

## Thought for the Day, 1 July 2020 from Toby Parsons

### Luke 16: 1-18

"No, that isn't what I meant!".

Maybe you've muttered those words quietly to yourself in frustration, when someone fails to grasp what you're trying to say, for the third time! Perhaps you've said it aloud in irritation, when your words are being deliberately twisted. And no doubt we can all think of times when a news article or interviewer deliberately takes something out of context.

It's easy to focus on a few words and ignore the wider context. And with retweeting and sharing of Facebook posts by the million, it's even easier these days for snippets of a conversation or article to be passed on, without much thought about what the original speaker was trying to say.

The same is true of the bible. We can find ourselves focusing on a few words, and missing the wider point.

Today's reading from Luke chapter 16 is a good example. Verse 18 states clearly that "anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery". It might be tempting to say that this is absolute, unequivocal teaching straight from the mouth of Jesus. This single verse could be thrown at people to shut down any further discussion.

But that would be at best simplistic, at worst deliberately manipulative. And it would certainly ignore the many questions that come up when we look at the wider context.

Chapter 16 is about money. We have the parable of the shrewd manager to start, and then the story of the rich man and the beggar to close. Verses 14 to 18 seem to be an almost random inclusion, at first glance. So why has Luke added these words, at this point?

And then we need to consider who's being addressed. Jesus is talking to a group of religious teachers who he saw being hypocritical and hard-hearted. Many of them had probably been divorced, perhaps more than once. They were often missing the point, and Jesus challenged them throughout the gospels in ways that were intended to shake them out of their comfort zone. He chose topics because of how they'd be heard by his listeners, the pharisees. We therefore need to be careful about trying to hear specific words of Jesus from our own perspective, without taking account of his audience at the time.

Of course this isn't to say that we just gloss over verses that seem a little out of place. People in Jesus's day would have come together to listen to scripture, to hear teaching, but also to wrestle with it. Understanding and application was an ongoing process, not a one-off sermon. Scripture carried weight, but also required work.

Perhaps we can learn from that today? And keep challenging ourselves to look more deeply into the bible, trying to understand the full picture... unless we're happy picturing Jesus standing there, saying to us "No, that isn't what I meant!".