

NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 11

“THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER”

Luke 16: 1-15

Earlier this week on one of the Cable News channels, a story was reported about the Catholic Churches effort to continue, and even increase the number of foreigners coming to America. I know this is a controversial issue, and we don't have time to consider it completely today, but I want to make a tie from this story to our scripture text today. The story went on to interview a priest and a few 'experts' who are questioning the Catholic Churches motives for wanting these 'illegals' to come to America. The experts stated that if the Catholics were serious they would build schools and provide services for these people, and even construct and operate their own prisons to deal with the criminal element crossing our borders.

Then the kicker; one expert sneeringly proposed that the real reason the Catholic Church was so interested in helping these illegal immigrants get to America was so they could line their fiscal pocketbooks with these poor people's money. The impression he clearly wanted to leave was that the church had no real intention of helping to better these people's lives, but simply to further their "real purpose for existing," which was to make themselves (ourselves, the Church) rich! I was appalled at the arrogance and ignorance reported as 'news' by a supposed 'expert.'

Without entering the debate about immigrants, (by the way, which most of our ancestors were at one time or another) I think this story interestingly introduces us to our text; that tells another story from the lips of Jesus. This time, it's about a shrewd manager who mismanages his master's affairs, yet is given credit; even held up as an example of admirable accounting, for his shrewdness. Listen to the story, and then we'll talk;

¹Jesus told this story to his disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a manager handling his affairs. One day a report came that the manager was wasting his employer's money. ²So the employer called him in and said, 'What's this I hear about you? Get your report in order, because you are going to be fired.'

³"The manager thought to himself, 'Now what? My boss has fired me. I don't have the strength to dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg. 'Ah, I know how to ensure that I'll have plenty of friends who will give me a home when I am fired.'

⁵"So he invited each person who owed money to his employer to come and discuss the situation. He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe him?' ⁶The man replied, 'I owe him eight hundred gallons of olive oil.' So the manager told him, 'Take the bill and quickly change it to 400 gallons.'

⁷" 'And how much do you owe my employer?' he asked the next man. 'I owe him a thousand bushels of wheat,' was the reply. 'Here,' the manager said, 'take the bill and change it to 800 bushels.'

⁸"The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with the world around them than are the children of the light. ⁹Here's the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.

¹⁰"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own?

¹³"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

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This is now the 11th Parable we have considered, and I am not sure any have been more difficult to understand and interpret, but we'll give it a go. Even Luke apparently had a hard time making sense of it, for he concludes 4 different times, with 4 different 'lessons'. Sort of like a sermon I heard recently, a great sermon, but the preacher should of and could of ended at 3 or 4 different places! I'm sure I've been guilty of that too. Let's take a look at each of the lessons Luke tries to draw from this interesting parable:

1. THE CHILDREN OF THIS WORLD ARE WISER THAN THE CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT.

This lesson would certainly be “Amen-ed” by the knucklehead giving the anti-catholic, anti-church interview on behalf of keeping America’s borders closed to illegal immigrants. But let’s put it into its broader context. The actual text states: *“And it is true that the children of this world are more shrewd in “dealing with the world around them” than are the children of the light.”* It is obvious that those people sharing this world’s views, values and standards, would be shrewder than those of us claiming to follow Jesus, who adhere to a different set of views and values. But the point within the parable is deeper.

We must note that the parable deals with the dishonest antics of a set of rascals. The steward was obviously a rascal and a quick-witted one at that. He had pilfered from his master’s business, and he proposed to escape the consequences of one misdemeanor by plunging into a series of others. The debtors were obviously quite content to be dishonest and to alter their agreements as fast as they could if they could get away with it. The parable ushers on to the stage a set of extremely unsatisfactory characters. Think of our question; who is the hero in this parable? Now to the point.

If Christians were as keen on their Christianity as these men were on their dubious business it would be a vastly different world. Jesus is saying, ‘Look at the way the worldly rascal works for the things he values; if we would work at our Christianity with the same enthusiasm we would be much better people, and we’d live in a much different world.’ It’s not wrong or hard for Christians to learn lessons and draw conclusions, even from suspect stories, or worldly examples. As long as we learn the lessons and don’t imitate the behaviors.

2. USE YOUR ‘WORLDLY’ RESOURCES TO BENEFIT OTHERS AND MAKE FRIENDS.

We must be clear to put the word 'worldly' in quotation marks, for emphasis. We must remember that all our resources are God's and come from God, and belong to God, and are to be used for God. Only those that squander them inappropriately make them 'worldly'.

In the NT Mammon stands for all material things on which people set their hearts. So then this means, 'Use your material possessions to benefit others, to lead others to Christ, and, to make friends that will join you on the journey to heaven, so that in the day of trouble you may reap the benefit of these friendships, just as the steward used his control of money to make friends for himself.

With that clear, let's consider the 3 basis human attitudes towards money, and see if we can make sense of this second lesson.

A) We may regard money as our enemy.

This would be the attitude of certain ancient ascetics who despised anything material and either lived off the land, or at the good will of generous people. But my question is if we all adopted this attitude, who would be able to be the generous benefactors. There are strains of this asceticism alive in Christ's church today. There are some who view anything material, or associated with money, as worldly and wicked, and thus to be avoided. Most of us are smart enough to know how stupid that is. We'll consider a more common, and opposite approach to money next.

B) We may regard money as our master.

Here, the Christian Church of the late 20th and early 21st Century, gives me pause. Again, though most of us are smart enough to know better, there are many unscrupulous 'Christian Leaders' (again note quotation marks) who are fleecing the members of their flocks by their ungodly and unbiblical, and frankly, evil practice of making the Christian religion all about money.

Sowing faith pledges, and trying to out give God, and giving what you don't have, in order for God to see your faith, are all examples of misappropriate expressions of the Christian faith, and would cause Jesus to cringe too.

Along with that are those Christian and non, who are making money their master by making it in dishonest ways, hoarding it, being a slave to it and its promise of power. Those who worship money, and work for the sole purpose of MORE. They are just as guilty.

B) We may regard money as our friend.

Money is neither good nor bad in and of itself, only given such value by the ways we use it. Money is a necessary part of existence in the ancient and modern world. We must use it wisely and share it unselfishly. We must give back to God what belongs to God, and remember even what we have left, is really His too! We must invest it wisely and save it intelligently, and spend it judiciously, and respect its power appropriately.

This second lesson can reveal much about a person's character, values, integrity and even our faith, by observing how we look at and handle money.

3. IF YOU ARE FAITHFUL IN LITTLE THINGS, YOU WILL BE FAITHFUL IN LARGE ONES.

This is a practical lesson, learned in reverse. Obviously the master's servant was unfaithful, untrustworthy, and though he may believe he has bought off his 'friends' with his unscrupulous actions, they will never be able to trust him again either. It takes a long time to reestablish trust, doesn't it?

We are given this same test. When we begin the adventure of following Jesus, we are given opportunities, even tests, to help us measure our progress in the faith.

Just like a good teacher tests his/her students to help them see and measure their learning, God gives us little things to test our faith, all in preparation for the large things that will likely come our way too.

Remember God never gives us more than we can handle, and when it seems that way, its only a test, and we must deal with the large obstacles and opportunities the same way we did the small ones.

It was not hard as a young person to tithe on \$10 a week, now it's more of a challenge if you are making a hundred or a thousand, to write that weekly check. It's not hard to believe God can heal you from a natural head cold, but how about facing lung cancer, or stroke? It hardly requires any faith to find that first job, but with 4 kids, and 3 cars, and 2 homes and 1 banker, being unemployed later in life requires much more faith, doesn't it? But the principle cannot be any clearer; be faithful in the little things, and you'll have enough faith to manage the big things too!

4. **NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS.**

Jesus concludes this parable by pointing directly at the Pharisees and challenging their well-known reputation for emphasizing money, to the ignorance of many other duties. Churches need money to operate, just like Christians do to live, but when money moves from it's natural position as a tool God uses to enable us to live, and a tool to help us spread the good news; to being a status symbol, or a tool for self-advancement, then we've crossed the line. I have a wealthy Doctor friend in Mitchell, SD who is fond of saying, "It costs a lot to have money." I think he is right.

Our allegiances cannot be mixed. We cannot be part lover of God, and lover of money. We cannot worship God an hour a week and ignore God the rest of the week. We cannot be self-serving 6 days a week and impress God with our service to Him on the 7th. We cannot live for money 60 hours a week and impress God with our pittance in the plates on Sunday Morning.

These are the lessons, hard as they are to understand, and we must apply them. The story of the shrewd manager can teach us if we let it. The example of an unknowing unbelieving 'expert' doesn't define The Catholic Church's motivation or our own! We must be; wise with our cash,
 gracious with our giving,
 faithful in large and small ways, and
 consistently servicing only one Master.

It's His story, but I'm sticking to it!

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- B) We may regard money as our _____.
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