

This Sunday's Sermon

DOES JESUS COMMEND DISHONESTY? – LUKE 16:1-13

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Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.' "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

"Once upon a time..." there was a very proud and fast rabbit or hare. This rabbit felt he could run faster than any of the animals in the forest. Many of the animals in the forest were tired of the rabbit's incessant boasting, but they couldn't do anything about it, because they knew the rabbit was faster than they were. But one day, a tortoise said he could finish a race faster than the rabbit. The rabbit laughed so hard that he fell down. "This will be so easy! I won't even need to try," the rabbit thought. So the race was marked out and the tortoise and the hare lined up at the starting line. At the starter's gun, the hare was off like a flash, while the tortoise placed one foot in front of the other, in a slow and steady pace. You know how the rest of the story ends. The rabbit, confident in his superior speed took a nap in the middle of the race, while the tortoise plodded on slow and steady. And what do you know, the slow and steady tortoise won the race over the fast and confident hare.

This story teaches the lesson that it is better to be slow and methodical and do things well, than to rush through things and do a shoddy job. We have many stories like this that teach a lesson for children and adults alike. Jesus too, saw the value of teaching in stories to get a point across. The stories that Jesus told are called parables, and often times they are describing what heaven will be like, they describe

how a believer is to live. And many of these parables are easy enough to understand, Jesus sometimes even explains the parables to his disciples: The parable of the workers in the vineyard describe God's grace in letting people into heaven, whether they've been Christians all their lives or come to faith at the end of life. The parable of the sower and the seed describes the different reactions people have to the Word of God.

But there is one parable in particular that causes us to scratch our heads and wonder what Jesus was getting at. That is the parable of the unjust manager, what we heard in our gospel for this morning. It's confusing because Jesus doesn't explain it to his disciples afterwards, it's confusing because it seems like Jesus is putting on a pedestal someone who is a scoundrel. And we are left to wonder DOES JESUS COMMEND DISHONESTY in this parable? It certainly seems like it with this verse in the middle of our gospel: **"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."**

So, what are we to do with this parable? Should we just ignore it? Should we say it doesn't belong in the Bible because it's too confusing for us to understand? Certainly not! This parable is as much a part of God's word as John 3:16 is. And just because it is difficult doesn't mean we should ignore it, but rather tackle it and find out what Jesus means with it. A few things before we dive in. In this parable like all parables, we should not apply meaning to every detail of the parable – such as the 900 gallons of olive oil symbolize the debt we owe to God. Rather we should look for the kernel of truth in the parable. So, let's begin.

DOES JESUS COMMEND DISHONESTY? In the parable you have a manager of a wealthy man's estate, someone who is in charge of everything. This man is accused of squandering the rich man's wealth for his own purposes and is asked to give an account of his management. He doesn't try to defend himself, but is looking out for his own skin. So he decides his last acts as manager of his master's estate will be to reduce the debt level of his master's debtors. This will put him in good standing with these people, so when the master releases him from his duties, these debtors will remember his kindness to them and take him into their homes.

But instead of going through with firing the manager, the master sees the manager's dealings and commends him for it. Because the manager, in addition to providing a retirement plan for himself, allowed his master to be seen in a good and gracious way – by reducing the debts of his debtors. So, is JESUS COMMENDING DISHONESTY? Is he advocating "the ends justify the means" approach? If this is all we had, we may think of it this way, but we have Jesus words that follow.

(1)

The latter half of the gospel goes a long way toward explaining the point Jesus is making with this parable. The point is best summed up by two verses. The first one is this: **"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light."**

Now what does Jesus mean by this? Look at the example of the dishonest manager in the parable. He knew he was going to get fired, so he did what he had to do to promote his own self interests. He was a man of decision, and he put his plan into action immediately. We can probably think of other examples of people using their means, their wealth, their intellect to deal shrewdly, to deal intelligently in order to

get things accomplished for themselves. Simply put, it is capitalism at its finest: people strive to be the best, the brightest, the richest, all in order to support themselves.

So how does Jesus want believers to behave? Exactly like the unbelievers with their worldly wealth? No. But he wants us to use our earthly wealth in a manner that is in keeping with being a believer. The story from the life of Abram in our Old Testament lesson is a perfect example of a believer managing his earthly possessions in a manner that is in line with his faith. When he heard of his nephew Lot, who had been taken as a POW by four kings, he pursued him with his forces and routed those kings. He brought back all of the plunder and returned it to the cities, and he gave thanks to the Lord God by giving an offering of a 1/10th of the plunder. Abram used the means he had to further the kingdom of God.

DOES JESUS RECOMMEND DISHONESTY then? No, Jesus is not recommending dishonesty in our dealings with the world. He is recommending a devotion to the task. To make plans and act wisely so that all our efforts are directed toward this heavenly goal. This is what he means when he says, **“Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwelling.”** Worldly wealth is not bad, in fact it is a gift from God, and he wants us to use it to serve him – helping others out, helping your church out. In this way, these people can testify that you are a child of God. Jesus wants us to have as much zeal for our heavenly goal as the world has zeal for itself.

(2)

The second of the verses that helps to explain this parable is this: **“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.”** The little that Jesus is talking about in this case is our worldly wealth. In comparison to the riches of eternity, our worldly wealth is very little. But like we heard before, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t care about our worldly wealth, we should certainly use it wisely. Because as Jesus says, those who have been trusted with the little things – worldly wealth – can certainly be trusted with the riches of heaven.

The unjust manager showed intelligence and wisdom with the possessions he was in charge of. By his actions of reducing the debts of his master, he not only provided for himself, but he built back the trust with his master, and built a trust with his master’s debtors. For us in our case, we have been given earthly wealth. Some of us have been given more of it than others, but it is entrusted to us by God. How have you handled the wealth God has given to you? Imagine you were God, and you could give your money to the people in this church. Who would you trust with your money?

When we put it that way, we can see that we wouldn’t necessarily trust some people with our money as much as we would trust other people. Look around the United States and you see people that are not able to handle the things they have been given. Many people in the US are in debt. If we were God, I don’t know if I would trust anyone with my money. And that brings up the flip side, **“If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”** As disastrous as it is that so many are in debt physically, it is even more disastrous the number of people who are in debt spiritually.

I think even those of us who have handled our earthly possessions well, would still have to admit that we have not handled God’s true riches well. These are riches that we have in this world that are

valuable for the next. We have been given God's word, the life-giving message of the gospel, and how often have we neglected to read it? We have been given the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, both offering the forgiveness of sins and how often have we neglected them or doubted their power? We have been given the gift of eternal life, and how often have we thrown it underfoot for an opportunity to please our own sinful flesh. Based on our consistent handling of God's riches, we are so far in debt with God that we have no hope to pay that debt back. Based on our handling of his riches, God should make us pay back our debt and not give us the true riches of eternal life. Jesus does not commend dishonesty, but he commends devotion, and quite frankly, we have not given him that devotion.

But where we have not been devoted, he has been. We don't normally think of Jesus acting shrewdly in his life, but everything he did was with a sense of purpose. That purpose was a complete focusing on the will of God – fulfilling God's will the only way he knew how – perfectly. He fulfilled God's will not by being dishonest, but by being devoted to his mission – his mission to save humanity. Jesus pursued the godly things that Paul mentioned in the letter he wrote to Timothy. He was trusted with little so that we might be trusted with true riches.

Jesus' parable of the unjust manager may still be difficult to grasp. But if you remember that JESUS DOESN'T COMMEND DISHONESTY but rather he commends devotion, you're on the right track. But it isn't just devotion to anything, it is devotion to God. The last verse of our gospel reads thus, **“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”** We live in the perfect devotion our Savior won for us, we have been freed from our sinful devotion to self. Our devotion to God will certainly make use of money – to help others, to help further his kingdom. But this money is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. The end when by faith we will be commended and invited to see true riches in their fulfillment. Amen.