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The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward

When Julius Caesar descended from his ship to begin his conquest in North Africa, he made what could have been one of the greatest errors of the campaign—he stumbled on the plank and fell to the ground. As his armies were assembled on shore to greet their general, Caesar's stumbling would have been interpreted as a bad omen. Immediately, rumors would begin. Hearts would sink. And Caesar's army would have been defeated before they began. Knowing this, Caesar did what only he could do. As he fell off the plank to the ground, he shouted with a voice that all his troops could hear, "Africa, I greet thee!" And the corporate gasp of his troops turned into a shout of victory!

We love stories like this, don't we? We love stories where people take the ordinary and transform it into the extraordinary. We like people to take a losing situation and work it into success. That is perhaps why Christ used this very theme to exhort His disciples unto faithfulness.

In Luke 15, Christ told the parable of the Prodigal Son. You remember the parable. A silly boy requests his inheritance and then loses it on prostitutes and loose living. And then, brought to the end of himself, the boy returns to his father who forgives him even before he asks. Now this parable presents as wonderful a picture of the gospel yet, it has a potential for misunderstanding. For example some say, "You mean to tell me that I can do whatever I want in Christ and God will always forgive me?" Or they say, "Now that I am saved, what I do is unimportant." In light of this, Christ turned to His disciples

and told them a parable to exhort them to use the things of this world not for themselves, but for the glory and honor of God.

The Setting of Luke 16

Luke 16:1-2, "And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted¹ his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward."

From a variety of sources we know that the societal makeup at the time of Christ included the tenant farmer² much in the same way that farmers rent land today. A wealthy individual leases his land to poor farmers³. Now based on the elements of this parable, we are safe in assuming that this rich man was the owner of one such estate. Because of his wealth, this owner had a steward⁴ to take care of the financial side of the property. This steward's job would primarily be the overseeing of the estate to ensure that it was productive for the master. In this capacity he would lease the land to farmers, administer the debt that these farmers owed and he would collect the rent that was due to the owner. In a lean year the steward would have the task of settling the debts of the farmers so that the land would remain productive.⁵

This steward was reported to his master because he was squandering the master's possessions. He was wasting the master's goods. The error of the steward is not one of defrauding his boss, just wasting his money.⁶ In other words, he mismanaged.

Now when the master found out about the steward's poor management, he called the steward in to give an account. Now because no response is given on the part of the steward the assumption by most is that the charges of this owner were true. And thus, the owner fired him. Since this servant was not charged with fraud (if that were the case, legal action would have been mentioned) he naturally would have prepared the books for his successor.

The Settling of Accounts, vv. 3-7.

Luke 16:3, "And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the

¹ *diaskorpidzon*

² See Klostermann, page 161, Grundmann, page 317, and Derrett, pages 52-55

³ The word poor is not referencing the farmer's ability, but rather his financial status. Throughout history farmer's have been poor and today the case is not much different.

⁴ The word used here is *oikonomon*. N.B. because this *oikonomon* was not punished for his mismanagement but simply fired, we conclude that he was not a slave, compare Luke 12:46

⁵ There are two types of tenant farming that exists: cash lease and share cropping. A common practice in farming is to pay about ten percent of a cash lease up front with the remainder due when the crops are harvested. In share cropping the landowner fronts the money for the seed and fertilizer, etc. and then the farmer sells the crops and splits the proceeds with the landowner.

Most likely the case referenced here is that of cash rent. It would be in the landowners best interest to keep a farmer on the land in lean years. Most landowners do not have either the equipment, experience or desire to farm. In cases where the crop is poor, they often allow the farmer to farm his way out of debt. This practice exists to this day.

⁶ Compare Luke 15:13

stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg”

Now that the steward had been laid off, the manager recognizes that he is in a predicament. Following this, no one would hire him to oversee their property. He is too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg. What is he to do? The answer came to him as a brain-storm.

Luke 16: 4-7, “I know what I shall do (~”I’ve got it!”), so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.’ And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty”

The settling of the specified accounts in this text is representative. The nuance is that this steward called EVERY “debtor” that his employer had and lowered their debt. Now notice this “lowered debt.”

Luke 16:6, “hundred measures of oil.”

This would amount today to about 875 gallons or the yield of 146 olive trees.⁷ For the steward to decrease the debt of these people by 1/2 is obviously a substantial amount.

Luke 16:7, “hundred measures of wheat.”

This would amount today to about 1000 bushels or the equivalent to the grain that could be grown on 100 acres.⁸ Once again, a 20% reduction would be a substantial amount to forgive. In fact, both reductions amounted to about 500 denarii in Christ’s day.

Now because of drought conditions and other circumstances of providence, a kind and gracious owner of land might lessen the debt of his tenants. This would have been the assumption of the debtors in this parable. As they were invited to meet with this Steward, shown their original certificate of debt, authorized to reduce it as they did, their hearts would have swelled with gratitude both for the owner and the manager who would have been given the credit for suggesting such a reduction.

And so after setting the books “in order,” this manager gives the books to his boss. And what is the response of his boss?

The Master’s Response

And did the master...

- Beat the unrighteous steward? No, he wasn’t a slave.
- Took the unrighteous steward to court? No, the steward committed no crime.
- Overturned the unrighteous steward’s actions? No, this would have given the rich land owner a

7. From a reference in Josephus (Antiquities viii.57) we know that a batos measured about 8 3/4 gallons. Here the debt is 100 batos, thus 875 gallons of oil or that of about 146 olive trees.

8. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 127.

“black eye” in the community.

No, there was very little this master could do. Accordingly we read this:

Luke 16:8, “And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly.”

In the event that something like this actually occurred, no doubt the manager and the land owner would have been praised quite highly in their town. As such, to rescind the actions of this steward would risk alienating the whole town. And so, to make the best of the situation, the owner allows the actions of this “unrighteous steward” remains and says only, “What a clever crook!”

Now do not misunderstand: the land owner is not praising the dishonesty of his servant, just his cleverness.

First Bank is robbed by a group of individuals who broke the “impregnable” computer password system protecting the bank. In such a situation, we rightly condemn the act of stealing, but commend their ingenuity that enabled them to accomplish such a feat.

West Germany’s Judge Hans-Ulrich Schroeder complimented Konrad Kujau’s ability at forgery. Konrad is the man who forged the diaries which at one time were ascribed to Adolf Hitler. The Judge said that Konrad “had a rare gift for imitating handwriting.” The judge was not commending Konrad’s dishonesty, but simply complimenting Konrad’s skill.

And that is the case here! The master is NOT saying, “I applaud the clever crook because he acted dishonestly.” Rather, he is saying, “I applaud the dishonest crook because he acted cleverly.” Now this leads us to the question, “What is the message that Christ is here conveying?”

Luke 16:8-13, “...for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness (this is a colloquialism not for “evil money” but for the “money of this world”- for it can be acquired in unrighteous ways); that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

Now before we address the message contained in this parable, notice a very difficult and confusing phrase:

Luke 16:9, “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they (either a pl. for God [cf. Jn. 14:2] or a reference to the citizens of the Kingdom of God who have already entered their rest) may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

It is because of this verse that this parable has been labeled as one of the most difficult of all of Christ’s parables. What does Christ mean by this?

Christ is NOT saying that we should be worldly, materialistic, or crooked. Rather, He simply is saying that in worldly matters worldly people often show more astuteness/shrewdness than God’s children do in matters which affect their everlasting salvation! And thus, Christ calls us here to use the things of

this world to invest NOT in

- A more secure tomorrow.
- Ourselves.
- Our own lusts and desires.

BUT in eternal life!

Matthew 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

1 Timothy 6:17-19, “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”

And thus, to “make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness” is an exhortation for us to

- Use the things of this world for eternity!
- Labor as diligently for the kingdom of God as people of this world do for the things of this world.

And so Christ continues:

Luke 16:10-13, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

In other words, now that you are saved, who will you serve?

That is the message of this parable. We cannot serve God and this world. All that we have and possess in this life therefore must be used for...

- The extension of God’s kingdom, not our kingdom.
- Eternity, not for the present.
- The Lord, not ourselves.

Hendriksen wrote, “What is stressed here... is that what we fondly call *our* money, *our* house, *our* bonds, *our* stocks, *our* bank certificates, etc., is not really our own. It is a trust handed to us to use in such a

manner that God can be pleased.”⁹

Now I don't know about you, but Christ's exhortation here is quite convicting and yet inspiring! Oh this passage is convicting! Not only are we to use the things of this world for the glory and honor of God BUT listen again to the exhortation, "...for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light"(Luke 16:8). In other words, when it comes to

- Diligence and focus on a cause.
- Commitment and Devotion to a goal.

So often the people of this world far excel the child of God and they do it all for a perishable wreath! John Calvin put it this way: "But Christ only meant that... ungodly and worldly men are more industrious and skilful in conducting the affairs of this fading life, than the children of God are... careful to make [eternal life] the subject of their study and meditation.”¹⁰

What an exhortation! Did you know that...

- There are Olympians this very moment training for a competition that is not going to take place for another three to four years?
- There are business men and women who put in 70 to 80 hour weeks in their climb up the ladder of success?
- There are doctors working right now who haven't had a significant break in the last 36 hours?

I have no doubt that there are children of God here this morning who this past week either have

- Failed to even open their Bibles and read.
- Neglected their God in prayer.
- Done very little in preparation for eternity!

Or if they have read, prayed, and prepared, they certainly have not done so with the intensity of the Olympic athlete training for his prize- and yet it is the dedication and intensity of the Olympian that must characterize our devotion to the Lord.

1 Timothy 6:12, "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

Hebrews 12:1, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith"

C. H. Spurgeon, speaking of Joseph Alleine, quotes in *Lectures to My Students*, "'At the time of his health,' writes his wife, 'he did rise constantly at or before four of the clock, and would be much troubled if he heard smiths or other craftsmen at their trades before he was at communion with God; saying to me often, "How this noise shames me. Does not my Master deserve more than theirs?"'"¹¹

⁹ Hendriksen, *Luke NTC*, page 772

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Book II page 175

¹¹ C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, page 48

The devotion and dedication of Joseph Alleine is quite rare today on the part of Christians, which brings us to Christ's point in this parable...

Luke 16:8, "...for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light."

Look around this world and you will find the non-Christian...

- Suffering all manner of difficulty.
- Undergoing all manner of sacrifice.
- Ingeniously using all that is at his disposal in this world.

All for a perishable wreath. Should not we, who know Christ and have been saved for the coming Kingdom, labor all the more diligently for that which is imperishable? Is not our master worthy of such devotion? Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 9:24a, 25-27, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?... And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. THEREFORE I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified."

In light of the grace and mercy that is ours in Christ, Calvin wrote, "How disgraceful is it that the children of light... should slumber and neglect the hope of eternal blessedness held out to them, while worldly men are so eagerly bent on their own accommodations, and so provident and sagacious."¹²

Brothers and Sisters, the call of this text is a simple one. Is not your God worthy of all your devotion? Is not God worthy of your...

- Time?
- Abilities?
- Talents?
- Labor?

But you say, "God is worthy, but I am a worm! My heart is divided! I fail daily! What hope is there for me?" This is where this passage becomes a source NOT simply of conviction, BUT also inspiration. Notice the context: Christ again told this parable to His disciples in order to instruct them as to the impact of grace on their lives. Accordingly, it is imperative as we consider this passage that we not divorce it from its context. Listen to the amazing grace of God before the prodigal could confess a sin we read...

Luke 15:20-24, "And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion *for him*, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the

¹² John Calvin, *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Book II, page 178

son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry."

Such is the experience of everyone in Christ. They are completely and totally forgiven! With the knowledge of this amazing grace, what ought we to do? Labor to redeem the time such that every position, talent, gift, stewardship, responsibility, job, or relationship is used to the glory of God and the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. In light of this, we ought all to be inspired this morning to strive to honor and serve God in the most ordinary places of life. We see the effects of grace in the life of Martin Luther.

"Alas! Must I walk the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and soars? And on top of that care for my spouse, provide, labor at my trade, take care of this, and take care of that? Do this and do that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? Why should I make such a prisoner of myself?"

"What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit; and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest golden jewels. It says, 'O God! I confess today that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I without any merit have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving Thy creature and Thy most precious will. Oh how gladly will I do so though the duty should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor will distress and dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in Thy sight.'"

May God give us the grace so to live unto the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom, and so to use every thing at our disposal to that end.

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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