

Modern Slavery ~ Slaves to Money

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

Usually, I think most people who study scripture can do an admirable job unpacking the parables of Jesus but not this week. Welcome to Luke 16; don't try this at home. There is no real agreement between theologians about the meaning of this parable. Many simply do not address this parable and encourage preachers to do the same. However, I want to unpack at least a little of this passage.

Perhaps some of the weirdness of this biblical parable is that it comes down to us over time with a couple of well-known titles. Luke 16 is known both as "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward" and "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager." Can it be both? If the conflicting titles of the parables seem confusing, the parable itself appears to be almost a riddle, one of the most debated and debatable passages in the New Testament.

So what does it mean? What was Christ trying to teach us in this parable? Is the lesson still relevant to us today? For our purposes I want to focus our attention on one portion of the parable.

Jesus said, "Turn in an account of your stewardship. Give me a record of how you are handling the responsibilities that I have entrusted to you." Jesus continued, "I have discovered that people who are faithful in the *little* things are faithful in the *big* things. The person who is *not* faithful in the little things is *not* faithful in the big things. The person who is faithful in *both* the little responsibilities and the big responsibilities, I will give *even more* to that person. The person who is *not* faithful in the little things and not faithful in the big things, I will relieve that person of all responsibilities. To whom much is given, much is required. If you are not faithful with the little things of life like money, who will entrust you with true riches? When the Pharisees heard this, they scoffed at Jesus because they were lovers of money. Steward...what is a steward?

A steward is a person who takes care of precious property which is not his own. Hear these stories of stewardship:

A World War II story. There was a wine steward who was responsible for caring for the finest collection of wine in all of Europe, the wine cellar at the Chateau of Monaco. At that time in history, the chateau was well known for its vintage, rare wines. But the Nazis had overrun the city and now lived and dined in the chateau, expecting and wanting to drink the world's finest vintage wines. The wine steward resented those "slime Nazis" and cleverly and carefully hid all the most rare wines deep in the cellar, serving his enemy only the cheapest and youngest wines, pretending that those wines were the best. *Stewards are people who care for precious property that is not their own, often preserving it from disaster.*

A few years ago I went on a trip to the Holy Land with several of my friends and colleagues in ministry. During the year-long planning I realized that I had to choose someone with whom to leave my precious puppy, Lucy and also select someone to look after my home and check on my mother. These were of great importance to me and I wanted to make sure that the person or persons I chose were trustworthy and dependable. Finally, I asked my daughter to care for my home, my dog, and my mom while I was away. You don't ask *just anyone* to care for your precious pets and family members for a few weeks. You trust them with someone who is *very* reliable...in all the small day-to-day details and all the large important details. *Stewards are people who take care of precious property that is not their own.*

When I serve as pastor of Unity Presbyterian Church we had a preschool that met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for half day. A part of my job as pastor of the church was to chair the Board that oversaw the operations of the preschool. We had responsibility to hire the teachers. Each morning as the parents and grandparents dropped the 2, 3, and 4-year-olds off, I was aware of the enormous trust they placed in us as they left their most precious children in the care of people they barely knew. These parents wanted and prayed that their children would be well cared for...especially with all the

little unseen details. The bruised knee. The hurt finger. The book carefully read. The loving tone of voice. All the little crucially important details that will never appear on a formal report. When that parent unexpectedly arrived early from work, that parent hoped that he/she would see their child being *well* cared for. *Stewards are people who take care of precious property that is not their own.*

It is with these stories that we approach one of Jesus' stories about a steward. There are several such stories in the Bible. "Once upon a time, there was a rich man who owned a villa. He was going on a long trip and so he appointed a steward to take care of his property while he was gone. He gave the steward some specific instructions. There was nothing in his instructions about taking care of the house or stables or animals. The owner, instead, told the steward to make sure that the servants were paid their *food allowance* for their work. *That was important to the owner: make sure you pay the servants their food allowance while I am gone!!! Don't cheat the servants!!!* Well, the owner was gone a long time, and then one day, unexpectedly, he showed up. He was pleased to find that the steward had taken care of his entire estate, and especially that he had paid the servants their food allowance. Now if that owner had come back unexpectedly and found the steward had not paid the allowance, and if instead the steward was "eating, drinking and making merry," he would have taken a switch to that steward and given him a paddling. He would have fired him and gotten a new steward, so the Bible says.

Jesus continued. I have found that people who are faithful in the *little* things are faithful in the *big* things; and people who are *not* faithful with the little details are *not* faithful with the big details. People who are faithful with *both* the little and big details, they will be rewarded and given even more. Those who aren't, they will suffer the consequences. To whom much is given, much is required.

Stewardship - we think of giving to the church. But stewardship is not about that narrow slice of life we call offerings to the church or that

narrow slice of our time, talents and treasures that we give to church. Stewardship is taking care of the precious property/people that God has entrusted to us and that is what I would like to talk about today.

Steward comes from the Greek word, “*oikos*”, which means house. Stewardship is taking care of household matters. A related word is “*oikonomics*” from which we get the word, “economics:” Stewardship is taking care of money matters that God has entrusted to us. Still another related word is “*oicology*” from which we get the word “ecology”. Stewardship is taking care of the earth that God has entrusted to us.

Jesus said, “Give me an account of your stewardship. Give me a record of how you are taking care of your household affairs.” How are you taking care of things around the house? Your clothing? Your car? Your furniture? Your plants? Your animals? All the property that has been entrusted to your care.

And none of this belongs to you. Your clothes, your house, your furniture, your pets, your toys, your plants, your family. None of it belongs to you. Can you take it with you when you die? Of course not. It’s not yours. Everything in life belongs to God who entrusts you and me to care for these precious possessions.

“Oiconomics.” Jesus said, “Give me an account of your household finances. Give me a record of how you are managing money.” It is so important that we learn to manage money rather than having money manage and dominate our lives. We need to learn to manage money wisely. Of course, we teach our children these values also, often giving them an allowance or work for an allowance, so they have money, not merely to buy things, but to learn to manage money effectively. In the Biblical texts for today, Jesus wisely said, “If you can’t manage the little stuff, like money, who will entrust you with true riches. The

Pharisees, who were lovers of money, laughed and scoffed at him.” Now, we would have said just the opposite, “If you can’t handle important stuff like money, who would trust you with real responsibilities? Our culture thinks that money is so important. If you can’t handle money, you are in big trouble. Jesus had the opposite point of view. To Jesus, money was part of the little stuff.

As we prepare for Stewardship Sunday, and we hear Jesus as he asks us that persisted question: “Give me an account of your stewardship. Tell me, give me a record of how you are caring for your household... the finances...the earth...those precious properties and peoples that I have entrusted to your care. Come on now, I want to know, I want to hear from you: Tell me how you care caring for all I have entrusted to you. Amen.