

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART SEVENTEEN

Behind the scenes in a large, wealthy household there needs to be wise, responsible management of resources if big dinner parties are to be provided for the needy. The steward played that role. He had to be absolutely trustworthy or the whole programme would be undermined. Sadly in the household Jesus described at the beginning of chapter 16, this was not happening. The steward was wasting what had been entrusted to him, presumably on himself and his friends. When word reached the master of how he was being defrauded, he arranged a meeting with the steward to warn him that his employment was about to be terminated. Paul described himself and his co-workers as 'stewards of the mysteries of God'. (I Cor.4:1) As those with the enormous privilege of being entrusted with the riches of the grace of Christ, we are accountable to our Master for what we have done with the message given to us to pass on. In another letter Paul saw himself as 'in debt to the Greeks and the barbarians, the wise and the foolish' until he had explained the gospel fully to them. (Rom.1:14) As messengers of Christ we have defrauded the Lord and those He sent us to if we keep quiet about the message or distort it into something else. (16:1,2)

Aware of a day of reckoning which was coming, the steward made a plan to safeguard his own future financially. He did not want to do manual work or end up in poverty. He came up with a cunning scam. Many people had debts to his master as the whole world is in debt to God because of sin. (Lk.11:4) His master's debtors would not be able to resist a discount on their accounts. The first deal was to cut the price of oil in half. The second was a 20% reduction on the price of wheat. Throughout the Bible oil is a picture of the Holy Spirit. (Heb.1:9) If we teach people that they can live life in their own strength instead of needing the Spirit to live that life in and through them, we are undervaluing the Holy Spirit. (Jn.15:5) Wheat seed is used repeatedly in scripture to picture the word of God. (Lk.8:11) If we undermine people's confidence in the whole Bible by doubt, denial or offering an alternative to the word, we have discounted it. Sadly the most subtle attacks on the Christian church come from those who claim to be spiritual leaders. Equally sadly so many people are sucked in by what seems an easy way to heaven which does not involve any real change on earth. (16:3-7)

When the master commended the treachery of his ex-steward he was obviously not approving but wondering at his audacity, as we might the cunning of a clever bank robber. The Lord was advising false teachers to make friends now because they will be the only company they will have in hell. He urges us to make up our minds to which master we are going to be stewards. If we love the Lord we will be rewarded beyond our wildest dreams in eternity. If we hate Him, which is the only alternative, a terrible fate awaits us. (16:8-13)

The Pharisees, who saw religious leadership as a way to make money without getting their hands dirty, were squirming in their seats. They ridiculed Him in the hope that no-one would take Him seriously and threaten their lucrative business. Jesus pointed out that seeking the approval of men was in direct conflict with being approved of by God. Men look at the outside; God looks at the heart. The Old Testament law, to which the Pharisees had added endless regulation, seemed to provide a way of gaining acceptance before others. Now Jesus explained the real purpose of the law and the prophets, to prepare people for the coming of the King into their lives. John the Baptist had preached the need of repentance from futile self effort to allow this to happen. Undervaluing the Spirit and the word of God would be a way of trying to force entrance into heaven. God was not going to allow the standard of the Old Testament to be discounted. For example marriage was being taken lightly and divorce seemed the easy solution for those who saw a more attractive option outside of marriage. By following the formula in Deut.24:1-4, the Pharisees could look right before their peers, but God knew the adultery in their hearts which

motivated them to look for a pretext to end their marriages. Paul explained elsewhere,(I Cor.7:10-16) that if a partner leaves us, we are free, after which God can lead us any way He chooses. Jesus as always was not giving a new law but challenging us to face the real problem in the human heart.(16:14-18)

The final parable in this chapter described the dinner party which never happened. Inside the mansion was a wealthy man feasting. Outside was a needy man starving, desperately longing for even crumbs from the rich man's table. It would have been so simple for the rich man to welcome the beggar to his table as it would be so simple for us to reach out from our comfortable church 'clubs' to the spiritually hungry, but not respectable looking, in the world outside. The time came when they both died and the situation was reversed. The beggar was welcomed into the family of Abraham, the friend of God by faith.(Rom.4:4-16; Jas.2:23) He received all the comfort and care he had been denied on earth. The rich man on the other hand went to Hades, the place of the dead, and a place of torment. The pain of hell more than anything else may have been seeing Lazarus being cared for and knowing what he had missed, and particularly to be reminded that he could have given that care in his own house on earth. Supposing that he could still command from hell as he had commanded on earth, he made two requests. First he wanted Lazarus to be sent to him with water to ease his suffering, as he could have sent water to Lazarus outside his gate. The answer was 'no'. Abraham reminded him that the irrevocable choice between heaven and hell is made on earth. Secondly the rich man wanted Lazarus to be sent to his still living brothers to haunt them and scare them into heaven. Again the answer was 'no'. It is the word of God which brings people to repentance, not seeing a ghost or a miracle.(16:19-31)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What two expectations did Jesus have of His disciples? Why are they impossible to meet?(17:1-4)
2. What was the disciples' reaction to those impossible demands? What two illustrations did Jesus give in His answer? What therefore was His answer to their question?(17:5-10)
3. What was the difference between the one leper and the other nine? What did the nine do which we call faith? What did the one do which Jesus called real faith? How was this the answer to the question in verse 5?(17:11-19)
4. What mistake were the Pharisees making in their question to Jesus? How do we make the same mistake today? What therefore should be our concern for the future?(17:20,21)
5. Having told His hearers to search their own hearts rather than the future for answers, what information did Jesus give about His return? To what Old Testament stories did He compare His return? What is the lesson in those stories for us today?(17:22-37)