“An Embezzling Agent Teaches About Heaven,” Luke 16:1-13 (Second Sunday After Epiphany, January 14, 2024)

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. **2**And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ **3**And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. **4**I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ **5**So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ **6**He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ **7**Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ **8**The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. **9**And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

**10**“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. **11**If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? **12**And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? **13**No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

PRAY

We have a practice at Grace Bible Church to spend our Sunday mornings in the spring, in those weeks leading up to Easter, studying one of the gospels of the New Testament. We began studying the gospel of Luke in January 2019, so this will be our sixth spring looking at this book and, Lord willing, we’ll wrap up our study in Luke next year.

We’re Luke 16 this morning, which is mostly made up of two parables told by Jesus (a parable is a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson). Today we’re looking at what is usually called “The Parable of the Unjust Steward” or “Unjust Manager.” The focus of this parable is ***money.*** Jesus means to answer the question, “How should a follower of Jesus Christ think about and use his or her wealth?”

I’ll have three points to my talk, and then all who follow Jesus are welcome to take the Lord’s Supper: *first, the meaning of the parable.* *Second, the mindset commended by the parable.* *Third, the moral of the parable.*

First, the meaning of the parable. It’s universally agreed that, of all the parables Jesus told, this is the toughest one to understand. Lots of brilliant scholars over the centuries have wrestled with it. I had to worker harder on this sermon than any I can remember in a long time.

As it opens you have two characters: first, there’s the “rich man.” We read in verses 5-7 that he’s owed tremendous amounts of olive oil and wheat. Therefore, he is probably a large landowner who leases his land to big farming operations (there’s a lot of these arrangements that go on in Mississippi every single year, especially in the Delta). These big farmers, in turn, pay the rich man rent with a portion of the crops they raise.

The second character is the rich man’s manager. In our society, we might call the manager an “agent.” He’s someone who has complete authority to not only negotiate but also sign contracts on behalf of his client. He has “power of attorney.” Obviously, you’d want only the most trustworthy, hard-working people in such a position.

But this manager is neither trustworthy nor hard-working. He’s been “wasting” the rich man’s possessions, probably due to his laziness. He worked hard at first, got himself into a well-paid position, but then coasted likely because he thought he finally had it made.

The rich man hears about the waste and tells his manager, “You’re fired. You cannot work for me anymore.” But in firing the manager the rich man made a HUGE mistake. Those of you studying management at Ole Miss or those who manage people now as a part of your job pay attention. The rich man fires his manager but doesn’t immediately make him pack up, turn in his keys, and get out of the office. He doesn’t have security escort his manager off the premises. The rich man doesn’t take out an ad in the local newspaper saying, “This man is no longer authorized to transact business on my behalf.” Instead, the rich man lets the manager keep working for a few days after he’s fired. That’s a colossal mistake.

Because though he’s been lazy, the manager is after all a “shrewd” man (we read that in verse 8). To be shrewd is to be clever, astute, someone who if you give him the smallest opening knows how to exploit it to his benefit. He was shrewd enough to get the job in the first place, and now that he’s been terminated he puts his brains to work once again.

He goes to a couple of these big farmers who are renting land from his boss and he reduces the amount of their rent. It’s notoriously difficult to determine how much something two thousand years ago is worth in today’s dollars, but I think it’s safe to say that the manager saves these two farmers something like hundreds of thousands of dollars each.

The manager cuts these bills, costing the rich man all this money, yet we read in verse 8 that when the master finds out about it he “commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.” In other words, the boss tells his manager, “Nice work!”

Now, does that follow to you? Why in the world would the rich man commend his manager who cost him thousands if not millions of dollars? And why did the manager cut those bills? Just out of spite? There are many different theories out there that try to make sense of what’s going on. I won’t make the mistake I think so many pastors make of listing the different theories and then letting you know which one I think is correct.

Instead, I’ll just go ahead and tell you how I understand this parable. When he discovers he’s fired, the manager at first begins to panic. That’s verse 3: “And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’”

But remember, he’s shrewd. He’s not dumb. He knows how to work a situation to his advantage. Therefore, after thinking about it for a little while, the manager comes up with a plan.

He calls these farmers to him and cuts their rents. In so doing the manager is not stealing, because he has the authority to make these contracts. He’s the one who negotiated these rents in the first place. Today, this would be considered at minimum a breach of a fiduciary duty, at worst embezzling, but in that time and culture it was a legal action.

No, the worst that can be said of the manager in that time is that, in cutting these bills, he is squandering the rich man’s property. But remember, he’s already been accused of that. That’s nothing new; it’s why he was fired in the first place!

***Therefore, accused of squandering, the manager just squanders some more!*** But whereas before the manager squandered out of laziness, now the manager squanders with a purpose. In verse 4 he says, “I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.”

In the ancient world, if someone did you good, you were obligated to pay them back. When the manager cut the rents of these wealthy farmers, they were bound by the honor code of the time to provide for him by welcoming him into their homes after he’s fired and make sure he’s cared for.

And the rich man can only look on his manager’s plan and smile. The rich man can’t prosecute the manager, nor can he get his money back. Everything was done on the up-and-up. He can’t fire the man a second time. He can’t even complain about the manager, because everyone in the community is now praising the rich man’s generosity in cutting the rents! All the rich man can do is say, “You got me. I should have had security escort you off the property the moment I fired you, but I didn’t. I left the smallest door open, and you took advantage of it.”

The manager, though out of a job, figured out a way to provide for himself and he’s set for years to come. The manager had indeed acted cleverly and shrewdly. That’s the meaning of the parable.

Second, what’s the mindset commended by the parable? Jesus tells this parable with a purpose. He wants his disciples to do something differently with their lives for having heard the parable. What is the change he wants in his followers? He tells us in verse eight. Through the rich man, Jesus commends the manager and says, “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.” In other words, Jesus says to his followers, “I want you to be more like the manager!”

Now, does that mean Jesus wants us to ***act*** like the manager? Does he want us to trick our employers or embezzle funds? Does he want us to ingratiate ourselves with people wealthier than us so that we can land on our feet in case we lose our jobs?

Of course not. What Jesus commends is not the manager’s actions, nor his goals, ***but his focus, because the manager has a laser-like focus on money.*** The manager is a “son of the world” (that’s from verse 8). A “son of the world” is someone who lives as if this world is all there is. He’s not worried about God, and he’s not worried about life after death. He’s only worried about this physical world and the things he needs to be comfortable and secure in this life on this earth.

Therefore, if you’re a “son of the world,” if this life is all there is, then nothing is more important to you than money. How could there be anything more important? After all, money buys you food. It buys you security and shelter. It can often buy you other people’s attention, and it certainly buys you health care when you get sick, and if this world is all there is then you want to stay healthy as long as you can, enjoy everything money can buy because when you die, that’s it. If this world is all there is, then, like the manager, ***you will work like crazy to get money so that you can take care of yourself now.***

If this parable were told today, if we were going to update it for a modern audience, instead of it being about an unjust manager you might build it around the TV show *Succession.* If you’ve never seen it, it’s about a Rupert Murdoch-like media mogul and his four adult children who are all scheming to take over the company from their aging father. Everyone on the show is a “son of the world;” they are proudly godless people, but as a result they are intensely focused. All they care about is the company and the money they can make with it. They spend every waking moment plotting how they can take over once Dad dies, and so if you told this parable today you might end it with, “The master commended the children on *Succession* for their shrewdness and determination in taking over the company.”

Jesus, in telling the parable, commends the manager’s determination to get money, ***and he challenges his followers to have the same intensity of focus when it comes to money.***

Maybe you’re thinking, “Wow. I wasn’t expecting that. I thought Christians were supposed to be different. I thought they weren’t supposed to love money. I thought Christians were supposed to be generous people.” That’s right, we are. ***But that’s also why Jesus is such a good storyteller.***  He shocks us by holding the manager out as an example, but then he brings it home with a twist and applies it to his people.

Third, the moral of the parable. The truth is Christians already focus on money. We can check on our money all the time. Thirty years ago, the only way to find out how much money you had in the bank was to either physically go to the bank and ask or wait for your monthly statement in the mail. The only way you could check on your investments was wait for the stock quotes to come out in the paper the next day. Now you can check on your money all the time. Just pull out your phone. Christians, like everyone else, focus plenty on their money; ***it’s just that we focus on it for the wrong reasons.***

We keep tabs on our money, like the manager in the parable, to make sure we have enough. But Jesus says, “Don’t worry about how much money you have, because God provides for you.” “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26**Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” Matthew 6:25-26.

Jesus wants us to focus on money like the manager, but not for the reason the manager does. Verse 9 is the key to the whole parable: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

Now what does that mean? It means that when it comes to our money, Christians must be shrewd with their finances and ask, ***“How can I wisely invest this money to fill heaven with more people?”***

What are some ways we can do that? Obviously, it can mean giving to missionaries and to campus ministries, funding those who take the gospel to people who have not yet heard. It means supporting people who go on mission trips. It includes giving to the church, because through the work of the church people are shepherded and the Word of God is proclaimed.

But it does not mean giving to just anyone who asks. Christians have a reputation for being easy marks. If someone or some organization asks for help, a lot of us feel like we have to give, right? You get invited to some fundraiser and it’s almost like you feel guilty if you don’t give, no matter how inept the people in charge might seem. But Jesus says, “Be shrewd with your money. The manager made sure he got a return on his investment. You are to use your wealth to make friends for yourselves in heaven, and that means knowing who you’re giving to and being certain they’re competent to do the work of missions, evangelism, teaching, and shepherding.”

Jesus certainly means for us to give to the poor. The second half of Luke 16 is about a rich man who failed to give to the poor beggar outside his front door. By generously giving to the needy in the name of Jesus Christ, we show forth the glory of God and win a hearing for the gospel.

I think, for parents, investing this money also means gladly paying the bills that inevitably come with having children. It is easy for Christian parents to frustrate their children by making comments about how expensive they are, as if they are a drag on their lifestyle. What if, instead, parents don’t complain about finances in front of their children? What if they quietly pray to God for their daily bread? It’s not that Mom and Dad never tell their children “No, you can’t have that” or “Yes, you can have it, but you’re going to have to work for it.” It’s just that the kids grow up in an environment devoid of financial anxiety. All they know is they’ve always had what they need. And then, perhaps, when those children grow up and become adults themselves, their default attitude when it comes to money is “God will provide,” and the next generation is even more empowered to sharpen their focus on money to “make friends” for heaven.

***Jesus, in telling this parable, says, “You see how focused the people of this world are on using money for themselves out of fear of what might happen to them? You see how clever and shrewd they are in making sure they get a return on their investment? I want you to be just as focused to use money to serve other people and populate heaven with them.”***

Now, the problem with talking about how we use our money is that it so easily devolves into guilt, because we all know we’re not doing this enough. Does anyone remember the movie *Schindler’s List*? It’s about a wealthy German industrialist named Oskar Schindler, who, during World War II, saved the lives of 1200 Jews by employing them in his factories and bribing Germany Army and SS officers to prevent their execution. By the end of the war he’d spent his entire fortune to rescue these people from the concentration camps.

At the end of the movie, it’s the end of the war. The Russians are approaching Schindler’s factory and so, as a German, he’s got to get out of there. The people he’s saved are gathered around him to say goodbye. But as he’s about to leave he says, “I didn’t do enough. I could have done so much more.” He’s spent his entire fortune saving people from death camps, but he still feels guilty. He looks at his car and says, “Why did I keep it? That’s ten more people I could have saved.” He pulls a pin off his suit jacket and says, “This is gold. I could have saved two more people with this.” He breaks down sobbing, and even though 1200 people are saying, “Thank you” he refuses to be comforted. He just keeps saying, “I could have done more.”

Heaven won’t be like that. There are no regrets in heaven over not doing enough, nor will there be tears. We won’t feel like Oskar Schindler in heaven, lamenting how we could have done more. But we will feel like those Jewish people he saved. ***In heaven, we will walk up to others and say, “Thank you for giving, serving, and sacrificing. I’m here because of you.”***

I have people I will thank in heaven, people who have walked with me along the way, people I know personally, and people I don’t know personally yet who through their preaching and writing have helped me. But in heaven all the books will be opened, and I will know more fully all those who gave and supported the people I know to thank right now. I’ll make those connections, I’ll see the fine weave of the tapestry, and a large part of the glory of heaven will be following up on all those connections and saying, “Thank you. I’m here because of you.”

***Here's my challenge to you, Christians: don’t you want people in heaven to thank you, too?*** When you’re in heaven you will know that nothing is more important than being there, and no expense was too great to help even one person to get in. If you know you’re going to feel that way in heaven then, and if it’s God who provides for you on earth anyway, ***why not start shrewdly investing your money for heaven now?***  Use your unrighteous wealth so that when it fails (and it will fail; no one’s bank account ever helped them even one day after their death) you will have friends to receive you into eternal dwellings.

But I must say I am glad that verse 9 reads the way it does. Because what if Jesus had said, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails **God** may receive you into the eternal dwellings”? In other words, what if Jesus had said, “You better make friends for heaven with your money or God may not let you go to heaven”?

If verse 9 read like that I couldn’t take it. It would crush me. You talk about financial anxiety? I would constantly worry that I wasn’t doing enough, and I would never have any joy or peace.

But, praise God, you don’t go to heaven based on how you use your money. You know how you go to heaven? We’re about to take the Lord’s Supper, the bread and the cup. They represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus Christ is that even though we are sinners and we are selfish and we love money and we hate to use it on anyone but ourselves and therefore we deserve to be condemned by God to hell, God loved us enough so that in Jesus Christ the penalty we deserve for our sins is paid. His body was broken, and his blood was shed on the cross so that God might be just and punish sins but also so that we might have eternal life.

And you qualify for this salvation not by how you use your money, but simply by knowing your need. One of my favorite verses when it comes to salvation is Isaiah 55:1: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

All you must do to be welcomed by God into eternal dwellings, my friends, is to say, “I’m hungry, God, for that which only you can provide. I have a thirst that only you can quench. I’m broken, God, in a way that only you can heal. Help me.”

Friends, if that’s you this morning, then I invite you to come to this table to eat and drink. God will welcome you into eternal dwellings. And once you know that, I charge you to use your money to make friends who will receive you there, too. AMEN