

### **Luke 16:1-13**

*Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; 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.*

*"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

Well, here we are with, apparently, another tough passage to understand. There is a part of it, a very particular part of it, that captures our minds and drags us away down an unavoidable track. What that is, I think, is pretty apparent. You all heard it, right? The why, however, is something that maybe needs a little more in-depth consideration.

Let's start with the what. What is it that sidetracks us, that stops us in our tracks? Verse 8: "The master commended the dishonest manager". Now, be honest. That's it, right? You know that is where you get hung up. It just doesn't fit. How in the world does that make any sense at all? The master is condoning dishonest behavior? That is what Jesus is teaching us?

So we try to fit that thought, that apparent fact, into our understanding. I heard an attempt at this yesterday. I was at a diocesan committee meeting and, as usual, we started the meeting with a celebration of the Eucharist. In the service this Gospel passage was read and then

a reflection was offered. The reflection focused on the dishonesty of the Jews. Since they were prohibited from charging interest on loans, it was said, they devised a dishonest way around that by structuring the loan in a way that would allow them to loan one amount but collect a higher amount without calling it interest. Now, of course, I am oversimplifying it, but the gist of the reflection was that the Jews were taking advantage of the poor through dishonest means, the manager in our parable was simply setting right a wrong perpetrated by the evil master, and the lesson for us to learn is that we should not associate with anything like what they did.

The thing is that whether there is validity to the premise of charging interest or not, that analysis really doesn't fit the context of the passage. The passage, by the way, is traditionally understood as being about faithful stewardship. The passage starts with a man who had been given responsibility for the master's wealth. He was charged by his master to be a good steward of those blessings, but he misused the trust that had been placed in him. Because of that, that wealth, those blessings, the privilege that had been entrusted to him, were being taken away and would be given to another manager.

The other bookend of the passage finishes the teaching: "You cannot serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." The parable is teaching us that God, the master, has entrusted gifts and resources to us and they must be used in service of God, not in service of the wealth or self.

That is the context, but there is another message in the midst of the passage, in the midst of that context. The fired manager reacts dishonestly and here is where it gets complicated. If you read it carefully, the dishonesty is clearly condemned by Jesus, not condoned. So, that being the case, what then is being commended? It says that the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. He is commending him for his shrewdness, not his dishonesty.

I hear it like this. The master sees the dishonesty of the manager and says to himself, "Hmmm? Interesting approach. You get an "A" for creativity. But, you're still fired. It was still wrong. Dishonesty is bad. You still can't be a trusted steward. But, that was creative. I'll give you that."

Then we get the final message in betted in the passage. And here is where it gets even more complicated. You see, all along he has been telling these parables in chapters 15 and 16 to Pharisees and Scribes. Yes, this one is spoken to his disciples, but it is in a series of parable used to teach the Pharisees. He has been teaching them about dishonesty and poor stewardship. He had just taught them about how heaven rejoices over one person who was lost but had been found. He just told them the parable of the Prodigal Son who had turned away from his father and squandered is rightful inheritance. He is talking about them. And he turns and tells them, "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." It is a message of salvation. Did you hear it?

Let me rephrase it. But before I do, let me explain a portion of the verse that is controversial...some say mis-interpreted. The word is "it". Make friends by means of dishonest wealth so that when "it" is gone (insinuating the wealth), they may welcome you into their eternal homes. The thing is that many scholars believe, and many translations reflect, that "it" should be "you". And that seems to fit better, at least to me.

So here is how this verse could be, and I think should be, heard. Make disciples with all the dishonest wealth that you have obtained so that when "you" are gone, those disciples will welcome you into eternity. Use your ill-gotten gains in order to share the Good News of salvation so that when you pass from this world, heaven will receive you, and the angels will rejoice, as you come into your eternal home. It is a call to repentance and salvation. Turn from your dishonesty and self-focus and reapply the resources at your disposal, ill-gotten or not, for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, now let me take just another minute to ramble a bit. First of all, if you read or heard this passage and felt deeply troubled by the apparent message commending and condoning dishonesty, good for you. You should have. You felt that way because you know that that message is incompatible with the totality of Scripture. So, why is it I wonder, that so many want to focus on the dishonesty and make it the primary message? I think that it is because in the world we are trapped in a crisis of vision. We are stuck in seeing things in a certain way because of the way the world bears down on us. Our secular leaders, and even our next door neighbors, tell us that we should change the teachings of our faith to fit the reality of the modern world.

We focus on the dishonesty because it makes sense to us. We see it all around us. We see everything through a lens of the negative because the clarity of the positive is being wiped from our experience.

I read an article this week that might apply. It was about what happens while we sleep. Now, I'm no scientist, but I am going to give it a try. It goes like this...when we experience things in our lives memories are created through the creation of synaptic connections created in our brains. At night, while we sleep, the synaptic connections in our brain that get used less, that are extraneous to our personal existence, get marked with a protein called C1q. During our sleep a particular cell binds with these proteins and those synapses are eliminated in order to make room for new ones. By extension this means that those things that are less important to us, or less prevalent in our lives, are culled from our conscience thinking in order to support and expand those things that have been reinforced through our ongoing experiences. As a result, we see the world through the lens that we are creating because of the things that we are continuously exposed to.

Do you see where this is going? Could it be that we readily see and focus on the dishonesty in our passage rather than stewardship and salvation because we see it everywhere, even, maybe, in places where it doesn't exist? When our experiences of love within the world tells us that love is just an emotion or simply an act of physical passion, then those synapses are

strengthened while those that show us a deeper form of sacrificial love atrophy and are eliminated through the lack of reinforcement. When our world tells us, over and over again, to focus on self and let others take care of themselves, eventually we become literally blinded to any other way of being. When society continuously pits one group against another, one race against another, one socio-economic group against another, then each night, as we sleep, the memory of any other way of existence is quietly scrubbed from our perception. They waste away and are discarded because they don't fit, not having been reinforced.

In the end, when we choose to focus on fear, we will never see Joy. When we allow ourselves to be accepting of lies, we will, eventually, not be able to see the truth. And, as our parable teaches, when we choose to focus on the things of the material world, we will lose the ability to see God.

No one can serve two masters; they will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and the things of the world.

Amen