

Being Shrewd About the Kingdom

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — XVI after Pentecost, September 19, 2004

Luke 16:1-13 NIV

Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 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.’

“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 — I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

“‘Eight hundred gallons of [olive] oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

“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.’

“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. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

“No servant can serve two masters. 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 Money.”

“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” Does Jesus condone dishonesty?

The parable of the dishonest steward isn’t the only story Jesus told that seems to commend behavior we wouldn’t endorse. For example, what about the parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18?

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Vindicate me against my adversary.’ For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.’” (Luke 18:2-5).

Is Jesus saying that it’s okay for a judge to settle a lawsuit just to get rid of a pestiferous plaintiff — regardless of the merits of the case?

When we come across stories like this in the New Testament we need to remember why it was that Jesus used parables — short, pithy stories taken from everyday life, stories in which the characters don’t always act according to what we would consider to be the highest ethical standards.

Jesus, you see, wasn’t teaching moral standards or a code of behavior. The Jesus who is the great philosopher, psychologist and arbiter of human behavior is a figment of modern imagination. The Jews already had the Law of Moses to govern their behavior, and of this Law the apostle Paul said, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12)

Jesus gave us two Great Commandments to govern life “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). But in giving these commandments, he was simply quoting what was already in the Law of Moses. Even when Jesus gave us the Golden Rule, he made it clear that his people already had its foundation in the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible: “So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

So if Jesus didn't come to preach new rules for human behavior, what did he come to preach? There is one place above all where we find the answer, and that's in the record of Jesus' very first preaching, in Mark 1:14-15: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

The kingdom of God is at hand — this is Jesus' message to his people. God is on the move, renewing his covenant with those he has called to serve him. God is coming, he's taking steps to accomplish his purpose for us, he's working out events of history to bring about the redemption of his people.

Today, in the hindsight of the ages, we see what Jesus' disciples themselves couldn't see at first. We can see how it was that God was working out his purpose—through the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. Many members of the Jewish community thought God would redeem them by throwing off the yoke of Roman oppression. That didn't happen. In fact, in the year 66 some misguided leaders began a revolt against Rome which led only to the destruction of Jerusalem and its beautiful Temple. Jesus warned his people about the "signs of the times." He pointed out a couple of things that had already happened that prefigured what eventually took place; that passage is found in Luke 13:

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5).

And it happened just that way, because they didn't listen to the Lord. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70, those who were defending the city in a vain hope of Jewish independence were killed by the sword or crushed under falling buildings. "Unless you repent" — unless you change your mind about God's purpose for his people, and turn away from this foolish course leading to rebellion — "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." "The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

So Jesus' message is first and foremost about the *kingdom of God* — not what we must do, not what we would like to do to achieve our dreams or fulfill our desires, but what God is doing to work out his purpose for us. Jesus' message, in other words, is to scrap our personal agenda, or the agendas foisted on us by a corrupt culture, and get with God's program.

In the first century, this meant forgetting about a prideful but hopeless revolt against an overwhelming power, a revolt in which the Jews were certain to meet humiliating defeat — a time, as Jesus described, it, of "great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matthew 24:21). It was a horrible time from which Jesus sought to spare his disciples, when he taught them to pray, "lead us not into testing," or trial.

God had not called the children of Abraham to be overlords in the earth, but to be servants — to be a means through which all nations of earth would be blessed, to be the channels of God's peace through which "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). Forgetting this purpose would lead to that time of great tribulation. But holding to this purpose would allow Jesus' disciples to endure through that day, to "have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36).

Today we don't face the oppression of Roman armies, but other things pull us away from our focus on the kingdom of God and our purpose in God's economy. The very pace of contemporary American life may be enough to divert our attention from what God is doing. It's so easy, for example, for families to get over-programmed. I know a young family with four children. Whenever I call their house, no one answers the house phone. I have to call their cell phones to get one of the parents, and chances are I have to leave a message even then. Whenever I'm at the house, the dad is on the phone with his business partners, and the mom is off at some church event or even on a mission trip or youth happening. Occasionally we get asked to "baby-sit" when the parents go away, and that consists of driving the kids to soccer games or piano lessons or a sleepover or some other activity. This is a committed Christian family, but they're doing so much themselves that it must be hard for them to reflect on what God is doing. It must be hard for them to focus on Jesus' announcement, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe this good news." Does any of this sound familiar?

Once, during my younger days as a pastor— and I *did* have younger days — I got asked to do a funeral for a man who was nominally connected with my church. I hadn't known him; he had never attended worship nor any other church event during the time I had been the pastor. His life revolved around card parties at the American Legion hall. That's what he lived for, and I thought it would be more fitting if the Legion held a memorial card party for him. So in my hard-headed youth, I refused to officiate at the funeral, and another minister in the town did the service. That was before I knew the Lord myself, and today I would try to minister to that family and to witness to the glory of Christ. But it's clear that the kingdom of God was simply not on this man's radar screen, nor that of his family members. Hobbies and interests can divert our attention away from what God wants to do in our lives. If it's nice on Sunday morning, the golf course or some sporting event may have greater pulling power than fellowship and celebrating with God's people. I know what I might do if I didn't think it was important to be in God's house — I'm a railroad fan and I would probably be chasing trains with my camera.

Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). I don't know what it is in your life that's trying to pull you away from the kingdom of God, but I guess we would all admit there is something that might divert us from witnessing to God's activity and his presence with us, if we would let it. It takes a commitment to maintain that attitude of expectancy that God is going to do great things in history and great things in our lives. My brother used to keep three file baskets on his desk; they were labeled "Unimportant," "Inconsequential" and "Trivial." We may have to come to the point where we look around and realize that much of what we concern ourselves with is unimportant, inconsequential or trivial compared with the worth of knowing God and witnessing to his saving action in our lives and the lives of those we love.

So, let's go back to our morning lesson for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, the parable of the dishonest steward. Here's a guy who has to act fast. The boss has found out he's been mismanaging the business— perhaps diverting some of the funds to his own use. So the boss has told the manager, "Turn over the books, and you're out here." With his management career about to take a nosedive, he has to figure out some way to get by.

"I'm not strong enough to dig ditches," he says to himself, "and I'm too proud to just go on welfare. How can I stay in management? . . . Aha! I have an idea!"

So what does he do? He calls into the office a businessman who owes money to his boss. "How much do you owe us?" he asks. The guy says, "800 gallons of olive oil." So the manager hands the guy the books and says, "Hey, quick, sit down at this desk and just cross out that 800 and write 400."

Then he calls in another guy — same question, "How much do you owe?" "1000 bushels of wheat," the guy answers. "Just cross that out," says the manager, handing him the books. "Make it 800 bushels."

What did the manager do? Notice that he didn't took the books. He got the guys that owed his boss to alter the books, to their own advantage. "Now," says the manager to himself, "when I get the heave-ho from this place, somebody else will take me into their business. If they don't, I'll squeal. After all, it wasn't I who changed the numbers. They did it themselves" . . . Blackmail!

And what does Jesus tell us? "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. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

When we see that God is on the move, we do whatever it takes to make sure we won't be left out of the action. It wasn't the manager's dishonesty that the master commended — and we can't tell from the text whether "the master" refers to the manager's boss, or to Jesus himself. It was the manager's *shrewdness* that was commended. It was his planning ahead for that which is sure to come. It was the fact that he was determined to make a place for himself in the future life, even if it took some drastic measures to do it.

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is worth everything we can muster to get it. He compared the kingdom to a treasure hidden in a field, worth buying the entire field in order to possess it. He compared the kingdom to a costly pearl, so desirable that a merchant would sell everything else in order to have it. He spoke of a kingdom worth so much that some violent men even try to take it by force.

What is this kingdom of God that is worth so much — worth so much that even a dishonest, crafty, blackmailing steward trying to protect his future becomes a model for the kind of shrewd planning we need to do to be part of it?

It is, put simply, God's overwhelming, life-giving, healing, forgiving presence with us. Paul the apostle called it "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). It's God acting to renew his covenant with those he has called to serve him, and to restore that communion with him that has been broken by human sin and disobedience. It's God at work in us, as Paul says, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). It's the Father acting through the Son, in his life, death and resurrection, to fulfill his purpose in us. As Paul states,

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

I don't think any of us can truly know this powerful, energizing presence of God in our lives if we're content just to rock along in a sort of ho-hum, routine version of the Christian life. Just going through the motions won't cut it; there has to be a deeper hunger to see God at work, a vision to be part of what he's doing. It's important to gather each week with the people of God and lift our praises to him and reflect on his word to us; we can't do without that, or we cut ourselves off from the living body of Christ. But, as someone has said, there are lots of folks who come to church and sit there, and confuse sitting with discipleship. Our desire to be part of the move of God has to be expressed with a kind of *passion* — the same passion for God that Jesus was describing when he told of the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field, or the dishonest manager who shrewdly blackmailed his way into future financial security.

I can't give you a blueprint for building this passion for the kingdom into your life. It's not our move, it's the move of God who by his Holy Spirit touches your life and mine to stir up that hunger within us — a hunger for more of him. I can only suggest that we stay open to the call of God, and be willing to respond when we hear that voice calling us to go deeper, and higher, and further in the faith. There may be things you and I can do to increase our openness to the Lord to begin involving ourselves in some vital ministry that blesses the family of God, such as visiting the sick or shut-in, taking part in the Christian education program, joining one of the music groups, forming a prayer circle or home fellowship, reaching out to those in need in the community. Let's be shrewd about this, let's be intentional and not just let the opportunity slide by to latch onto this glorious move of God we call the kingdom.

Jesus died to open the kingdom of heaven to all believers, and rose again to bring us into this new life in the presence of God. As the writer to the Hebrews asks, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3). For it's in him that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Sermon text ©2004 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable