

“Worldly Wealth and True Riches”

**Luke 16:1-13** Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup> 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.' <sup>3</sup> "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-- <sup>4</sup> I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' <sup>5</sup> "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' <sup>6</sup> "Eight hundred gallons {6 Greek one hundred batous (probably about 3 kiloliters)} of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' <sup>7</sup> "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "A thousand bushels {7 Greek one hundred korous (probably about 35 kiloliters)} of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' <sup>8</sup> "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. <sup>9</sup> I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. <sup>10</sup> "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. <sup>11</sup> So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? <sup>13</sup> "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

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I have to admit that this passage from Luke has been one that I have puzzled over for years and if I weren't preaching from the common lectionary passages for Luke I would avoid it all together. Not to mention that in the past couple of months I given quite a few sermons on money and without a question this passage deals with money. Most ministers do not like to talk about money for various reasons. One does not want to give the appearance that the church is all about money nor does one want to upset those paying one's salary. But we ministers are without excuse. Fully two-thirds of Jesus' teachings in one way or another involve money. Therefore, it is not a topic to be shied away from.

One of the puzzling aspects of this passage is that the dishonest or unrighteous manager or rather steward in the end is commended for cheating his master. His master fires him for cutting himself in on his profits. Yet, when he learns he will lose his job, to keep from having to get a real job he lets his master's account holders reduce their debt so that he can live for free in their homes. No matter which way you turn, the master here is losing his wealth. Why commend the unrighteous steward? Another thing that is puzzling is Jesus telling his disciples to use their worldly wealth or rather their unrighteous mammon to gain friends for themselves so that these friends will welcome them into their eternal homes. What does that mean? And finally, this one more blunt

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than puzzling, Jesus tells his disciples that they cannot serve both God and wealth. They will inevitably love and be devoted to one over the other and the primary object of affection will more than likely be mammon.

Well, I worked with this passage a bit this week to find some answers. Would you like to hear what I gleaned? I think the key for unlocking the puzzling aspects of this passage lies in the last part of verse eight when Jesus says: “For the people of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.” And then again in verse sixteen: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the Kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” So, God entrusted the light or the grace of proclaiming the Law and the prophets to the management of the ancient Israelites. If you read through the Old Testament one thing that stands out is that the Israelites time and again prove themselves to be unrighteous stewards. They forget the Law and murder the prophets and then turn away from God and worship idols to the extent that the community life in ancient Israel is an abomination to God where (as the prophet Amos contends) the needy were bought as slaves with a pair of sandals. God repeatedly had to pass judgment on his people and even sent them into exile in Babylon for their unrighteous stewardship of the light he had entrusted to them.

In Jesus day the scribes and the Pharisees were about the only ones who gave any kind of impression of trying to be the people of light that God intended ancient Israel to be. They thought that because they were blood descendents of Abraham all they had to do was obey the law to the tee and they would have a place in the Kingdom of God when the Messiah came which they expected to happen at any moment. Unfortunately, they ignored the prophets and twisted the Law (usually to their own financial advantage) and worse they became legalistic, self-righteous hypocrites. The Pharisees were largely wealthy hypocrites who thought that the Lord had blessed them with wealth because of their obedience to the law and worse they looked down their noses in judgment at those who were not as they were.

Now, in this parable of the dishonest or unrighteous steward, ancient Israel and more specifically the Scribes and Pharisees are the unrighteous steward who has lost the task of proclaiming the light of the Law and the prophets and must give an account for his stewardship of it. In self-righteousness, they had been hogging its benefits for themselves. Jesus’ message for them in this parable, for they heard it too, is that mercy is the way into the kingdom of God not trying to force one’s way in with some hypocritical show of self-righteousness. Jesus commends the shrewdness of the dishonest manager because reducing the accountholders’ debts was an act of mercy.

Now let us move on to the disciples. To us Christians God has entrusted the light of the grace of the Kingdom of God. To speak of the kingdom of God is to speak of God’s presence and his reign among his people. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom is to say that God in his infinite mercy has come to dwell among humanity; first as flesh and blood in Jesus of Nazareth, and he continues to do so now as the Holy Spirit dwelling with and in us. Therefore, we invite all peoples to come and live accordingly and living accordingly is sharing

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life in community with others where the peace of Christ is really present, where there is genuine mutual affection for one another arising out of personal knowledge of God the Father's own steadfast love and faithfulness.

The Kingdom of God is about community, people bearing with one another and bearing one another up in the love of Christ Jesus. The end of chapter four of the Book of Acts gives a staggering image of what this community of the Kingdom of God looks like: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

This passage from acts describes beautifully what Jesus meant when he told his disciples to use their worldly wealth to make friends for themselves so that these friends may welcome them into the eternal dwellings. Sharing what wealth we have with others according to need to the point of exhausting it is Jesus rule for the handling of money in the kingdom. This is what he is speaking of when he tells his disciples “whoever is faithful with a little will be faithful with a lot”. After all, the wealth that we have really is not our own. We, our very selves, belong to Christ Jesus and everything we have he has entrusted to us. If we are not faithful in sharing the worldly wealth that is at our disposal, how can we expect God to entrust us with the true riches of his kingdom: the peace of Christ and joy in his Spirit, the sure and certain knowing of God's love, and genuine Christian community. I may be stepping out on a limb and sawing behind me, but Jesus seems to indicate here that in the Kingdom of God there is a direct correlation between generously sharing wealth (to the point of exhausting it) and truly receiving the riches and richness of the Kingdom of God in community.

To conclude, for the people of ancient Israel and those like them who are stuck in hypocritical self-righteousness learning and showing mercy is the first step into kingdom. The basic lesson in mercy comes from knowing that Jesus died for us taking our sin and death unto himself in order to end our sin and death and the gracious result is that the Father's love for him and his love for the Father are freely given to us by and in the gift of the Holy Spirit that we might live in the new life inaugurated in his resurrection from the dead. It is only by God's presence with us that we can proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Yet, for those who know this basic lesson in mercy and who strive to live accordingly; for these the problem, (the threat to real community like Luke describes it in the Book of Acts) is money. If we are not faithful in our stewardship of the worldly wealth in sharing it according to need even to the point of exhausting it, how can we expect God to entrust us with the stewardship of the true wealth of the Kingdom of God, his very self in Christian community. Jesus meant it when he said we cannot serve both God and mammon. In Acts chapter five when Ananias and Sapphira fell dead because they withheld part of a promised gift, it was because of the love of money and the hypocrisy of wanting to appear generous when they were selfish to the core. Here in the Kingdom of God

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sharing more than anything defines faithfulness. So friends, be faithful with what God has entrusted you with and prove yourselves worthy of the true wealth of God's grace, peace, and mercy which abides among you freely. Amen.