

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2006
Luke 16:1-9

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

We Could Take a Lesson from This Crook

1. The dishonest manager was shrewd in worldly matters
2. We are to be shrewd in spiritual matters

^{NIV} Luke 16:1 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.² So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'³ "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg--⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'⁵ "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ "'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'⁷ "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'⁸ "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Fellow managers of God's blessings,

The parable in today's Gospel lesson is challenging and almost shocking. The main character in the parable is a dishonest manager. This fellow is the exact opposite of Joseph, who is described in today's Old Testament lesson. Joseph was a faithful manager and the Bible says that God blessed the household of his Egyptian master because of him. On the other hand, there was more than just a whiff of dishonesty about the manager in the parable. He looted the household of his master rather than managing it faithfully.

It comes as a surprise, then, that Jesus offers this fellow for our emulation. But it's not his poor managerial skills or his dishonesty that Jesus is urging us to imitate. It's his zeal to make friends. And that's what causes us to say that **We Could Take a Lesson from this Crook**. This manager was shrewd. And Jesus urges us to be as shrewd in spiritual matters as this manager was in worldly matters.

1. The dishonest manager was shrewd in worldly matters

In his parable Jesus describes the day on which this manager's dishonesty came back to bite him. The master called his manager in for a meeting. The manager stood accused of wasting his master's possessions. The meeting with the master could have been a time for the manager to prove that he'd been faithful. But neither the master nor the manager seemed to think that an audit was going to show that everything was on the up-and-up. The master had already effectively fired his manager. He told him, "*You can no longer be manager.*" And the manager set to work not to prove he'd been faithful but to pack his parachute. He knew that in a short time he was going to be unemployed and he knew that his employment options were limited. It wasn't likely that anyone would want to hire a manager with a reputation for dishonesty. He wasn't strong enough for manual labor and he was ashamed to resort to begging.

Then it came to him. He says here, "*I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.*" He began calling in his master's debtors. Now here is where we see that the master made a human resources error. He let the manager he suspected of dishonesty remain on the job for a time. That doesn't happen much nowadays. I remember someone telling me how it works when your company no longer needs or wants your services over in the Silicon Valley. The people from security come to your desk, take away your ID badge, hand you a box in which to pack your personal effects, watch you the whole time you pack it, then escort you out the door to the parking lot. It doesn't matter if you were laid off because of changing market conditions or fired for incompetence or misconduct. That's how they do it. It sounds heavy-handed, but they do it that way so that the fired employee doesn't have a chance to take sensitive or valuable material or do something to sabotage the company that just fired him.

The rich man in the parable didn't have such a policy in place and he soon regretted it. The soon-to-be-fired manager had a plan to make a soft landing when he got tossed out. He began calling in his master's debtors and used his managerial authority to discount their bills. The guy who owed 800 gallons of olive oil was given a 50% discount. The fellow who owed a thousand bushels of wheat got a 20% discount. By giving these discounts the manager was ingratiating himself to these debtors. He was making friends for himself. His hope was that those who had benefited from the discounts would remember him later and receive him into their homes. It was a shrewd plan. Even the rich man, whose resources were being squandered yet again, had to hand it to the manager: he was very shrewd.

And that's what Jesus is urging us to imitate. Not the wastefulness. Not the dishonesty. But the shrewdness. He knew the time for him to act was limited, so he worked in the time he had left to make friends. This is where we Christians could take a lesson from this crooked manager.

2. We are to be shrewd in spiritual matters

Jesus bestows a high honor on us believers in this parable. He calls us “people of the light,” in contrast to unbelievers who are called “people of the world.” In Jesus we are people of the light. We were called out of darkness of unbelief into God’s wonderful light. We were once blind to spiritual truth, but by the power of the gospel Jesus has brought life and immortality to light. We were once on our way to hell’s gloomy dungeons, but Jesus burst through death’s door and as a result a bright light penetrated that prison of sin. Now we have the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Jesus, the Light of this dark world, has saved us by his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. And when he saved us, the Light of the world commissioned us to be lights in this dark world. The Lord himself told us to let our light shine, to put our light on a stand and not under a bowl. When our light shines forth, people see our good deeds and are led to praise our Father in heaven.

There’s more. God has made us managers. He has graciously entrusted us, the people of light, with great blessings. The gospel, the means by which we were saved, has now been entrusted to us. We are to go and make disciples of all nations. We are to be Christ’s witnesses in all the world. And God has given us spiritual gifts—all we need to facilitate the mission of saving the lost and nurturing the saints—teachers, leaders, encouragers, and those who serve. And then, in addition, he’s given us material wealth so that we can provide for our needs and the needs of our families, and also so that we can help those in need and advance the kingdom of Christ. What Paul said to the Corinthians can just as appropriately be said of us: **“You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”** (1 Cor. 1:7)

Now this church is not a business; it’s a church. There are significant differences. Terminology is different. The mission is different. The definition of success is different, to name just a few. But there are some points of similarity, even if we use different terminology to describe them.

Our product here in the church, if you can describe it that way, is the gospel. That’s what we’re peddling. (Actually, we’re giving it away for free!) And talk about a product you can believe in! We’re not stuck with something we ourselves don’t trust. We have experienced the gospel’s saving power. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, loved us and gave himself for us. We have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We can’t praise God enough for what he’s done for us through the gospel. **“He saved us,”** Paul says, **“not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”** (Titus 3:5) And this gospel has God’s power to save those who hear it. There’s nothing like this good news that God has entrusted to us. The “product” is unequalled.

But it’s also true that you can have the finest product in the world, yet no one will know about it if you don’t get the message out there. How are we doing at that?

As a church, as a synod, as individuals, are we carrying out our God-given call to “**shine like stars in the universe**”? (Php. 2:15) Are we making known among the nations what God has done, or by our silence are we keeping the wonders of his grace a secret?

And then there’s the matter of productivity. Companies are fond of saying that their greatest resource is their people. How is it with us? Are the called workers, the paid staff, and the various volunteers working diligently and joyfully? Are we faithfully administering the grace God gave us when he called us to serve him? Are we doing all we do to the glory of God, or have ulterior motives and unbecoming attitudes crept in? Are we faithfully serving one another in love, or would we get failing grades on customer service?

Sometimes it seems as if our mission is more like that of the manager in the parable—to take good care of ourselves. It’s possible to become so content with having come to faith that we make little effort to grow in our faith, do precious little to share our faith, or even little apparent living of our faith. No one comes out of this unscathed. It only underscores our need to repent of our sins. We have not always been good managers of the blessings God has entrusted to us. Too often we’ve gotten sidetracked from our mission by our materialistic impulses. Too often the fears that are the result of weak faith have resulted in inactivity. Too frequently we abandoned God’s goals for our own agenda—to the detriment of our stewardship. God could rightly say to us, “*Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.*”

But here’s where God does what no savvy business owner would be willing to do. He forgives us this huge, un-repayable debt—pardons every last penny of it for Jesus’ sake—and entrusts us all over again with the position of manager of his blessings. He says to us, essentially, “Let’s try this again, shall we?” And then, in the last verse of this section, he provides some guidance for serving him. Jesus says, “*I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*”

At first glance you might wonder what Jesus is saying here. It seems to be at odds with other things he said. Does he really want us to buy friends with our worldly wealth, or buy access to heaven? This was a matter of some discussion recently when the wealthy investor, Warren Buffet, announced that in the next few years he would be donating \$37 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation so that it can be used for medical research and education. In the context of giving that gift, Buffet said this: “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” Quite a few people, including a Fordham University priest, understood Mr. Buffet to mean that he thought his lavish charitable donation was going to get him to heaven. In an open letter to the priest, Buffet attempted to set the record straight. He said the “more than one way to get to heaven” quote was his answer to a question about why he had chosen the Gates Foundation to manage his donation. There are others, “but

this (foundation) is a great one. But then he went on to write, “It would be crazy to think that entrance into heaven—if there is such a place—would depend on giving away surplus wealth...” Unfortunately, his assurance that he knows he can’t buy his way into heaven was accompanied by an expression of uncertainty about the existence of heaven.

Let’s start with this: There is a heaven. The Bible says so. There is also a hell. When our life on this earth is over we are going to go either to heaven or to hell and all we have, whether it would fit into a paper sack or would tax the storage capacity of Ft. Knox, will be left behind. Our worldly wealth can be used only while we’re still in this world. With that in mind, Jesus advises us to use our worldly wealth to make friends for ourselves, not the kind of friends the prodigal son had in the previous chapter of this Gospel—friends who left when his money ran out—but the kind of friends we will retain for all eternity. And when we use worldly wealth, which is passing away, for eternal purposes, we will be welcomed when by merits of Jesus we arrive at the eternal dwellings. There we may meet someone who heard about Jesus from us, or someone who heard about Jesus from a missionary whose work we helped to support. There in the eternal dwellings of heaven we may meet someone who was spared from starvation and enabled to hear the gospel by an act of kindness, the consequences of which we never saw while we were on earth.

Can a morally-impaired, out-of-work manager teach us anything? He can! He can teach us the importance of making friends before our time is up. Jesus told this parable because he observed that people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light. But why should it be that way? God has given us the gift of time and, in addition, more spiritual and physical blessings than we can count. He calls us to recognize that he has made us managers of his blessings and urges us to use our blessings to make friends for all eternity. Amen.