

Scripture Lesson: Luke 16:1-13

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 74

¹ Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.' ³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' ⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ¹⁰ "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 16:1-13

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When it's NOT A Lesson In Ethics...

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"I heard about a young lawyer who was called in from the big city to represent a large railroad company that was being sued by a farmer. It seems that the farmer's prize cow was missing from a field through which the railroad passed, and the farmer was suing for the value of the cow. Before the case was to be tried, the lawyer cornered the farmer and convinced him to settle out of court for half of what he originally wanted. The farmer signed the necessary papers and then accepted the check. The young lawyer could not resist gloating a bit about his success. He said to the farmer, "You know, I could not have won this case if it had gone to trial. The engineer was asleep and the fireman was in the caboose when the train passed through your farm that morning. I didn't have a single witness to put on the stand!" With a wry smile, the old farmer replied, "Well, I tell you, young fella, I was a little worried about winning that case myself seeing as that cow came home this morning." [from "Lessons From a Shrewd Crook" by Dr. Bill Bouknight, www.Sermons.com.]

Both the farmer and the lawyer could have related to the dishonest manager Jesus tells us about in our scripture lesson for this morning. It will not surprise many of you to learn that this is one of the least popular, least known, most confusing, and most disturbing parables in all of Scripture. Jesus holds up before us a dirty, rotten scoundrel! A corrupt, crooked scumbag. This manager is cooking the books. And when he gets caught, he's handed a pink slip. So he asks himself, what am I

going to do? He's not the manual labor type, he's too proud to beg. So, he decides to keep doing what he's been doing! He cooks the books some more! But this time, it's not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of his boss's debtors. He's collecting favors so that when his time is up, he's got some folks compelled to help him out a bit. And in a real twist to the story, the boss commends the manager for acting shrewdly! This manager is given a pat on the back for being dishonest. This is craziness! How are we to make sense of this unexpected and puzzling parable Jesus tells us?

First, understand something: the parables of Jesus fall into two main categories. There are the "go and do likewise" parables. The Good Samaritan parable, for example, is a "go and do likewise" parable. This is not one of those. Sometimes, when I preach on a parable like this one, a little piece of me worries I'll see some Facebook post where somebody is being hauled off to jail howling "Pastor Amy told me I could cheat! She said Jesus recommended it!" So I'll repeat: this is not a "go and do likewise" parable. This is what I'll call a "how much more" parable. If a dishonest steward can ensure his future with shrewdness, "how much more" should Christians be shrewd ensuring the future of God's Kingdom?" [two types of parables from "The Model of Success" by Mark Trotter, www.Sermons.com.] Jesus tells parables to make a point—to teach something. What is Jesus trying to teach us in this parable?

First lesson: Very simple—money is a tool. Jesus was not anti-money. On the contrary. Money has its uses. We all know that. Money is neither good nor evil. It just is. What we do with money determines its value. It is a tool. In his sermon *On The Use of Money*, John Wesley writes: "In the hands of God's children, money is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked... By it we may... be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain... It may lift up from the very gates of death." [from John Wesley, "Sermon #50: The Use of Money", <http://new.gbmg-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/50/>]. So Jesus is not anti-money. It's a tool. Money makes an excellent servant. But it is not a good master.

First lesson: Money is a tool. Second lesson: Be smart! The dishonest manager is not held up before us for his ethics. Huh! What ethics? Again, this is not a lesson in ethics. "It was the man's ingenuity and drive that Jesus was extolling. The man didn't sit around whining over his situation. He got busy and found a solution. He came up with a plan and he followed the plan to fruition. He may have been a scoundrel," writes King Duncan, "but at least he was an industrious scoundrel. Jesus was a man of action and he wanted his followers to be people of action." [from "On Fooling A Mafia Don" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

"It sounds so pious to say, 'I'm just going to just pray about this, and if God wants such and such to happen, God will provide.'" Have you ever known anyone with that kind of attitude toward life? It sounds like such a nice, spiritual idea—waiting for God to provide our need. But friends, it can also be an evasion of responsibility. And as such, it can be deadly—deadly personally, professionally and spiritually. It's very much like saying, "If God wants me to lose weight, God will keep me from desiring ice cream." Or, better yet, "If God doesn't want me to stop at [Krispy-Kreme], there won't be a parking place out front when I drive by." One guy prayed that prayer, and as providence would have it, there WAS a parking place—his seventh time around the block.

"Dwight L. Moody was one of the world's great evangelists. He was on a ship that was crossing the Atlantic. The ship caught fire. The crew and the passengers formed a bucket brigade to transport water to the fire. One man in the line turned and said, 'Mr. Moody, don't you think we should retire from the line and go down and pray?'"

"You can go pray if you want to," Moody replied, "but I'm going to pray while I pass the buckets."

“Moody understood the relationship between prayer and personal responsibility. [from Stan Toler, *God Has Never Failed Me, but He Sure Has Scared Me to Death a Few Times!* (Tulsa: Honor Books, 1995); 4 ¶s as used in “Who Did He Praise?” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Jesus laments the fact that the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. “Jesus says, through this story of a dirty rotten scoundrel, that it does little good if his people are so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good.

“There is an amusing story told about Jay Wilkinson, son of the famous football coach Bud Wilkinson. Jay ran for Congress in Oklahoma some years ago. Many people thought he would win easily. After all, Jay Wilkinson was an All-American at Duke who married a Miss America finalist after graduating from Harvard Divinity School. Young, handsome, and idealistic, Jay was a perfect subject for Madison Avenue wizardry. A television commercial was designed which pictured Jay and his wife walking hand-in-hand through an Oklahoma pasture. As they walked, they looked soulfully upward at the sky to the accompaniment of soft music with the ad “A Better Tomorrow for all Oklahomans.” The incumbent, Tom Steed, was a good old boy with real sod-kicking credentials. He knew he was in for a tough fight. But he scheduled only a 40-second answer to Wilkinson’s spot. He looked into a camera and said, “I may not have a fancy degree from Harvard like young Wilkinson, but I do know enough not to look at the sky when I am walking in a cow pasture.” Tom Steed won. [original source unknown, 2 ¶s used in “Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

What we are supposed to understand through this parable is that this manager is commended because he used the resources at his disposal to help someone else. And in doing so, he benefits as well. But catch this. Not only does he benefit. Not only do the debtors benefit. But—stay with me here—the Boss benefits. See, none of these debtors are likely to agree to be in on a scam to cheat the Boss. They don’t know the manager’s been fired. They think the boss is just being a good guy, showing some grace, cutting them some slack. And the debtors are understandably grateful. The Boss—boy, he’s a generous guy. I’m going to keep doing business with him. The manager just lost the Boss some money, yes, but he not only made himself look good—he sure made the Boss look good.

First lesson: Money is a tool. Second lesson: Be smart! Third lesson: Be generous. What we have, we ought to use to make God look good. What is the wisest thing we can do with our Money, asks Jesus? Give it away. Use it. Don’t hoard it. Don’t hold onto it, or it will begin to exert a hold onto us. Give it away. Store up treasure in heaven. Make friends through generosity, and we make friends for God. Not only that, we ourselves make friends with God, and our future gets brighter.

“We always get this wrong in the church. We come up with all these reasons why we should give. We try the business approach. We give because we need 5% more money this year over last year. We try flattery or ego. You have the means; only you can give this amount. We try guilt trips. “You are wealthier than 95% of the world’s population. We try greed. You will get back more than you gave. We give every reason in the world to give except the right reason. Giving because Christ supremely gave. Giving because we are not truly human until we give. Giving because a giver is the kind of person we want to be in the world. Giving to keep grace alive within us. Giving because it reflects the nature of a God who gives.” [adapted from “Increasing our Standard of Giving” by Brett Blair and Staff, www.Sermons.com.] God has put these things at our disposal for a reason—not just to be used, but to be shared.

The dishonest manager knew that using the generosity of his master was the only way he could survive the pressures of the times in which he lived. He took a good hard look at everything his Boss had left in his care, and he used it. We’re not to emulate his dishonesty. But we are to do as he did in that we are to look a good hard look at what God has left in our care and use it. And we’re to do what he did and make friends in the world. Because generosity is one way to connect with others—to get

out of our own heads and stretch beyond ourselves. Our world is less and less generous. As a society, we're stingy with grace as well as money. But I remain convinced that generosity may just be the best way to survive the pressures of the times in which we live.

Money is a tool. Be smart. Be generous. Because the real truth of the gospel is that the shrewdest investment we'll ever make is in the building of God's kingdom here and now.

This week, Brad and I were looking for something to watch while we wait for new stuff to premier in October, and we saw that Noah Wyle won an Emmy last week for a show called The Pitt, so we watched an episode, just to see if we liked it. We were hooked. Each episode is one hour of a shift, but it goes fast, racing between doctors, flying down corridors from the ambulance bay to the nurses hub, darting in and out of exam rooms, following the action from one patient to the next – overdoses, drownings, gun shots, disease, burns, broken bones, just about every medical emergency you can think of. Some say it's very realistic. At the end of the day, it's still a TV show, so I'm not putting big money on realistic. That being said, the show touched me. It gave me hope. Not just because it's entertaining, but because every one of those doctors is flawed and broken in some way, trying to navigate the gray areas of ethical boundaries, their own emotional baggage, and often conflicting needs of patients and caregivers, all with limited resources and intense pressure. And yet, they push on, hour after hour, trying to help another. The plot lines may have lack realism, but the drive to make a difference in spite of all our brokenness is as real as it gets. That's what followers of Jesus try to do – to be smart with the tools and gifts we've been given, to be generous with grace, with hope, with support, with affirmation, with love. Do we lose sometimes? Yes. Do we fall down on the job? Absolutely. Are we perfect? No. But we do the best with what we've been given to share the light of our one true Master, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This isn't a lesson in ethics. It's a lesson in faith. Don't go and do likewise. Go and do better; be better. Amen.