



*Money-Wise*

*3rd in the Fall sermon series "Taking Jesus Seriously"*

*Luke 16:1-13*

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, September 22nd, 2019*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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*Text: And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light. (v. 8)*

What are we to make of this parable? Is Jesus commending dishonesty?

And what is it about Jesus and money? He seemed to be obsessed with it.

For example, there's the parable of the rich man who builds bigger barns, the rich man and Lazarus, the rich young ruler who walks away from discipleship, the story of that wee little man named Zacchaeus, the parable of the "talents", turning over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, and today's gospel lesson; the parable of the dishonest manager.

Here are my thoughts on these two questions. Let's look at the second question first; Jesus and money or possessions.

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Jesus knew that there is a very fine line between "owning" things and being "owned" by our things. Take the story of the rich young ruler, for example. He came to Jesus wanting to know how to have eternal life. Jesus told him that the path to eternal life was to keep the commandments, a very Jewish answer. The young man said that he did all of that, but he still felt unsure. Jesus reply? Sell your possessions, give it to the poor, and follow him. Put your trust not in your "things" but in God. At that, the young man walked away because he had a great many "things".

It must be said that Jesus did not consider wealth, money, and "things" or possessions as inherently bad. They are just "things". But things can easily become "gods".

When we identify who we are by what we have or by the position that we hold, we have made something temporal into a "god".

Jesus' parables of the talents illustrates the point. We are entrusted with some of the Creator's things for the limited time that we are on earth. By the grace of God and sometimes coupled with the sweat of our brow, some of us accumulate great wealth. But our wealth is only on loan; it is to be used not only to meet our needs, but to do the work of the Kingdom.

In his sermon on today's gospel lesson John Wesley said that the right use of money is of the utmost of importance to the serious follower of Jesus. Poets and philosophers have too often seen wealth as a source of evil, Wesley said, but the fault lies not with money but with those who use it. When seen correctly, money is a gift from God to be used to do good. In the hands of serious followers of Jesus money is food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, education for the young and shelter for the homeless. With money we care for the widowed and the orphaned, defend the oppressed, and tend to the sick.

Wesley went on to say that there are three rules for money;

**gain all you can,**

**save all you can, and**

**give all you can.**

When he said that we should earn all we can Wesley did not mean that we should sacrifice health or home in the pursuit of wealth, but that we should engage in honest labor and do the best that we can.

There is a tradition that says that St. Augustine was once criticized by his Christian neighbors for buying his sandals from a non-Christian when there was a Christian sandal maker in the same neighborhood. St. Augustine is said to have told his critics that he did too much walking to buy inferior sandals.

Our work should be of highest quality. Years ago the Zenith corporation had a company slogan that said, "The quality goes in before the name goes on."

When Wesley said that a serious follower of Jesus should save all they can he meant that we should not chase "shiny objects".

We live in a radically consumerist society designed to create a sense of permanent discontentment. As a consequence we constantly seek fulfillment by buying more and more things. Most garage and rummage sales are nothing more than a collection of other people's things that no longer satisfy a once burning hunger. We never lost the 50 pounds promised when we bought that treadmill or stationary bike or *bowflex* (*Do you remember the bowflex?*).

Things do not give us worth. Things can not satisfy. Things cannot fill that little void, that hunger that gnaws at our soul. The lesson of Jesus' "Bigger Barns" parable is that if we weigh ourselves on the world's scale we will never have "enough".

Wesley's call to **give all you can** acknowledges that our first responsibility is to take care of the basic needs of our family, while being cognizant of our larger responsibility.

Serious followers of Jesus need to constantly ask themselves if they are being good stewards of those things that God entrusted to them.

So, what was it with Jesus and money? Simply this, he just knew its power to corrupt the soul. Wealth and money are not bad in and of themselves but as the First Letter to Timothy observed, "*the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to become rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.* (6: 10)

Now, let's consider the dishonest steward or manager. A better description of the manager would be "incompetent." The manager was "incompetent" not a thief. The word used to describe him is the same word that Jesus used immediately before this parable about the younger son in the story we commonly call *The Prodigal Son*. *It was said of "the prodigal" that he "squandered" his inheritance. The manager in today's parable "squandered" the rich man's wealth.*

Once the manager realized that his incompetence had caught up with him, he knew that he had a very limited time frame in order to secure his future. In his own mind he was too weak or soft to do manual labor and too proud to beg. So, using the gray matter between his ears, he went to each of the rich man's debtors and gave them a discount.

When the rich man discovered what his manager had done, rather than being angry he was amused and impressed by the manager's ingenuity for he had put the rich man in a bind. No doubt the rich man's debtors told others about the rich man's incredible generosity. His standing in the community rose to heights that he had never before experienced. People would look at him differently on the town square and in every social circle in which he moved.

At the same time, if the rich man went back and corrected the accounts owed to him, he would become in the eyes of everyone a "cheap skate". His reputation would be forever marred.

Do you remember the movie *The Sting*? *Do you remember the joy at seeing the cleverness of "the sting?" I do, and I imagine that the people hearing Jesus' parable would have been delighted at the manager's ingenuity. It is clear by his telling of the story, that Jesus was.*

So here's the point, when it comes to the work of the Kingdom of God we give up too easily. We say that the work is too large or too hard. We look at what we don't have and come up with reasons why we can't do this or that. But what we ought to do, is to be like the manager in Jesus' parable, take an asset inventory, look at our resources and put it to work.

I once read that no church has all of the gifts of the Spirit but each church has the gifts of the Spirit necessary to do the work to which they are called to do.

And lest we miss the point of his parable, Jesus added, "*Whoever is faithful in very little will also be faithful in much. And whoever is dishonest in little will also be dishonest in much.*"

*And if you have not been faithful in what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"*

That latter statement reminds us that the parable is not about dishonesty but ingenuity. All that we have belongs not to us but to God. As I said a few weeks ago, when the "game" of life is over, all of the pieces go back into the box.

We are in the midst of a stewardship season and you may be wondering how should respond--how much of what God has entrusted to your stewardship should be set aside for the ministry of First Federated Church. The Finance Committee can give you guidelines and tell you what the cost of our various ministries are, but ultimately you need to prayerfully ask God a very simple question, "What does God want me to do?"