

# GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sunday Sermon, September 19, 2004

Pentecost 16/Proper 20

Reading: Luke 16:1-13

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. 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 manger any longer.’ Then the manger said to him, ‘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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 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.’ 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. 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.

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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.”

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## The Most Important Commitment of All

This parable is a very difficult to understand. The problem is that Jesus appears to praise a dishonest manger for his dishonesty. However, that is not the case. The manager managed a rich man's property. The rich man learned that his manager was not managing the property well, and prepared to fire him. However, before the word of his firing became public, the manager called in the master's debtors one by one. One of the debtors owed a hundred jugs of olive oil. The manager said, "Pay me for fifty, and I will mark the bill paid in full." Another man owed a hundred containers of wheat. The manger said, "Pay me eighty, I will mark your bill paid in full." The manger was not trying to steal money. He was trying to make friends with these debtors while he still had the opportunity - in hope that they would return the favor once they learned that he was "out the door on his ear."

He had good reason to believe that they would return the favor because reciprocity (the mutual sharing of goods and services) was obligatory in those days. If someone did you a favor, you were obligated to return the favor. Most people lived their daily lives in this way. The surprise is the rich man's response to the actions of his manger. You would think that he would curse the manger and toss him in jail. Instead, he praises him for acting shrewdly. "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light."

The parable makes it sound as if Jesus thought it more important to be clever than to be honest. However, that is not the case. Jesus is not commending the manager's dishonesty, but is commending his initiative. Jesus calls the children of the light (God's people) to be as shrewd as the children of this world - but there is a difference. This is a call to get "street smart" - not about Wall Street -but "street smart" in regards to the Kingdom of God. Just as the manager was shrewd concerning the ways of the world, the parable is a call for God's people to be well informed and shrewd when it comes to the things that have to do with the Kingdom of God. Just as this dishonest manger understood how to turn the rules of this world to his advantage, Jesus calls us to learn how to share the message of God's

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Kingdom, in attractive and clever ways. This is a call to take the message of the Kingdom of God, the call of sharing God's Good News in creative ways, seriously, especially now.

The wisdom this world is different from the wisdom of the God's Kingdom. Any good financial manager will tell you, "Pay yourself first." This means that when you are paid, put at least ten percent into a saving plan. The strictest financial programs will strongly suggest that you first put ten percent into insurance, ten percent into investment, and ten percent into savings. The rest is for everyday living.

In the Kingdom of God, there is a different priority. The fruits of our labor belong to God because everything belongs to God. Jesus knows that we are not living in a different world than those around us. He knows that we daily face decisions concerning our resources. How will we use the gifts God has given us? Will we squander them or put them to good use?

The bottom line in stewardship is this: Giving is a matter of faith. Our daily prayer is, help us to live our lives by faith in God's wisdom. We indeed need God's help to be prudent, shrewd, wise, logical and skillful in being faithful stewards of God's many gifts. Our response to this parable should be, I will daily ask God to help me be honest with my stewardship. This is the most important commitment of all.

Our commitment to God's wisdom is important because the "Evil One" lurks and sneaks all around us trying to corrupt our priorities, our faith, our prayers, and our commitment to the things of God. However, God continues to trust us, to forgive us, to bless us, and to provide for us. Welcomed into the family of God through Word and Sacrament for Service, we seek another chance to make sure the fruits of our labors belong first to God. We need yet another shot at being faithful stewards. Moreover, by God's grace we are empowered to move forward as God's forgiven and blessed people.

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Can we do it? Can we be faithful to what this parable is calling us to do as the people of God? The surprising answer is “No”. We cannot live faithfully the way God wants us to live on our own. However, we are not alone. We have God’s Promise in Christ Jesus. Trusting in God’s Promise, we can be faithful in many little ways as we seek to get our budgets and our priorities in line with our Christ-like faith. Today’s parable calls us to spend less time worrying about what we will live on and more time focused on what we will live for. That is the shrewd and faithful way to live as the people of God.

Hear this call to love God first above and before anything else. In addition, respond. When God is first, everything else falls into place. May you discover that this promise is true. Amen.

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