

#45 15-16

Psalm 79:1-9

Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

## *Who Are We Serving?*

**Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' 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 are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."**

This text has been described by numerous resources as, "challenging"; "difficult to preach"; "baffling"; one said, "It is not exaggeration to say that the parable's meaning has stumped even the best and most creative interpreters of Scripture." (G. Penny Nixon) Because it isn't really clear on a lot of little details that we hearers would like to have so we could judge the various characters better - so we could know where we fit into the parallels, and so we could know what we are to learn from this.

First of all, we have a rich man, who hears a rumor. We don't know if it is true. The manager, is worried for his life and livelihood and finds some creative ways to get back in his master's good graces, and appears to do exactly what he had been accused of. But none of what he acquires is for him - it is for his master. And his master commends him for his shrewdness! The Jesus says, "Makes friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." This first 9 verses is just really confusing!

Some theologians like the explanation that, in accordance to Deuteronomy, charging interest on loans was forbidden, "because it exploited the vulnerable poor." (Barbara Rossing) So all this man did was to make this wealthy master closer to being a righteous man. It certainly would have improved the reputation of the wealthy man in the area, and in doing so, the manager had a backup plan for being welcomed if he were to lose his job.

What is also often discussed around this scripture is the situation at the time between the very wealthy and the very poor. According to G. Penny Nixon:

The poor were always at the mercy of the rich landlords who demanded the lion's share of their crops and the Roman government who exacted exorbitant taxes from them at every turn . . . By describing this situation, maybe Jesus is pointing to the harsh reality that there is no way to be honest in a system that is already excessively unjust and dishonest. The telling of the parable may in itself be a shrewd way to unveil the gross dishonesty of a system that cheats and robs the poor daily . . . In the realm of God, debts are forgiven and indentured servants are set free.

The author continues her reflections by pointing out that:

In the parable we are given an insight into the manager's motivation. His goal was to make friends so that when unemployed, someone would take him in. Christine Pohl, in an essay titled, 'Profit and Loss,' makes a revealing point about how the parable uncovers the pervasiveness of our love of money. She contends that 'Jesus does not commend the manager's practices, but rather his insight into the connection between resources and relationships. When we consider our wealth and economic practices-even the means we employ to accomplish good ends- as peripheral to the kingdom, we are ignoring Jesus' warning that it is impossible to serve God and mammon.' ... Serving God means that loving people is always the bottom line. So Jesus' closing words . . . are certainly an apt summation of what Jesus is so ardently trying to get across: you cannot serve God and wealth.

Bruce Epperly has also shared his perceptions on this topic. He writes:

The passage from Luke 16 is challenging in many ways. What are we to say about the character of the dishonest manager? Was he looking out for his best interests or was he a bit of a "Robin Hood," trying to support those facing economic burdens? While we cannot commend this behavior - and neither does Jesus - we can appreciate Jesus' recognition that we need to be wise in the use of our personal and congregational resources. We should be especially wise because of the potential pitfalls in our desire for economic well-being. We can put economic security ahead of our relationship with God. Money cannot be the center of our lives. It cannot get in the way of our obligation to God, our self-care and care for friends and family, and our stewardship of the earth. Our use of our largesse must be subservient to our commitment to God and determined by our commitment to God. Our faith must shape our economic and vocational values, not the other way around. In the spirit of Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, we need to ask regularly: "Is this how Jesus would behave in terms of personal and corporate economics? Do my buying patterns reflect a care for my neighbor, the vulnerable, and the planet? Do I place consumerism, security, and comfort ahead of generosity and care for the needs of vulnerable persons?" Luke 16 invites us to an examination of conscience on the personal and political levels and challenges us to see our political decisions in light of our spiritual commitments. We have much to lament and much for which to be grateful. In fact, lamentation and gratitude go together. Our grief is the result of recognizing our wayward and reckless use of the earth's bounty and our forgetfulness of our neighbors' needs. Repentance is possible, but it comes as a result of seeing our largess from God's perspective and not our self-interest.

We are being asked today, in this scripture, who are we serving? What are the relationships that we are focusing upon? Because our focus determines our faith. When we make the riches our focus, we overlook much of the hope and the glory and the love that comes from *trusting* in, and *hearing* ~ how God is calling us to serve him and those around us. What the quote, unquote, "dishonest" manager did, was make the people who were indebted to his master seem more human - no longer numbers in a ledger. He created a bond between himself and those debtors, which in effect reflected well upon his master, and thus he was rewarded.

And Jesus was saying to his followers - be like this man in doing everything you possibly can to create healthy, human bonds - because these bonds are how we show the world who God is. In serving the least of these - in serving the most of these - in serving each other with unlimited grace and compassion we are responding to our greatest human need to serve God. We unite ourselves with the power which is beyond all understanding. And we move further and further away from our own negative human tendency to want to always be right and to judge others by how we are being served.

Searching our souls for the truth as to who we are actually desiring to serve - ourselves - our wealth - others - our God . . . searching for this truth is the shrewdness that Jesus is asking us to do now and for every now from now on! AMEN