

“Find Us Faithful”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 16:1-13

How many of you find this parable of the “shrewd manager” confusing? I know I do! I always have, really. This is the one parable Jesus tells that I have just never been able to figure out. Now certainly, many of Jesus’ parables require continual study; that we might grow by discovering the fuller and fuller meanings of Jesus’ words. But the thing about this parable we heard this morning is that it’s so confusing. For me at least, this parable seems so inconsistent with the rest of Jesus’ teachings, and it’s hard to understand why he lifted up this shrewd manager as an example to be followed! So, though I have long avoided this parable, writing it off as too complicated, I decided this morning to preach on it. I am hopeful that by facing this parable head on in search of its full meaning, we might all come to a greater understanding of its meaning, and of Jesus’ teachings for our lives!

Indeed, there are lots of ways this parable could be understood. And certainly, scholars and theologians still do not agree on the exact message Jesus was trying to convey here to the disciples and Pharisees. I read four different commentaries as I prepared this sermon, and each one had a different interpretation of the meaning of this parable about the shrewd manager. A cursory reading would make it seem as if Jesus was teaching that it’s okay, or maybe even wise, to cheat your boss. We might also get the idea from this parable that you can buy your way into heaven; using our worldly wealth for ourselves in order to prepare our eternal dwellings. That’s what Jesus seems to be telling us in verse 9 when he says, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

Certainly, it may all seem quite confusing, but we do well to remember that Jesus was consistent in his message. And one of Jesus’ very clear messages was that worldly wealth used selfishly does not get us anywhere in our journey with God. His message is no different here. Jesus is teaching us about how to prepare for the

future, and to prepare for a future with God, we have to be generous and faithful now. Through this parable, Jesus emphasizes the importance of using our worldly assets to help our friends in need, and he challenges us to be as clever and prudent as the steward in ensuring our future.

Now, don't get me wrong, this parable of the shrewd manager does not condone dishonest thievery. Rather, this parable turns on the steward's shrewd response to the urgency of his situation. Jesus is trying to urge upon his listeners the fact that we too are in the midst of a crisis that demands an urgent decision if disaster is to be avoided. Faced with the loss of his position, the dishonest steward acted decisively to provide for his future. Likewise, one who hears the gospel knows that just such a decisive act is required of any who will stake their all on the coming kingdom of God. In essence, Jesus is saying, "Look at the shrewdness, the enthusiasm, with which the sleazy shysters and charlatans of this world acquire riches for themselves. If you, the children of light, could marshal just a fraction of that cleverness for God's work, for serving others, what good could be accomplished?"

"The people of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." That means that if only we Christians were as eager and ingenious in our attempts to attain goodness as the man of the world was in his attempt to attain money and comfort, we would be much better people; much better Christians. If only we would give as much attention to the things which concern our souls as we do the things which concern our business! Our Christianity will begin to be real and effective only when we spend as much time and effort on it as we do on our worldly activities.

So, what exactly is the shrewd behavior that Jesus seeks from his followers? Well, one clue is found in this parable itself, and it has to do with how we use our resources, and how we act as stewards. Do any of you know the origination of the word steward? The original meaning of the word steward is "a ward of the sty, or a keeper of pigs." Sty-ward. It goes back to a simple way of life, but it still has force to us as Christians – we are God's agent to rule a lower level of life. We are not to immerse ourselves in this lower world – our job is not hoarding of wealth or fencing it for our own pleasure, but the proper circulation and use of it in God's sight.

When the steward learned that he was to lose his job, he didn't call the people to him, collect their debts and then skip town with all the Master's money. We must always be on guard against miserliness and the lure of quick money. And though this steward might have fallen into that trap originally, he didn't this time. He took his fate and turned it into an opportunity to secure his future by making friends with the people who owed money to his Master. He reduced their debts in order to gain friends. "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Jesus' words here are not focused on a selfish motive, but on our obligation to help those in need. In essence, Jesus is saying, "Help the poor now in this world, and they will help you in the next." This is not some sort of shrewdly calculating charity, but a life lived in compassion and in sight of eternity. God wants us to come into his eternal presence, and one of the ways we do that is by fervently working to seek God's will and to help those in need in any way we can!

If we can be faithful stewards with the "little" we have here, then God knows that we will be faithful with his eternal reward, our "treasure in heaven." God wants us to be fervent in our pursuit of his will and his kingdom, and if we are, we will be rewarded greatly. That means we have to lay aside selfish covetousness and humble ourselves as servants at the throne of God. "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."

Perhaps you all are familiar with the passage from Joshua, "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." And the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!" Wealth can become a master; materialism enslaves us. But wealth can also serve as a means and opportunity for securing one's place in God's kingdom if used shrewdly for the sake of others. God requires exclusive loyalty. So choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve; make an investment in your future and serve God faithfully with all of yourself!

I leave you with this paraphrase from preacher Fred Craddock, "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a

queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat." And these are the investments we should be making. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." It's the way of the future!

1 Timothy 2:1-7 (NLT)

Instructions about Worship

2 I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. **2** Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. **3** This is good and pleases God our Savior, **4** who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. **5** For,

There is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. **6** He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone.

This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time. **7** And I have been chosen as a preacher and apostle to teach the Gentiles this message about faith and truth. I'm not exaggerating—just telling the truth.

L: The Word of God, for the People of God!

P: Thanks be to God! Amen!