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Israel's idolatry. The Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 57. The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart. Devout men are taken away, while no one understands.

For the righteous man is taken away from calamity. He enters into peace. They rest in their beds, who walk in their uprightness.

But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit? You who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks. Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion.

They are your lot. To them you have poured out a drink offering, you have brought a grain offering. Shall I relent for these things? On a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed, and there you went up to offer sacrifice.

Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial, for, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed, you have gone up to it, you have made it wide, and you have made a covenant for yourself with them. You have loved their bed, you have looked on nakedness. You journeyed to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes, you sent your envoys far off and sent down even to Sheol.

You were wearied with the length of your way, but you did not say, it is hopeless. You found new life for your strength, and so you were not faint. Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied, and did not remember me, did not lay it to heart? Have I not held my peace even for a long time, and you do not fear me? I will declare your righteousness and your deeds, but they will not profit you.

When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you. The wind will carry them all off, a breath will take them away, but he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain. And it shall be said, build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way.

For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry, for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him, I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart.

I have seen his ways, but I will heal him. I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the Lord, and I will heal him.

But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked. A new section of the book of Isaiah began in chapter 56.

In the final verses of that chapter the Prophet described the unfaithful leaders of the people who failed to act as effective watchmen, guards and shepherds, but were given to indulgence and unmindful of those committed to their charge. The opening verses of chapter 57 belong with those verses that preceded them. The wicked and irresponsible overseers of the people, on account of their failures in guarding the nation and curbing injustice within it, have produced a situation where oppression and unrighteousness can run rampant.

When such a situation arises, the righteous will be dismayed and the wicked emboldened, leading to a more general decay of the society, something that is described in Proverbs such as Proverbs chapter 11 verse 10. When it goes well with the righteous,

the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness. Also chapter 28 verse 12.

When the righteous triumph there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. The whole society is much worse off, as judges and rulers fail to vindicate the righteous. The righteous are dying, many at the hands of oppressors, but no one is recognizing it or acting to prevent it.

From wicked, gluttonous and ineffectual rulers, we move in verse 3 to idolatry and spiritual adultery. The setting here seems to be one in which there was widespread idolatry in the land. This seems out of keeping with the supposed context of so-called Trito-Isaiah, set within the land of Israel after the return from exile.

Idolatry simply doesn't seem to be the same prominent issue within the post-exilic period. It really is not an issue that sticks out within the post-exilic prophets or the other writings from that period. Rather it fits far more naturally with the period prior to the exile, where many of the prophets, from Jeremiah to Isaiah to Ezekiel, directly address such idolatrous practices.

The practices involved in such idolatry were known from the time of the Canaanites, mentioned in Deuteronomy for instance. In Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 6 for instance, we find descriptions that match some of those in this chapter. Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? Also in Ezekiel chapter 6 verse 13.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leaf and oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols. Here Isaiah describes the idolaters as sons of the sorceress, perhaps a way of characterising unfaithful Israel. Elsewhere in scripture, in Jeremiah for instance, Israel and Judah are described as adulterous women.

This is an image that is most developed within the book of Hosea. They are here described as mocking the Lord, dishonouring him by their spiritual infidelity. What is meant by their opening of their mouth wide and lengthening their tongue is not entirely clear, though most likely the latter expression refers to the sticking out of the tongue in an act of derision.

The sites of their adulterous relationships with the idols and false gods are found throughout the land. In speaking of their unfaithfulness to the Lord in terms of sexual faithfulness of her wife to her husband, the Lord underlines some of the betrayal that is involved. While relationships with idols can be more transactional in character, the Lord desires the exclusive and wholehearted loyalty of his people.

He wants them to be unreservedly devoted to him and to love him fully. Yet the entirety of the land that he lovingly gave to his people is polluted with their infidelity. Every green and fruitful tree has been set apart for fertility worship.

The blood of the children that he blessed them with is shed in the valleys as the children are sacrificed to Moloch. Gary Smith suggests that we read the opening clause of verse 6 as, Among the dead the valley is your portion. They had there sacrificed to demonic deities, giving their very offspring as tribute.

In verse 7 we move from the valleys to the high mountains where they had also committed their idolatry, continuing to describe this in the language of marital infidelity. In verse 8 the people are described as having uncovered their bed, loved the beds of their lovers and looked upon nakedness. It is likely that this verse also talks about them having made a covenant with these false deities.

The door and the doorpost here most likely refer to temples, not just to their private dwellings. Verses 9 and 10 most likely extend the notion of infidelity to refer also to the ways that they sought alliances and aid from foreign rulers. This of course was a prominent theme within the first half of the book of Isaiah, where Judah was tempted to look to Assyria during the Syro-Ephraimite war and then to Egypt and Babylon during the later Assyrian crisis.

They had devoted great effort and invested great hopes within this pursuit. And the Lord asks what dread or fear, what reverence led them to do these things? Was he just silent for too long and they ignored him? However when the Lord speaks it will not be in their favour. He is going to declare their righteousness and their deeds, but that righteousness and their deeds will clearly be of no benefit for them because they are entirely hollow.

What are they going to do when crisis comes? They should go to their idols if they are really the object of their trust. Let them help them. All who do this however will be destroyed, but those who take refuge in the Lord will inherit the land itself.

In verse 14 there is a shift as we move to a statement of salvation. Back in chapter 40 verse 3 we read, A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Verse 14 could be read in part as an allusion back to this, although it also looks forward to chapter 62 verse 10. Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up a signal over the peoples.

As in chapter 62, but in contrast to chapter 40, the way being prepared here is for the people, not the Lord primarily. The people are being brought back into the blessing of the Lord's presence. The Lord is the one who speaks, is the one who is high and lifted up.

Once again robust theological claims are those which drive the strength of the promises. Because the Lord is the God that He is, He can make the promises that He does. Our confidence ultimately rests in the fact that He is God.

There is a correspondence in the contrast between the high and holy place where the Lord dwells and the contrite and lowly spirit that He heeds. The Lord does not merely dwell in the highest heavens. He also dwells with Him with the lowliest spirit, promising to revive the strength of all who are humble.

The Lord may discipline His wayward people, but never with the end of finally destroying them. He knows the weakness of man, and so He deals with man accordingly. Because of the iniquity and the injustice of His people, He was angry with them and judged them.

He hid His face from them, withholding His blessings. However, the people did not respond by turning back to Him. And so, as the people would not respond, the Lord had to heal His people.

One of the great promises of the New Covenant given in the Prophets is that the Lord will deal with the unfaithful hearts of His people, writing His law within them and giving them a new heart of flesh where they once had a heart of stone. The consequence of the Lord's healing of His people is praise upon their lips, peace, peace to the far and to the near. In contrast to these restored people, however, the wicked are like the restless tossing sea, ceaseless and peaceless tumult.

They cannot be quiet, and as a result, they will find no peace. A question to consider, why is it appropriate that the Lord dwells with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit? Luke chapter 16 He also said to the disciples, There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.

And the manager said to himself, What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management people may receive me into their houses. So summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, How much do you owe my master? He said, A hundred measures of oil.

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? He said, A hundred measures of wheat. He said to him, Take your bill, and write eighty.

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it

fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.

If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money. The Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

And he said to them, 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. The law and the prophets were untold 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. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us. And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.

And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. The parables of chapter 16 of Luke are some of the trickiest of all.

There's a lot here to reward closer attention though. Jesus is still speaking in the context

set by chapter 15 verses 1-2, where the scribes and the Pharisees grumbled about the fact that he was eating with sinners, and he will continue to speak in that sort of context until chapter 17 verse 10. While he's more directly addressing his disciples, as we see in verse 1, the Pharisees are also listening in, as becomes apparent in verse 14.

In the parable of the unjust steward, it's important to keep in mind that Jesus is praising his shrewdness, not his morality. This steward would have been responsible for managing his master's estate in his absence, sorting out rents and the like. Reference to squandering might suggest some connection with the parable of the last son that's proceeding.

The steward hasn't been faithful to his master, and now he faces the crisis time, imminent removal from his position. What is he to do? And the steward comes up with quite an ingenious scheme. While he is about to lose his position, apart from his master, no one else knows this yet.

So he goes around all his master's debtors and reduces their debts. This would make him a hero in the neighborhood, and his master would appear to be generous and good. The master is also now put in something of a bind.

He can't easily remove the steward from his position or recover full debts without appearing grasping or courting public disfavor. Even if he removed the steward from his position, the steward would be welcomed by people in the neighborhood, who appreciated that he had taken a concern for their interests in their debts with his master. The steward was accused of wasting his master's goods, so there's a distinct possibility that he was raising the rents.

Perhaps the reduced rents were largely taken from his unjust cut. He had been placing heavy burdens upon the people. What is the point of this parable? I believe the Pharisees and the scribes are in view here.

The Pharisees and the scribes are unjust stewards. They've been squandering God's riches, not managing his house well, laying heavy burdens upon the people, and the time for their accounting to their master is just about to come. They are now faced with a choice similar to that of the unjust steward.

Will they double down on their injustice, or will they use that brief remaining window of opportunity of their stewardship to take emergency action to prepare for their future? The action that Jesus implies that they should take is that of getting on the right side of their master's servants and debtors before it is too late. Using the remaining time and authority that they have to give to the poor and take concern for the burdens that are placed upon the poor and the vulnerable of Israel. In this parable, as in the parable that comes later in this chapter, the rich man and Lazarus, the relationship between rich and powerful religious leaders and the poor and indebted of the population is really

highlighted.

Of course, unlike the shrewd steward, the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers were oblivious to their predicament and they remained unjust. The scribes and the Pharisees have not been faithful with the old covenant least, and so God will not entrust them with the new covenant riches, he will remove them from their office. Jesus is clearly accusing the money serving Pharisees of abusing their power for the sake of dishonest gain from the poor.

There is a change in the world order afoot and people are pressing into the kingdom and the Pharisees must hurry or be left out. And the use of money is especially important as a theme here. If as a matter of urgency they gave to the poor, they would be lending to the Lord and building up treasure in heaven before they are to be finally removed from their position and their power.

Investing their money in such a manner would make it possible for them to be welcomed into eternal dwellings. And Jesus draws our attention to the importance of money in this picture. Money has become a master to these people.

It's a sort of idolatry that they have committed themselves to. Our powers place us under their power, our liberties take liberties with us. Our technologies can often render us subject to them.

We can think that the economy makes us rich while enslaving ourselves to the cause of its continual growth. It preoccupies our attention, we become fixated upon it. Jesus wants his disciples to see the danger of money, the way that money can become a master of people, and the way that ultimately that master can lead people to destruction.

Jesus directly rebukes the Pharisees. They present themselves as righteous before men, but God knows their hearts. And the testimony of the law and the prophets led up to John the Baptist.

But since John the Baptist, the gospel is being proclaimed and people are pressing into the kingdom. The Pharisees need to recognise what is happening. The law is not going to be overridden by the kingdom, but will be validated, confirmed and fulfilled.

Why is there a reference to divorce here? Seems to me that the implication is that the religious leaders were abusing their role as guardians of the law to exploit the poor and to gain wealth, but also to loosen God's standards of marital faithfulness and sexual sin in their favour. As we see elsewhere in Jesus' challenging of the scribes and the Pharisees, they used technicalities to undermine the intent of the law. For instance, people divorcing in order to marry someone else.

That is quite manifestly a form of adultery, but yet being able to do it under the guise of

legality dulls people's sense of the sin that is taking place. In contrast to the Pharisees' nullification of the law by their tradition and their practice, Jesus is going to fulfil and confirm the law. The parable of the rich man of Lazarus, with which this chapter ends, should probably not be read as a literal account of the post-mortem state.

Rather, it is using a particular picture of the post-mortem state as a parable of something else. The rich man in the parable is clothed in purple and fine linen. This clothing should probably remind us of the priesthood, as we see in Exodus chapter 28 and elsewhere.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is like the leprous outcast. Lazarus and the rich man are sharply contrasted in their dress, in their food and in the place where they live. And the deaths of the rich man and Lazarus possibly refer to the end of the old order and the bringing in of the kingdom, or at least they anticipated on the near horizon.

Lazarus is now welcomed and the rich man finds himself excluded and seeking the mercy of the poor man. Lazarus, however, is not the centre of this parable. He's someone who doesn't really do anything at all, he's passive for most of the story, whereas Abraham and the rich man are the active parties.

Lazarus mostly serves as a foil against which the reversal that the rich man experiences and the utter finality of the state that he ends up in can be described more aptly. He also addresses Abraham directly, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to do something for him. Some have suggested that this gives a clue as to the importance of Lazarus as a figure.

Lazarus is a form of the name Eliezer, and Eliezer was the chief servant of Abraham, and the rich man addresses Abraham as if Eliezer was his servant, to be sent to do particular tasks, whether to quench the fire of his tongue or whether to bring the message to his brothers. If this reading were accurate, the son of Abraham, the one who addresses Abraham's father, finds himself excluded from paradise, whereas the servant of Abraham finds himself in Abraham's bosom as one inheriting the blessing. When the rich man finally realises that there is no hope for him, he begs for Lazarus to be resurrected to warn his brothers.

But Abraham makes clear that that is not going to help the situation. They already have Moses and the prophets. The word is not far from them.

It doesn't require someone to come back from the dead to bring it to them. It's in their mouths and it should be in their hearts. And indeed, if they don't accept what they already have, someone coming back from the dead won't change anything.

Why does the rich man have five brothers? Why are we given a close description of the clothes that he wears? I believe it's because he's the high priest. He represents Caiaphas. Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, has five brothers, all of whom became high

priests.

The high priesthood of Caiaphas and his five brothers would lead all the way up to the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, they did receive the witness of one come back from the dead and they rejected that witness and as a result they faced destruction. This fits in with the parables that we've had to this point.

The parables of the preceding chapter in chapter 15 are about the religious leader's failure to welcome in the lost sheep, to welcome the returning lost sons, and the way that they are excluding themselves from the father's table and the renewed fellowship of the family as a result. The parable of the unjust steward with which this chapter begins is about the need for dishonest managers to be removed from their office and the urgency of them overcoming their love of money and using their money to give to the poor in a last-ditch attempt to secure a future for themselves when they are removed from their post. The parable of the rich man of Lazarus then presents us with a stark image that culminates this larger body of teaching, challenging the religious leaders for their failure to welcome and serve the poor.

The rich man, symbolising the priesthood, will be cast out into torment, while Abraham, the father of Israel, welcomes the poor Lazarus as his child. The lines of the family of Abraham are being redrawn in surprising ways. A question to consider, this chapter presents us with images of the very rich relating to the very poor and of people with power relating to those with debt.

Jesus' teaching around these parables makes clear that the riches cannot just be spiritualised, nor can the poverty. The relationship between rich and poor, between the indebted and those who have the power over their debts, is a matter of spiritual consequence. How might Jesus' teaching here on these points relate to teaching elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke?