

Not If, But When

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 manager any longer.’ 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. 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.”

Alfred Hitchcock was the master of the plot twist and the surprise ending. In the movie *Psycho*, after hearing the mother’s voice throughout, we find out she is long dead. In the movie *Vertigo*, we are led to believe that one of the main characters is dead – only to run into her on the street later. Hitchcock, if he were still alive, could be the director if we turned our Scripture reading this morning into a film. No, it doesn’t have the quality of suspense he was famous for, but there are two twists that really catch our attention.

In the parable Jesus tells this morning, our main characters are a wealthy absentee landowner and the man he pays to be his manager while he’s away. It comes to the attention of the landowner that his manager is doing a poor job, squandering his money. That could mean a lot of things: he’s cooking the books, he’s not collecting the rent in a timely fashion, he’s not charging enough interest, he’s not fully renting out the land... but whatever he’s doing, he’s not living up to the expectations of his job description. So the landowner fires him and tells him to hand in his financial records.

At this point, the manager starts to worry. This guy is a white collar worker through and through. He considers alternate employment and decides that he's not strong enough to dig. In other words, he's not really cut out for, or willing to take a blue collar job. He doesn't want to be a common laborer. And he considers begging for a living, but knows he's too proud to actually do that either. So he finds a different way to depend on the kindness of others.

Since no one yet knows that the manager has been fired, he pretends he's still on the job and summons those who owe the landowner rent. He then invites them to look at the financial records and alter them in their own favor. You owe 100 bushels of wheat? Erase that. Now you only owe 50. You owe 100 jugs of oil? Let's change that to 80. Why would the manager do this? Well, you can imagine that the renters were thrilled to find out that a significant part of their debt had been written off. They will now have a very favorable opinion of both the landowner (whom they assume has approved this) and of the manager who carried it out. When everyone realizes that the manager has been fired, it is his hope that their opinion of him will be high enough that they will want to help him in return.

And here comes the first twist in the story. When the landowner comes to collect his books, and discovers that the manager has cheated him out of money, he doesn't get mad. In fact, instead he commends the manager! "Well done," he tells him. "That was totally dishonest, but it took chutzpah, and I admire your cleverness." This is a pretty surprising turn of events. Jesus doesn't clarify in the parable if the landowner is sufficiently impressed to keep the manager employed, or if he's still fired. But that's not important.

What is important is the next twist in the story. As he concludes the parable, Jesus tells us that we should be like the dishonest manager! Really? Jesus wants us to "make friends for

yourselves by means of dishonest wealth...” And suddenly now we have a Scripture reading that has been making pastors and scholars scratch their heads for thousands of years.

Okay, so we have to ask ourselves, was Jesus really commending the manager for his dishonesty? Or was he commending him for something else he did in the process? Actually, I think there are a lot of lessons we can learn here that aren't encouraging dishonest behavior. First, Jesus commends the manager for seeing money as a tool. The manager could have called in the renters and demanded they pay a portion of their rent immediately. Then he could have run away, cash in hand. But instead, he uses the money as a tool to get what he wants.

Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor and theologian from the last century, creatively imagined how God might respond to us when we enter heaven, if we have learned how to use money as a tool. He writes:

“Blessed are you, my faithful child. You have made the unrighteous mammon righteous because you used it to feed the poor and hungry and to clothe the naked. Enter into the joy of your master!” Thielicke concludes, “Let us therefore hallow the unrighteous mammon by the use we make of it. Let us not make of it a god, an idol, but a servant.

A lot of people like to toss out the quote “money is the root of all evil.” But what the Bible actually says is “the love of money is the root of all evil.” Money itself is pretty neutral. What you do with it can cause great evils, or it can bring about great benefits. In God's economy, possessions and wealth matter only in terms of how they connect us to others.

Another thing Jesus may have been commending is the urgency and enthusiasm the manager shows. Jesus challenges his disciples to have the same kind of resourceful zeal to pursue God's kingdom and the new age. People of the world have a consuming eagerness to achieve the things of this world. Barriers do not stop them. They work to overcome them.

Look at how people in the world operate: Athletes practicing hours and hours every day. Presidential candidates strategizing years in advance of the election. Military leaders spending millions to develop the weapons of the future. Business leaders sticking to the bottom line. Jesus certainly wouldn't approve of all they do, but you've got to admit, they've got focus. They have chosen their top priority, and they work tirelessly at it. Imagine if the dishonest steward had put forth the same amount of headwork, planning and dedication into doing something good. Imagine if athletes and politicians and military leaders and business leaders did that. "Imagine," implies Jesus, "if the children of light did that!"

Perhaps Jesus was commending the manager for being able to face reality. The manager quickly assessed his options, and saw that they were not good. He knew that realistically, he wouldn't make a good laborer or a good beggar. How many times has the church stumbled because we have done something even though in the back of our minds, we knew it wasn't a realistic option for us? Small churches spending money as if they had the budget of a mega-church. Large churches overworking their staff trying to connect with people individually like a small church can. Yes we want to be creative; yes we want to try new things. But we also have to be realistic about our resources.

One of the realities we have to face as a church is that we no longer live in a culture where Christianity is assumed. Sure, a majority are still vaguely, culturally Christian. But less than half of our country can count themselves as really active, involved Christians. And we are all sometimes painfully aware that church is no longer the social hub of the community. People used to have limited options for what to do with their free time, and church was the place to go. Today we have options ranging from sports and clubs to TV and shopping. We have to be realistic about knowing that whatever the church does, whatever we offer, it's just one choice

among many. Episcopal minister Loren Mead warns that “too much of the church is trying to carry on as though nothing has changed, or throwing up its hands in despair when the people of today don’t respond.” So no wonder Jesus would commend having a realistic worldview.

Without it, our ministry could really fall flat.

Finally, Jesus might also have been commending the manager for his foresight. Notice that in our Scripture, Jesus says that money will fail. He doesn’t say if, he says when. Because we all know that sometimes money does work for us. That’s why it’s so easy for money to become an idol. That’s why it’s so easy for us to depend on ourselves and our money instead of depending on God. But eventually, money does fail. You want proof, look at our current economy. Let’s face it; we should have seen it coming.

But the manager had foresight. He knew he was going to need a plan. He did what he had to do to secure his future. What kind of future are we as Christians trying to secure? In addition to preparing for our future in this life, we need to be preparing for our future in eternal life. And like the manager, we need a plan. And God has given us the plan. It’s deceptively simple and complex at the same time. Jesus died to offer us salvation. That’s the simple version. For the complications, take a look at any of the roughly billions of books that have been written to try to explain the mechanics of how the cross actually brings about salvation. And unless you want me to preach for another 30-45 minutes this morning, we’ll leave that topic for another day.

But one thing should be clear by now – it’s possible to find positive lessons in the actions of this dishonest man. There was something here for Jesus to commend and uplift. Which gives us all one final lesson, and perhaps the most important one. It’s not for us to judge one another. The Bible reminds us over and over that God judges us, but according to different information than we tend to use when we judge one another. We judge based on what we can see and hear.

God judges based on what's on the inside, what's in our hearts and souls. Jesus could find something good and redemptive about even a dishonest manager. So we shouldn't be too quick to judge others or write them off. God might yet see something valuable in them. Amen and amen.