

Parables of Jesus

Message 9

What Good is Money?

Luke 16:1-13

The Steward

Tonight's parable centers around a steward. We have encountered a steward before, in the Parable of the Evil Servant in Luke, chapter 12. There we learned that a steward was a prominent figure in a large household. He acted on behalf of the master. He oversaw the other servants, managed the property, took care of business, and kept the accounts. In the parable in chapter 12 the steward was apparently a slave, for when he went bad, the master had him flogged. In this parable the steward is apparently a free man, an employee, for when his crookedness became apparent, he was simply fired.

In a moment we shall see that the master was extremely wealthy, so the steward was responsible for large sums of money and huge assets. I suppose it was very tempting for him to line his own pockets with some of his master's wealth. In those days the accounting practices were quite primitive and it would have been relatively easy for the steward to slide a considerable amount of his master's profits into his own hands. At any rate, somehow the master received an accusation against the steward that he was "wasting his goods". There is no indication that the master questioned this charge. Perhaps he had suspected as much himself, and the rest of the story proves the steward was dishonest. So the master fired the steward. The steward's last job was to close the books before he left.

Apparently the steward was a man accustomed to a life of little physical exertion and some social status. As word got around that he was dishonest, no other rich man would hire him to manage his affairs. There was no unemployment compensation or welfare in the first century, so he was facing either the drudgery of menial labor or the humiliation of begging. Out of a job and without any hope of a job, what was he to do?

The Swindle

At this point the steward hits upon a truly ingenious scheme. He resolved to cook the books so that his master's debtors would owe a lot less money. They would then be so grateful to the steward, they would provide for him when he lost his job. Now on the surface this might plan seem a bit implausible, but when we see the nature of the swindle it begins to make more sense.

In verse 6 our text says the first debtor owed 100 measures of oil. The word translated measure here is the unit "bath". Since a bath was equal to 8.75 gallons, 100 baths would be 875 gallons, the yield of 150 olive trees, which would be worth 1,000 denarii. At the rate of one denarius for a day's labor, this debt would equal about three years' salary.¹ When the debt had been reduced to 50 baths of oil, the financial gain to the debtor would have been 1½ years' salary – maybe \$100,000 for a Lehigh engineer.

Verse 7 tells us that the second debtor owed 100 measures of wheat. Here the unit is the cors (κόρο), equal to 10-12 bushels. This makes the total amount of wheat 1,000 to 1,200 bushels, the yield of 100 acres of grain. Since a cor was valued at 25-30 denarii, this whole debt came to between 2,500 and 3,000 denarii, eight to ten years' salary. When the debt had been reduced to 80 cors of oil, the financial gain

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) pp. 1330-31. The information on the value of the wheat came from this same page.

to the debtor would have been 1 year's salary. Obviously, the people involved here were not peasants. Perhaps they had rented large farms from the rich man and oil and wheat were the rent on the estates.² More likely they were business loans. Perhaps the rich man was a wholesaler and the others were retailers who had obtained goods from him and had not yet paid for them³. Either way, the amounts were huge. Now the parable says he called "each one of his master's debtors", implying a sizable group. Apparently these first two were just a representative sampling of all the debtors. When this is considered, it is certain that the total debt being cleared was a fabulous sum. The master was being swindled out of a huge amount of money. Putting this in today's terms, I think it is likely that the total value of this debt-reduction program came to millions of dollars.

So it is clear that the end result of this was not a small favor for the debtors, but a major windfall. How do you think they responded when approached by the steward with this offer? "I am about to lose this job. But I will reduce your debt by \$100,000 if you agree to help support me when I am out of work." It's a great deal! A win-win situation for everybody.

Well...almost everybody. The big loser – and I do mean big – was the master. By the time the steward had left and the master looked over the books, he could see that he had been cheated out of a huge sum of money. Now how would you respond if this happened to you? What if one of your employees cheated you out of several million dollars? Would you be pleased? You would be furious! Why, then, does the master praise the steward? And even more perplexing, why does Jesus seem to share the master's opinion? How could Jesus condone dishonesty? Is He thinking that the end justifies the means?

The Compliment

The key to understanding this parable is to study verse 8 closely. Verse 8 says, "So the master commended the unjust steward *because* he had dealt shrewdly." It does not say that the master gave unequivocal praise to the steward. There is no suggestion that he is going to write a glowing reference for this guy if he goes out seeking a job. The object of the master's praise is not the steward himself, but only his shrewdness.

Now some people may object that it is unrealistic to imagine the master giving any sort of praise to someone who had just cheated him out of millions of dollars. That is likely true of some people, but others are capable of recognizing outstanding abilities in others, even when they are enemies. Republicans had little love for Bill Clinton, but Republican politicians admitted his political skills. Democrats likewise admit that George W. Bush is a skillful politician even if they cannot stand him or his policies. Tonight a lot of people will lose the elections, and many of them will offer compliments to their opponents for a race well run. Besides, the master in our parable was a businessman and already quite rich. No doubt he had made and lost money many times in the course of his life, and expected to make more in the future. Regarding the money, he may have been mildly disappointed or he may have been enraged; we do not know, for nothing is said. The point that *is* clear, is the master's admiration for the steward's shrewdness.

This is the point that Jesus picked up in the second half of the verse. "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light." Jesus never condoned the action of the steward. He did not tell this parable so that we would imitate the unethical behavior of the steward. He told it because the steward's scheme was so ingenious. It's a marvelously clever plan, and we really do have to admire the crooked mind that produced it. And this is exactly Jesus' point. Shrewdness is admirable. It is a positive trait

² Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, p. 798.

³ Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1972) p. 190.

we should all possess. Furthermore, Jesus uses this occasion to observe that the sons of light, believers, often are not shrewd at all compared to unbelievers. To get right to the heart of the matter, here we have an unbeliever in a difficult spot, and he has the sense to concoct a clever plan to provide for his future. Meanwhile, believers are often stupid by comparison.

How do you measure up? Are you shrewd, or stupid? Have you been thinking that shrewdness is not a Christian characteristic? Are you thinking that Christian traits are honesty, generosity, and compassion? Does shrewdness seem more like a trait of corrupt politicians and businessmen? Well, I don't see how you can escape the conclusion that Jesus praises shrewdness here and slams believers for lacking it. And this is not the only place in scripture where shrewdness is commended. Many of the proverbs are essentially instructions on how to behave shrewdly. Such sayings as do not lend money to a friend, and give gifts to your enemies are obviously shrewd pieces of advice. Furthermore, Paul says, "We are not unaware of Satan's devices." That sounds like shrewdness to me. How about you? Do you know what Satan is up to at the moment, and have you taken action against him? If not, perhaps you need some shrewdness yourself. But if you fall short in shrewdness, don't despair, for Jesus goes on to tell us one way to become shrewd.

The Instructions

Verse 9 is the key verse in Jesus' instructions on shrewdness. First we need to clarify some terms. Mammon is a transliteration of an Aramaic word for wealth. But what is "unrighteous mammon"? Does this refer to wealth obtained unethically – the fruit of theft, extortion, or murder? This verse is addressed to believers, so is Jesus advising us to obtain ill-gotten wealth and use it to make friends? Clearly this would contradict Jesus' other teachings.

The solution to this dilemma is found back in verse 8. There Jesus sets up a contrast between the "sons of this world" and the "sons of light", and the rest of the passage deals with this contrast. Therefore we should ask, what would contrast with unrighteous mammon? In verse 11 unrighteous mammon is contrasted with "the true", i.e. the true wealth. What would true wealth be? It would be the wealth that belongs to the sons of light. Thus the unrighteous mammon is worldly wealth, the currency of this world, whereas "the true" is the riches that come from following Christ. The former is such things as silver and gold, while the latter would include the Holy Spirit and eternal life. The point is not that the unrighteous mammon is money tainted, or resulting from illegal activity. The point is that it is the currency of a realm which is by its nature tainted with sin. By contrast, followers of Christ belong to a different realm. They are no longer sons of this world, but sons of light – and there is a different kind of wealth in that realm. So unrighteous mammon is the wealth you can get in this world, while the true wealth is that which you can get by following Jesus.

But Jesus has no intention of taking His followers out of the world. Although we can tap into an eternal, imperishable treasure, we are still part of the sinful world. And now we get to the point Jesus is making in this verse. He commands us to use the unrighteous mammon, the plain old money of this sinful world, to make friends for ourselves.

Have you been buying friends since you came to Lehigh? Were you expecting Jesus to tell us to buy the friendship of others? Does the very idea chill you? Shouldn't we rather make friends by doing things together, and by being friendly with people? It seems coldly calculating – in fact it seems distinctly unfriendly and false – to use your money to make friends. But let me ask you this. What *else* would you do with your money? What *do* you spend your money on? Movies, CDs, food, football games, clothes? Oh yes, books! And why do you spend your money on these things? Isn't it because they give you pleasure? (Well, maybe not the books!) It's very nice to put a good CD on while you are hanging out in your room. And of

course you need to eat. And what better way to spend a Saturday afternoon than in Goodman Stadium watching the Lehigh football team. I certainly enjoy all these things. But while these are all fine things to spend money on, they are all essentially directed toward yourself. These expenditures are all good uses of money, but they are also all selfish. Others may benefit from your company at the game, but ordinarily you go because *you* will enjoy it. You see, what Jesus is saying here is that you should use your money for other people. He is not recommending that you bribe or extort favors from others, or that you adopt a greedy, demanding attitude toward them. He is simply commanding that we use our money to benefit others – and in the process we they will become our friends.

This fits with the rest of the verse, “when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.” There are two variants in the Greek manuscripts here, one which reads “you fail” and another which reads “it fails”, the “it” referring to the unrighteous mammon. This is why different versions of the Bible translate it differently But both ultimately point to the same thing – death. They are euphemisms for that point when you have failed in a definitive way and when money can do you absolutely no good. This also fits with the “everlasting home”. This cannot mean a permanent, or even lifelong dwelling place on earth – for you don’t remain on earth when you die. Instead it is a reference to heaven. The idea here is that as you make friends on earth, they will be present in heaven to welcome you when you arrive there.

Now let’s put all this together. Chapter 15 contained the parables of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. Jesus told these parables in response to the Pharisees who were grumbling because He spent His time with the sinners and tax collectors. His point was that his purpose in coming was to find the lost, and that heaven rejoices when the lost are brought into the Kingdom. Now in chapter 16 Jesus is addressing His disciples, who were His apprentices. They were undergoing training to do his ministry, and in chapters nine and ten already they had been sent out to seek the lost. While the message to the Pharisees had been, “I want all the lost to return to the Father”, the message to the disciples is, “Be shrewd, especially in the use of money, in seeking the lost.” They were not to bumble about in seeking the lost, but were to use even the wealth of this evil age to gather them into the Kingdom. In so doing they would be making friends who would definitely be in heaven to welcome them. This message is addressed to the disciples, the “sons of the light”, those to whom it is the Father’s good pleasure to give the Kingdom. The friends would receive them, not in the sense of the debtors, of sharing their own possessions with those who have not – but would receive them in the sense of welcoming others for whom the door has already been opened by the God whom they all serve.

The Application

So how, practically do we do this? I was startled once to hear someone cite this passage in reference to tipping. He observed that Christians are often the stingiest tippers. They are trying to be frugal, or maybe they think they will spend more on missions. But by giving skimpy tips, what message are you conveying to the waitress? If you have an opportunity to share the gospel, what will the waiter or waitress conclude? You may be saying that God loves him, but how believable is that when God’s representative is hardly showing love?

My grandfather was an excellent example of this principle. When I was a child we sold sweet corn in 100-ear lots to women who froze it. It takes skill to determine when the ear of corn is filled out, so we children were not allowed to pull it. My job was to carry the sack. Now corn is very heavy. So we would walk out into the field, Granddaddy pulling the corn and me carrying the sack. After a while he would ask, “How many is that?” Since I was carrying the heavy load of corn, I was very attentive to the number of ears we had pulled. “Seventy three ears,” I would say. Later Granddaddy would ask again, “How many do we have now?” “Ninety five,” I would reply. We would go one, picking 15 or 20 more. Granddaddy would say,

“Well, let’s just put in a few extra,” and pull 5 or 10 more. Then we would drive down to old Mrs. Miller’s house. Granddaddy had been selling her sweet corn for decades, so there was a warm, cheery greeting. Then Granddaddy would say, “We’ll just shuck this corn for you so we can take the husks back and feed them to the pigs.” Meanwhile I was thinking, “Those husks are worth about 2 cents. This is a big waste of time.” But that is not the point. Granddaddy was using the unrighteous mammon, corn, to make friends – and he lived his whole life like that. Hundreds of people attended his funeral, and I am sure there were also hundreds in heaven welcoming him home.

Before long Christmas will be here. Do you buy Christmas presents? For whom? And why? Is it simply a traditional duty? Well here is an opportunity to use your money to please someone else. You can use your money to advance friendship with others by giving gifts which show that you value them. Christmas is a festive occasion, and you could use your worldly wealth to bless many people. My mother always baked cookies for the mailman, our teachers, the milkman, and others. Ruth probably gives gifts to 50 people outside our family at Christmastime. It is some expense and a lot of work, but it is one way of making friends with your worldly wealth.

We must not neglect to mention the importance of giving 10% of your income to the church. The church is responsible for spreading the gospel and caring for the poor. One reason the church is not more involved in the lives of people is that some Christians do not give 10% of their income to support it’s work. For some of you 10% may not be much. I had a work-study job when I was a student, and my tithe each week was \$5. The important thing is not how much you give, but that you give obediently.

The Choice

Jesus closes this passage by showing us the alternative to using our money to make friends for God’s Kingdom. Here He uses mammon as a personification – a god opposed to the true God. Those who will not shrewdly use their wealth to draw others into God’s Kingdom will serve Mammon – the money god. This is the case of those who use their money for themselves. They think they are making their own choices, living the way they want to live, but in the words of that old Bob Dylan song, “You gotta serve somebody.” Autonomy is an illusion. Man *always* serves someone. He has to, because he is not God. Only God has absolute freedom. “Oh it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.”

You will be tested with your wealth. Most of you will graduate single and make a good salary. You will be able to get a snazzy new car, a plush apartment, and enjoy yourself. These things are not evil in themselves, but the question before you is this. Are you using your money to serve God’s Kingdom, or to serve yourself? If it’s the latter, then you are guilty of idolatry – you are serving Mammon. And as Mammon gets his grip on you, he squeezes any love for God right out of you. Daniel faced this question this summer as he considered buying a car. Would he buy the car of his dreams – of his lusts? Or would he buy a car that will enable him to serve in the Kingdom. God is not mean. He does not want to give you cheap, ugly things. He wants to give you things you enjoy. But they must not control you. I warn you – think carefully, and be shrewd in how you use your wealth.

Jesus said the sons of this world are shrewder than the sons of light. In other words, unbelievers more consistently use their wealth to advance themselves than do believers. It’s sad to say, but the point Jesus is making here is that many believers are just stupid. They claim to follow Christ, but half of the time they serve the money god. They could store up eternal, heavenly treasure, but instead they squander their earthly wealth on foolish pleasures.

The choice is yours. Will you be shrewd or stupid? Will you spend your money and use your

possessions to draw others into God's Kingdom, or will you use your wealth for yourself? There is no third way. You can serve God, or you can serve Mammon, but you cannot do both. May God give us the grace to turn our backs on Mammon and serve Him only, especially with our wealth.

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