

Sanctified and Street Savvy

Luke 16:1-9

The portion of Luke's gospel we just read is generally agreed to be the most difficult to interpret of all Jesus' teachings. It is tough to understand on multiple levels. First of all, it is just a strange story for Jesus to tell because it appears to glorify a scoundrel. This manager of a wealthy man's estate has been discovered to have been squandering it. The word is the same one used to describe the prodigal son just before this story, who takes his father's money and squanders it on loose living. Here the manager squanders his employer's estate. He at least is losing money due to poor management; as worst, he is stealing money from his boss.

So the boss calls him in and says, "You're fired, but before you're fired, bring me a summary of my assets and liabilities." So the manager knows he is in trouble. He's too proud to beg and too weak to dig ditches – so there are no other job possibilities out there. Once word gets out about his management skills, he's going to have zero job possibilities. What to do? So he comes up with a scheme. He calls in all of those who owe his boss. These are probably people who live on the boss's land and owe him a healthy portion of their crop. And he has them change the amount they owe. Instead of a hundred jugs of olive oil, suddenly the renter only owes fifty. Instead of a hundred containers of wheat, now it is only eighty.

So he cheats his boss out of what people owe him in order to make the people love the manager. What we would expect is for Jesus to condemn this dishonest manager. He has squandered his boss's business, now he has cheated his boss out of what is owed, and he has done it all in order to save himself from the consequences of his own irresponsible ways. He has done it to make the boss's debtors like him so they will take him in when he's jobless and take care of him. Shrewd? Yes, without a doubt. An example we would expect Jesus to lift up for the rest of us to follow? Hardly.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does. He says that when the master discovers this scalawag's plot, he congratulates him on coming up with a scheme to insure his own survival. And then Jesus says, "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."

So that's the first problem with this passage – Jesus tells a story about a scoundrel and, instead of telling us we should NOT be like that, he says that there is some way in which we should be like that. It throws us off the track, confuses us just to hear Jesus lift up such a crook and a rascal as somehow having something we should aspire to, being someone we should emulate. I mean, if Jesus were the pastor of a church, and this parable was a sermon, the folks would go home saying, "Wow, that was definitely NOT one of his better sermons. He must have had a rough week because he was off his game today."

But Jesus was not a pastor. This parable is not a sermon, and we don't have the privilege of dismissing this story as the result of a busy week where Jesus just didn't have time to bring his A game. This is the Son of God, the Messiah, and it is our job to try to figure out what Jesus is teaching us here. And I have an idea of a way to gain an understanding of this parable that I'd like to share with you. Here it is: imagine that you are the squandering manager. Put yourself in his place. It may feel a bit uncomfortable at first to imagine yourself being such an irresponsible, dishonest person, but sit with it a minute and see if it doesn't begin to fit. After all, have you been as responsible with the portion of God's kingdom he has entrusted to your oversight as you could or should have been? The time God has given you in this world – have you, do you use it as responsibly as you should to do God's work, to share God's love, to spread God's message of life in Jesus Christ with others? How many people have you introduced Jesus to this past week? How many hours did you spend reading God's Word this week? How many hours did you spend in prayer, lifting up the needs of others to God, or just being with God and letting God speak to your heart? Beginning to feel a bit roguish?

God has placed within each of us certain talents, certain spiritual gifts. He has invested these gifts in us for us to use for the growth of his kingdom, for the spreading of his message, for the glorification of his name. Have you discovered what those gifts are? Have you used them this week in ways that grow the kingdom, spread the message, glorify God's name? Those abilities are very much like the responsibilities entrusted to the manager who squandered his master's wealth. What are you doing with the master's wealth he has entrusted to you?

And, of course, there is God's treasure with which we have been entrusted, what Jesus calls here "worldly or dishonest wealth." The word in Greek is *mammon*, most literally translated, money. What are you doing with God's money? Are you tithing, bringing the tenth back to God to be used for doing God's work?

See what I mean? This squandering irresponsible manager has a lot in common with you and me... more than we would like to admit, but, if we are honest with ourselves, he is us. So put yourself into the parable. The master has put you in charge of part of his estate – time, talents and mammon. And you've not exactly multiplied it. And he's discovered you're squandering what he's entrusted to you. What are you going to do?

I think Jesus is saying we can learn from the streetwise folk around us who always seem to find a way to get by. The translation of the Bible called "The Message" translates Jesus' words this way: *"Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way – but for what is right."*

In other words, we are to be sanctified and street savvy. We've been caught red-handed mismanaging God's estate. The question is, what are we going to do about it? I think Jesus is suggesting we get creative, we start using a little more street smarts, we start using what God has entrusted to us to make friends in eternal places. What have you got that you can use? Well, you've got those three things that are still entrusted to you right now: time, talents and treasure. Jesus says, "Use *mammon* to make friends for yourselves in eternal homes." Instead of squandering it, start using it creatively to increase God's kingdom.

A few years ago, I had a number of people who came to the church looking for help with purchasing bus tickets. They would come in and tell me how they needed to get to Lexington or Charlotte or Raleigh because they were out of money but they had a job waiting for them or family who could help them. Well, being the responsible steward of the church's money that I was, I did not just give them the money for a bus ticket. I dropped what I was doing, put them in my car and we drove down to the bus station where I would buy the bus ticket for them. It was amazing how many folks were in need of bus tickets all about the same time, but, there it was. It felt good being responsible – I wasn't giving them money they could use to buy liquor or drugs or whatever. They were getting a bus ride, hopefully, to a better place. One day as I was purchasing another bus ticket for another traveler, probably the third or fourth in that many weeks, the teller at the bus terminal said to me, "You know, as soon as you give this ticket to him and leave, he's going to bring this ticket up here and ask for a refund, and there's not a thing I can do about it but give him the money."

I don't buy bus tickets for people anymore, but I've got to hand it to the folks who came up with the scam – they were being very creative, very street savvy.

I think Jesus is saying, "Go thou and do likewise. Be sanctified and street savvy."

Amen.

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