

The Coming of God's Kingdom

Luke 16:9-18

Have you ever been in the situation where you've planned to do something or to go somewhere, but it just hasn't happened?

- Perhaps some project around the house. Starting a vege garden. Building some shelves in the garage. Sorting through the accumulated mess. You seriously look at the situation. You make a start on it – maybe even several starts. But the site for the vege patch now sprouts weeds. The mess is bigger rather than non-existent.
- Perhaps you planned to go to some event. Some Australia Day celebration. Some show passing through town. Even the Open Doors film last week. It looked vaguely interesting. You thought: I really should go. But the time's come and gone – and you didn't quite get there.

What's really gone on in these situations? Why didn't your plans come to fruition?

- Was it a lack of skills?
- Was it a lack of time?

Ultimately, most of the time, it's a lack of real motivation – a lack of priority. Those plans didn't rate high enough up your list of priorities to get done.

- If I really want to achieve something, I'll put the effort into doing the research or developing the skills so I can do it.
- If I really want to go somewhere, I'll make sure I set aside the time to go. I'll put it in my diary. I'll make the time to get ready. I'll actually attend.

I won't be half-hearted. I won't be looking for excuses.

It's something that's important to me. I'll make sure it happens. My real priorities – not just the ones I say I think I have – are shown in my actual behaviour.

Kingdom Priorities

Last week, we looked at this story Jesus told – a story about a guy who'd just been sacked and who came up with a clever scheme to make sure he survived unemployment. He wasn't half-hearted about it. He didn't put it off. He thought this was a pretty urgent matter – and he acted on it straight away. Indeed, he made sure nothing interfered with getting this thing done. Most people facing that situation would do the same – probably not the same scheme – but they'd give that situation top priority. Remember, they didn't have Centrelink to catch the people who fell through the cracks.

Now, Jesus isn't really talking about unemployment. That's not the real crisis facing these people. The real crisis is the coming of God's kingdom. God's kingdom's here because God's King is here. What are you going to do about it?

- Are you going to see this for the important crisis it is and act accordingly?
- Or are you going to leave it halfway down your list of priorities and put it off till you get around to it?

Now, at this point, Jesus isn't particularly interested in what people say their attitude to God's kingdom is – He's more interested in what their actions show about their real attitude. One of the big indicators of a person's real attitude is how they use their wealth. That's what Jesus goes on to talk about in the next three short paragraphs. Verse 9:

I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

In many ways, it's not an easy verse. And when you read some of the commentaries, you come across still extra difficulties that you didn't dream of. However, I think the basic idea's fairly clear: use your money for kingdom purposes.

Why does God give us money to play with?

- Is it so we can collect it and compare ourselves with each other and see who has the best collection?
- Is it so we can accumulate it till we've stored sufficient and no longer need trust God for our future?
- Is it so we can pamper ourselves with all the little luxuries life has to offer?

Money seems such important stuff – especially in the midst of a global recession. Yet, it's not eternal. You can't take it with you when you die. There's no banking system such that you can deposit cash so it's available for your use when you get to the other side.

So, what's it for? Like everything else in life, God determines its purpose. He says we're stewards. That is, the money's not ours outright – we simply hold it on trust for Him. We've this tendency to think we actually earn our money and so it belongs to us and so we've got a right to do with it what we want. That's not the Bible's position.

- Who decided you'd be born in rich Australia rather than poor Uganda?
- Who decided you'd have the abilities and aptitude for the job you've got?
- Who decided to provide you with opportunities to

have your mind trained and your abilities honed so you can do your job well?

Your circumstances and the money that flows from them are in God's hands. We're responsible as stewards.

As stewards, we're to invest it in the things God thinks are important – in other words, things to do with His kingdom. That makes sense – because, in the long run, it's only His kingdom that lasts. Anything invested in anything else simply won't last into eternity.

- Your high interest bank account – permanently closed on your death.
- Your share portfolio – non-existent in both heaven and hell.
- Your dream house – only a very vague memory overwhelmed by your new surroundings.

And so it goes on. All those things we think so important and spend so much time and money on – all gone. Just a vague mist. All those marvellous must-have experiences or you simply don't know what life's about. Just a fleeting breath on a cold winter's morning.

How much better to invest in the kingdom – to put your time and money and effort into evangelism and mission. That way, people will be saved from God's judgment. People will enter through that narrow door Jesus spoke about. They'll find their way into God's kingdom. You'll play a part in that – and so they'll welcome you. When you pass on, you can't take your money with you – but you can take the results of your kingdom investments. So where's the best place to invest?

Jesus highlights a second lesson about money. Money's a test. Verse 10:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

We spend much of our life thinking "if only ..."

- If only I had a better paying job, then I could put more in the offering box.
- If only I had the mortgage paid off, then I could afford to support the Christian educator.

We think if Jesus trusted us with more worldly wealth, then we'd become generous. Then we'd make a greater investment in His kingdom.

That's not how Jesus thinks. He's not looking for faithfulness in the things we haven't got – He's looking for faithfulness in what we have got. The quantity of money isn't the real issue.

- Some people could invest \$2000 a week into kingdom work and still not be faithful.
- Others may only be giving \$50 a week and yet still be faithful.

Remember the incident in Luke 21? Jesus sees the rich people putting their gifts into the temple treasury. We're not told how much they put in, but the implication is they were decent amounts. And then this poor woman puts in just two small copper coins. Jesus commends that poor widow.

In the middle of last year, we had all these stories about how people were doing it tough with rising interest rates

and rising petrol prices. Some people went under, but most learned to cope. They realised it was possible to live by taking packed lunches and foregoing the gym membership. Some Christians discovered that as well. Now that both the interest rates and petrol prices have tumbled, what's the Christian response?

- Thank God for the extra money so that I can start going to the movies again; or
- Thank God for the lesson that I can live on less – and, now that I have more, I can use that to invest in His kingdom.

Money is a test of our faithfulness. What sort of mark are you getting?

Then there's a third lesson about money. Verse 13:

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Some Christians disagree with Jesus at this point. They think it was only a problem back in the first century. We modern western Christians have come of age. They say: If you're a real Christian, God will bless you abundantly. You'll live like a King's kid. God'll bless you with whatever your greedy heart desires. It's called the prosperity gospel.

Other Christians don't go that far – but they still disagree with Jesus. They think we modern western Christians can handle it. We've really matured. We're much more spiritual than our first-century counterparts. We can love both money and God.

Now, whenever a Christian disagrees with Jesus, there's always a problem. And it's always the Christian who's wrong. Most Christians in their mid-30s – if they've been Christians for 20 years or more – know of people who've drifted away from God because they loved money.

- The keen young man in the youth group – Sunday School teacher, went on beach missions, read his Bible every day – somehow got sidetracked in his job. He just wanted enough for a house and then a boat and then a holiday home – and so he worked harder to get it. Time was precious. He still had time to play sports on the weekends (after all, he needed some relaxation), but not to go to church.
- Or the keen young woman in the youth group – led the singing in church, went off to Katoomba Conventions, told her friends about Jesus – fell in love with a rich guy. They got married and started a family. Her life's so full of different things – the golf club, the tennis club, social functions, holidays in the Caribbean. And the kids have got all their extra-curricular activities. God and church – there's just no time to fit them in.

It's not that they set out to ignore God – to reject Him. It's simply that something else competed for their attention – their devotion.

Now, I've used fairly blatant examples. And there's a danger in that – because you think: I'd never do anything that blatant. But that's not the way temptation works. It's not the way idolatry works. It hardly ever starts off blatant. It'll simply be the temptation to compromise at some point – to make one decision in favour of money rather than God; to put the kingdom of self ahead of the kingdom of God. Jesus says our loyalty to God must be

firm. He demands our allegiance – and He warns us against the allegiance demanded by money. While we're to put money to good use for kingdom purposes, we're not to be enslaved by it. We must avoid the idolatry of greed and materialism.

Competing Priorities

Not everyone agreed with Jesus. Verse 14:

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

Imagine sneering at Jesus. Why? What causes them to sneer? Basically, they don't believe Him. They're not willing to trust Him. They have a different view of money and what it signifies and how it's to be used.

- Money's a sign of status in this life. It shows you who's successful and who isn't. It shows you who's made it and who's failed.
- Money's a sign of status in God's kingdom. It's God's blessing me. It demonstrates God smiling at my lifestyle. I need to let others see I've made it.
- Money's to be enjoyed – at least, the things money can buy. It enables you to experience the abundant blessings of God's good creation.

The Pharisees love money. It's all very self-centred. It's all very worldly. It's all very idolatrous.

Jesus says as much in verse 15:

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."

What's highly valued among men? All sorts of things could pop into your head. However, in this context, it's

got to be stuff to do with money and wealth. It's the desire for reputation. For these guys, it's the reputation of being pious and religious and on good terms with God.

- I can flaunt my wealth – see how God's blessed me.
- I give sizable donations to the poor – see how pious I am.

They're concerned with how they appear to others. They want to parade their piety so everyone will look up to them. And that's exactly what they get.

But God's not impressed. They may have fooled everyone else – they may even have fooled themselves – but they haven't fooled God. God sees that thing as the arrogant, self-satisfied pride that it really is.

It's an important reminder, isn't it? It's so easy to do something because we think it'll impress others – because we want to improve our reputation – even in the church.

- To parade God's blessings before others – whether it be in the way we dress or the quality of our food or coffee or the size of our homes – and to think that these things show others we're doing OK with God.
- To pretend we're going great guns in the Christian life and we're enjoying marvellous devotional times and God's blessing everything we do when we're losing the struggle with some sin in our lives.
- To pray with theological words or pious tones or grand eloquence or great teaching – all for the sake of impressing others with our magnificent words – instead of actually focusing on the fact we're asking God for the things we need.

It's worldly thinking. We live for an audience of one: namely, God.

Continuing Realities

Jesus goes on to say:

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

You'll notice the NIV puts a heading before verse 16 – *additional teachings*. It suggests we're moving on to something new – that Jesus has perhaps changed the subject – that we've finished with this stuff about money. And, at first glance, it does appear to be a new topic. But I don't think that's the case.

- First, there's no break in Jesus' speech. He just keeps on. Luke doesn't say: "And now, Jesus began to teach His disciples". The natural presumption is He's still talking to the same people and He's still talking about the same thing.
- And secondly, when you get to verse 19 and Jesus tells another story and it's a story about the sort of stuff that's in verse 15.

So, how are we to understand the flow of Jesus' argument. I think it goes back to the Pharisees' understanding of God's kingdom. What did they expect?

- They expected physical blessing. God's promise to the slaves He brought out of Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey. God's promise of blessings if Israel obeyed the covenant was tied up with prosperity and peace and security.
- They also expected physical rule. God would intervene and defeat their enemies – just like He'd disposed of the Egyptians. God would establish the

rule of King David's greater descendant – and that rule would extend over the nations of the earth.

In other words, they had a particular view of the kingdom that supported their attitude toward money. Jesus didn't fit that view.

- Jesus wasn't rich. He had no assets. He didn't even have a place He could call His own home. There was no evidence of kingdom prosperity in what they saw of Him.
- And Jesus wasn't powerful. They hadn't even seen Him handle a sword – let alone display any qualities that'd suggest He could lead an army. There was no evidence of kingdom rule in what they saw of Him.

And yet Jesus does preach the kingdom. His message announces the new era. Everything in the past – the Law and the Prophets – that is, the whole of the Old Testament – pointed forward to this time. Jesus says: they all point to Me. That was the promise; I'm the fulfilment. That was the shadow; I'm the reality. The law and the prophets that you guys are so fond of – they promised Me. It's a huge claim He makes – it's a claim of authority. Thus, the Pharisees are left with a choice:

- They can hang onto their own vision of the kingdom – a vision that Jesus just told them was worldly (that is, it's the sort of vision someone in rebellion against God would have); or
- They can adopt Jesus' vision. They can trust that Jesus is who He claims to be and knows what He's talking about and is the One promised by the Law and the Prophets and that the kingdom He talks about is the real kingdom.

Others are taking up that option. The bit the NIV's translated as *everyone is forcing his way into it* is quite difficult. Scholars make various suggestions both as to how it should be translated and how it should be interpreted. I don't have time to go into all the details this morning. I'll just give you my tentative conclusion. The ESV has an alternate translation in its footnote: *everyone is forcefully urged into it*. In other words, this is the age when the kingdom is being preached – but it's not just a trivial thing. It's not like the decision as to what colour you'll paint your bedroom or whether you'll go to the shops today or tomorrow. No. This is crucial. Nothing's more important. This has to do with eternity. Thus, people aren't simply asked if they'd like to enter – a take-it-or-leave-it type of offer – they're urged to respond positively. Jesus keeps making the offer – even in the face of rejection. Jesus tells them to make every effort – strive with all you might – to enter the narrow door. And He keeps urging these Pharisees, even though they sneer at Him.

So it's another way of putting verses 9 to 13. The crisis of the kingdom's here. What are you going to do about that crisis? Ignore it? Put it down towards the bottom of your priority list? No. This is crucial. This decision impacts all of your life. You now adopt kingdom priorities. Thus, it re-shapes your life. It determines what you do with your money.

So where does that leave the Law and the Prophets? Are the Law and the Prophets now all irrelevant? Verse 17:

It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

No. The Law and the Prophets don't disappear. As

Darrel Bock puts it: they serve as a reminder of the promise and are a call to righteousness.¹ That is, they continue to have at least a twofold function.

- First, they continue to explain Jesus to us. It's not that God made one promise and Jesus fulfils another – and so has nothing whatsoever to do with that initial promise. No – God promised He'd do something to deal with the problem of human rebellion. That promise was tied up with all sorts of things described in the Old Testament: the covenant, the tabernacle, the sacrificial system, the promise of the land, the rule of the kings – a whole stack of things. When Jesus comes, who He is and what He does fulfils those things. Sure, Jesus fulfils them in a way that goes beyond our imaginations – but it is those things He fulfils. So we need to understand them in order to truly understand who Jesus is and what He did.
- Secondly, they continue to explain God's will. The kingdom Jesus calls people to enter is God's kingdom. It's where God's will is done. It's where there's a hunger and thirst for righteousness. It's not that God's definition of what righteousness looks like has suddenly changed. No – God still defines righteousness the way He's always defined it. The problem was: the law didn't have the ability to get us to do righteousness. Neither did the prophets. They showed us our unrighteousness and looked forward to the promise of what Jesus would do.

And so verse 18:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Michigan: Baker, 2004) 1348.

divorced woman commits adultery.

The law spoke of the sanctity of marriage. The law spoke of the importance of keeping one's vows. But it didn't give the ability to do that. So, now that the kingdom has come, what does that mean in relation to marriage and vows? Does it mean I'm free to desert my partner? Does it mean I'm free to break my vows? No. It means God's promise is at work in me bringing His rule to bear in my life. He's the God who keeps His promises. He wants His citizens to keep their promises as well. They're not people trying to find loopholes to justify a lack of integrity in themselves.

Seek First God's Kingdom

It's not an easy passage. At first glance, it appears it's a lot of isolated sayings strung together. There are lots of these sayings – and we could profitably spend a week on each of them. And I've covered them all in one sermon. In that sense, it was a lot to cover in one go.

But it's not an easy passage also because of its content. It challenges us about our commitment to Jesus and His kingdom. We've said we want to be at God's banquet table. We think God's kingdom's the place to be. We're glad we've been welcomed home by the Father. Does our life show that reality? Have we truly taken on the kingdom's values? Are we investing for eternity? Have we abandoned our society's idolatry of money?

If you're like me, you seem to be caught somewhere in the middle – trying to have a foot in both camps. Jesus says that can't be done. We need Him to continue that work of salvation He's begun within us to release us more fully from the grip of money in our lives. Let's pray.