

## Luke 16:1-13

Jesus also said to his disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager who was accused of wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup>The rich man called him in and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you can no longer be manager.’

<sup>3</sup>“The manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, since my master is taking away the management position from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup>I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from my position as manager, people will receive me into their houses.’

<sup>5</sup>“He called each one of his master’s debtors to him. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup>He said, ‘Six hundred gallons of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and write three hundred.’ <sup>7</sup>Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘Six hundred bushels of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write four hundred and eighty.’

<sup>8</sup>“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are. <sup>9</sup>I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings. <sup>10</sup>The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much. <sup>11</sup>So if you have not been faithful with unrighteous *mammon* who will entrust you with what is really valuable? <sup>12</sup>If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own? <sup>13</sup>No servant can serve two masters. Indeed, 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 *mammon*.”

## The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

### I.

There was a big story in the news when I first moved to Grand Rapids. Barton and Krista Watson had created a scam front-company called CyberNet and had bilked investors and even banks out of millions of dollars which they used to live lavish lifestyles. When lenders wanted to see their operation before loaning them more money, employees were sent to hook up lights and wires to empty server boxes so that it looked like they were functioning in a huge data center.

Then there’s the name Bernie Madoff. He created a Ponzi scheme and convinced investors it was a legitimate investment tool. He stole billions of dollars from unsuspecting investors.

Managers who have begun legitimate businesses have pulled off much the same thing. David McQueen was the mastermind of a \$46 million Ponzi scheme right here in West Michigan. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison after bilking many clients of their life savings.

Charities, including churches, can find their treasurer to be stealing some of the donations. That’s why at Holy Trinity we have a good auditing system. Not only does it protect the congregation, it protects our treasurer from having accusations brought against him.

### II.

Greed is a common problem. It isn’t just the poor who are greedy to have something rather than living in poverty. Some think the rich have a corner on greed because they always seem to want to acquire more, but many of them aren’t greedy at all. Being poor or being rich doesn’t identify you as greedy. Greed is an attitude of the heart. Greed is not an isolated problem, but something that is pervasive in every culture.

When it comes to fraudsters like the Watsons of CyberNet or Ponzi scheme masterminds like Bernie Madoff, eventually they get caught. That’s what happened to the dishonest manager in Jesus’ parable. His employer became aware of his fraud, confronted him with the overwhelming evidence, and fired him.

The dishonest manager used his logic. He was about to be unemployed. The more-or-less “honest” alternatives were unappealing to him. He didn’t want to stand on the street corner with his sign in hand—“homeless; family of 5; anything will help”—hoping the chariot drivers would roll

down their windows and hand him a 5 or a 10 or a 20. Certainly he didn't want to perform manual labor—*that* was beneath his dignity.

Since he was already caught, what would a little more dishonesty matter? Before anyone else could hear about what had happened, he pulled up his contact list and called a bunch of the company's customers. He could glad-hand some of the contacts and make deals with them. His employer was soon to be his *ex*-employer. The customers wouldn't know he wasn't really acting on behalf of his employer, and the altered ledgers would look completely legal. When the manager was unemployed, he could seek out these business contacts who would remember how much he had helped each of them with their bottom lines.

Jesus concludes his parable this way: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (Luke 16:8, EHV). It certainly wasn't the morality of the manager which the master commended—his morality was reprehensible. What the master commended was the manager's shrewdness. Someone who is shrewd uses his intelligence to think things out carefully.

Then Jesus inserts his own commentary: "For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are" (Luke 16:8, EHV). Worldly people often act decisively in a crisis. They know how to CYP—Cover Your Posterior. They know how to "look out for number one." They know how to take advantage of the situation.

Shrewdness in dealing with finances doesn't happen by accident. Our society revolves around it. Young people plan their lives according to money. What kind of training do I need to get the kind of job I want? Will it be vocational school or college? A shrewd young person weighs the cost versus the financial rewards in the kind of job that can be expected when the training is completed.

Things have changed in the past century. These days people not only change jobs, but routinely change entire professions. It is no longer uncommon for people to have three or more different professions during their working careers. Many who have been in the workforce for years go back to school to facilitate this change in career. Perhaps they are seeking a better income, perhaps they just want to enter a career field they find more fulfilling, but the same shrewd weighing of the cost comes into play.

Even when one is rapidly approaching retirement or already retired, money is something we continue to focus on. Investments, taxes, retirement plans, and Social Security. Financial planners help people wade through the mine-field of dealing with their money even into retirement.

Remember the parable of the rich fool from the gospel of several weeks ago? He didn't have enough room to store all the produce from his bumper crop, so he built bigger barns. Before he could enjoy all the wealth he had accumulated, he died. Worldly cleverness with money turns out to be the height of foolishness. Money does not conquer death. Money does not restore our relationship with God. Depending on money; focusing all our attention or too much attention on acquiring money, runs the risk of cutting ourselves off from the *real* blessings God wants us to have—eternal life.

### III.

That really gets to the heart of why Jesus said: "For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are. <sup>9</sup>I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:8-9, EHV). You see, Christians know something worldly people don't know. We know what the *real* future is—heaven. Do you *live* as though *that* were true? Do you live as though heaven were uppermost in your mind?

Paul says in the Second Lesson for today: "God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> ... wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup>For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:3-6, EHV). Jesus paid the price for us, not with gold or silver, not with money, but with his own holy precious blood and his innocent sufferings and death. He did this to free us from the enslavement to all the idolatries of life, including money.

#### IV.

So what does the Christian who knows about this do? Look again at what Jesus says: “I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings. <sup>10</sup>The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much” (Luke 16:9-10, EHV). God has given every believer something to be faithful with.

Every Christian has been given time—a lifetime of grace. Knowing what we do about the eternal future that is in store for us, we ought to be about the task of making friends for eternity. In other words, we ought to be sharing the good news that Paul told us—that Jesus gave himself as a ransom for sin, because God wants all to be saved and to be in heaven. Some people live a longer life than others, but every Christian *will* use the time we have in service to the Lord.

Every Christian has been given talents. No two of us are exactly alike. Each Christian has been given the gift of faith. Each of us has been given other gifts in which to display and share that faith. Whatever you are good at, Christ Jesus can use you in his Kingdom. Each Christian *will* use the talents we have in service to the Lord.

Every Christian has been given money, or the ability to earn money. When Jesus and his disciples were watching the people bringing their money to the temple and depositing it in the basket, a widow threw in coins worth a fraction of a penny. Jesus told the disciples: “Amen I tell you: This poor widow put more into the offering box than all the others. <sup>44</sup>For they all gave out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on” (Mark 12:43-44, EHV). There are several things God expects us to do with our income—take care of our families, pay what we owe in taxes, charitable giving to the needy, and offerings. No matter how much or how little we have, Christians are to use some of their money in service to the Lord.

“The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much. <sup>11</sup>So if you have not been faithful with unrighteous *mammon* who will entrust you with what is really valuable?” (Luke 16:10-11, EHV). What does it mean to be faithful with a very little? The EHV uses renders Jesus’ words: “unrighteous *mammon*.” The footnote explains that *mammon* is an Aramaic term that was transliterated into Greek. It refers to worldly wealth. Worldly wealth, no matter how extensive one’s holdings might be, is a “little thing” to the Christian. It is far less important than spiritual things. “After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26, EHV). None-the-less, a Christian is to be a faithful steward in the use of this “little thing” called money. A faithful steward will administer this “little thing” in such a way that true spiritual riches will be the focus.

“I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9, EHV). Earthly wealth is finite. Your time of life will come to an end. So use that finite wealth of time, talents, and treasures in service to the Lord; doing so will pay dividends. The people whose lives you have touched by your confession of faith and your gifts and offerings to the Lord will thank you in heaven.

“No servant can serve two masters. Indeed, 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 *mammon*” (Luke 16:13, EHV). To the unbeliever, money is an end in and of itself. To the Christian, money is only a means to an end—something to be used in our service to Christ and his Kingdom.

God wants us to be as clever in our use of earthly resources for *his* purposes as the ungodly are in accomplishing the world’s purposes. Respond to those opportunities to show love to your neighbor. Help your neighbor in matters of this world, but especially where you can help in spiritual things. Amen.