesus responded**

We see his response to them beginning in verse 15 [**Luke 16:15**] which says:

*"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."*

There is a whole lot we need to unpack in just this one verse so let's start with what it means to "justify" oneself

To "justify" someone means to cause them to be in a proper or right relationship with someone else and, in this case, it means that the Pharisees believed they were in a right relationship with God

Again, because we tend to view the Pharisees as bad guys we automatically assign a false motive to this self-justification. But I think we err when we jump to that conclusion because I believe the Pharisees actually thought they were doing well before God.

They were scrupulous in what they saw as their duty under the Law before God and the teaching that had been handed down from their fathers and their father's fathers for as long as they could remember.

Their problem was that they viewed justification before God as consisting of externals alone and believed that compliance, and especially the ostentatious compliance they practiced, was enough to satisfy God.

And why not?

After all, they were "*exalted [by] men*" as we see Jesus say – people held them in very high esteem and everything served to assure them that they were in good standing with God.

But Jesus tells them "*God knows your hearts*" and "*what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God*".

It's one thing to justify yourself before other people because we tend to judge according to what we can readily see.

The prophet, Samuel, was warned by God against that tendency when he was tasked with anointing the future king of Israel after God rejected Saul.

Saul was the first king over Israel after the time of the judges and he was kind of a transitional figure in that he was a tall, handsome, and powerful figure like many of the judges had been – he fit the physical image people have of a king.

But when God sent Samuel to anoint the future king from among Jesse's sons, he warned him to not look at the externals.

Look with me at **1Samuel 16:6-7** where Samuel's thought process and God's instructions are revealed.

Jesse's sons were called in from the fields and stood before Samuel in birth order.

*... he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

Eliab must have been a striking figure because as soon as Samuel laid eyes on him, he just knew he was God's man.

It's according to our nature that we judge according to what we see and even in the church today we esteem some more than others on the basis of how they "look".

Sadly, we're pretty easy to deceive and we readily fall prey to an attractive presence, a great personality, or an outward display of spirituality even if it exists only on the surface.

But God judges according to a completely different standard as we see in both 1Samuel 16:7 and Luke 16:15 – God looks at the heart.

Remember, when the Bible speaks of the heart of a person, it doesn't mean simply the emotional center of a person but the core of the person – the heart is the seat of the inner moral and spiritual life – it's the essence of who we are.

**Mark 7:21-23** reveals the importance of the heart –

*For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*

And God searches the hearts of men and judges accordingly.

Jesus had plenty to say about the religious leaders of his day and it wasn't good.

In Matthew 23 he spelled out several woes against the scribes and Pharisees, saying in verses 27-28 [**Matthew 23:27-28**]

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."*

And in our passage we see that the reason they scoffed at Jesus and his teaching was that they “*were lovers of money*”  
Materialism is a sin that crosses all economic lines and anyone can fall prey to it regardless of how wealthy they are  
I once heard a man from South Africa share that materialism was the biggest problem the his church faced even though he lived among very poor people

He said that if a person lived in a straw hut they longed to live in a dirt hut while those who lived in a dirt hut longed to live in a metal hut and if they lived in a metal hut they longed to live in a conventional wooden house and so on

They didn’t have much but their focus was always on having more – that’s materialism and it isn’t a malady just for the wealthy

Paul writes in **1Timothy 6:9-10** –

*But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.*

That phrase, “desire to be rich” indicates a purpose or goal in life and Paul says if you live for material things you set yourself up for spiritual destruction that comes through temptation

And we see in several places throughout the New Testament that the religious leaders had a focus on money

In Mark 7 Jesus condemned their use of the principle of Corban to keep from supporting their elderly parents

And while Jesus admits the Pharisees were scrupulous about tithing to God even to the point of tithing on the spices in their cabinets he also says they made a show of their giving to be seen by others

And we remember that it was they who turned the temple into what Jesus referred to as a den of robbers as they defrauded the people who came to offer their sacrifices

Part of their focus on money was due to the mistaken belief that was prevalent in Jewish thought that God blesses those who do well and curses those who do otherwise

It’s the same mentality that caused Job’s friends to assume Job was harboring secret sin because of the calamities that had befallen him and the disciples to ask Jesus who had sinned; the blind man or his parents that he had been born blind

So it really shouldn’t come as a surprise that the religious leaders made a strong connection between earthly prosperity and morality

But they erred doubly when they reversed the formula and allowed others to view them as moral simply because they had money

Because, as Jesus points out, it was an abomination before God to focus on material prosperity without also being compelled to living righteously before God and governed by a consciousness of stewardship of God’s resources

We also need to be aware of this tendency in our own lives because chasing the American dream can be compelling and we can fall in to the trap of giving too much attention to stuff

While there is nothing inherently wrong with wealth we can become fixated on having just a little more for the wrong reasons and why we do things matters a great deal

Because *why* we do a thing is in many ways more important to God than what we actually do

Make no mistake, both our motives and our actions matter to God but why we do a thing reveals the content of our character even more than the things we do

God wants us to focus on having our inner man conform to his standard more than he wants us to do the “right” thing

That is to say, he doesn’t want us to be satisfied with “acting” righteous; he wants us to “be” righteous because if our hearts and motives are right our actions will typically follow but the inverse doesn’t always follow

So, how should we respond to Jesus' teaching in this passage so as to avoid the mistake of the Pharisees?

### **III. How we should respond**

Obviously, the first thing we need to do is to **assess our attachment to money and material things**

We need to take seriously Jesus' warning that no one can serve two masters and especially when those two masters are God and money as we see in verse 13 [**Luke 16:13**]

In order to know where our loyalties lie we need to honestly answer some serious questions such as:

Do I truly acknowledge that God actually owns everything and I am only a steward tasked with managing God's possessions faithfully according to his principles?

Am I content with what I have or am I constantly looking for more?

How much do I worry about having enough?

How much of my time and attention do I give to the acquisition and care of my possessions?

How concerned am I about losing what I have?

How do I determine how much I give back to God and am I cheerful about giving?

How generous am I?

Am I living within my means?

How concerned am I whether other people see me as a financial success?

These are just a few questions that will help you determine the importance of money in your life and to test whether money is becoming a master over you

Second, we need to **stop trying to impress people with how spiritual we are and only live to please God**

Christianity is a matter of the heart before God and our one desire must be to submit to the authority of Jesus as we find it in the Bible

In verses 16-17 [**Luke 16:16-17**] Jesus says –

*The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.*

Remember when we studied the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said in **Matthew 5:17** that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them

And Jesus did fulfill the ceremonial aspects of the Law that pointed to him

The civil aspects of the Law were for the nation of Israel which was a theocracy and, while the principles found there may be valuable for secular government such as we enjoy they are otherwise not applicable for us today

But the Law as a whole reveals the holy nature of God and who God is and is therefore always and eternally operational and by showing us God's standard the Law provides us with insight as to how to live to please God

And living to please God is not a matter of practicing certain external behaviors and refraining from others

Pleasing God is a matter of the heart before God as we compare ourselves only to Jesus and strive to be like him rather than living to be esteemed by others

Only someone who is completely deluded could compare themselves to Jesus and then proceed to strut around proudly before others as if they were something special

Paul asks some very penetrating questions that get right to the heart of the matter of pride in **1Corinthians 4:7** –

*For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*

Who and what we are and whatever differences there are between us are God's doing there is no place for pride or envy

Everything we have has come from God so there is no place for pride or envy

There is absolutely no reason for anyone to strut around saying look at me because no one is justified before God unless it is through the atoning work of Jesus Christ

## Conclusion

The religious leaders of Jesus' day truly believed they were the cream of God's crop and they used their status and their earthly appearance to prove how much God favored them

But whatever righteousness they demonstrated was only on the surface and their hearts were actually far from God

Sure, they scrupulously adhered to the letter of the Law as they themselves interpreted it and I think they actually believed they were doing well

They believed it so much that when Jesus came along and told them that mere external obedience and the exultation of their fellow men for it was actually an abomination before God they ridiculed him rather than consider what he said

But they were devoted to the things of this world – possessions and the applause of men

Theirs was a faux spirituality that substituted strict rule following, accolades, and the trappings of success for true love of God and the obedience of devotion that naturally comes from it

But God knew their hearts and wasn't fooled by their outward appearance

Jesus knew where their affections lay and what compelled them and he said those things were detestable to God because no man can serve two masters

It's not enough just to *act* differently before men and be thought spiritual; we must *be* different and *being* different is a matter of the heart and a transformation we must strive for even as we rely on God to change us

Just as Paul says in **Philippians 2:12-13** –

*...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you...for his good pleasure*

God knows your heart and he wants you to turn away from the allure of things and the applause of men and to live for him alone as an audience of one and your greatest possession

Let's pray