

## **LEARNING FROM THE BAD HOW TO BE GOOD**

**Luke 16:1-13**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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Jesus' parables are normally simple and straight forward, teaching lessons a five year old child could understand but today maybe someone should go out and find a five year old child because the Parable of the Dishonest Steward really seems confusing.

Before we can understand and really appreciate this parable it should first be made clear that even though it seems that way, Jesus wasn't condoning dishonesty. Second, we need to realize Jesus is drawing the dichotomy between two oppositional groups of people, the Children of this Age who operate in "worldly" ways and the Children of the Light who are expected to live according to Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Third, Jesus teaches us that even though worldly ways can be despicable, the Children of the Light can learn a thing or two from the Children of this Age, namely their fierce commitment to the goals they set and their willingness to think outside the box to reach them.

Something else to consider before we move on: each of the characters in this parable, the steward, the farmers and merchants he bargains with and the steward's master are all cut from the same cloth, ready to wheel and deal, without scruples, to get what they wanted. What's more, even though the Master is the victim of his steward's dishonesty, his true character was exposed when he expressed gushing admiration for his steward's uncanny ability to make lemonade out of lemons. So don't feel too badly for the master, especially since he seemed to enjoy being cheated in such a clever way.

So, in twenty-five words or less this is what you need to learn from this parable: Christians are expected to be as committed and creative in their discipleship as the unscrupulous Children of this World are in their deal making. Or as Jesus put it even more succinctly, "Be as wise as serpents but as gentle as doves." (Matthew 10:16)

Having set the stage, let's now review this parable so we can not only understand it, but just as important, put it into practice.

Apparently the Master suspected his Chief Steward, who managed all his worldly goods, was either incompetent or an embezzler so the steward was given a pink slip, but not before being told to close the books and report back to his master.

Upon being fired, the steward initially went into panic mode wondering what would become of him now that he was about to be unemployed. However, he recovered quickly and suddenly got creative. He called in his master's debtors, one by one, and started wheeling and dealing, giving each of them the break of a lifetime, having only to pay a portion of the money they owed his boss. Why was the steward so generous with is

master's money? Because now the debtors would be indebted to him and he could later ask them for payback after he became unemployed.

You'd think these deals would've been kept secret, but word of the shady deal soon got back to the Master. Instead of being furious he was mildly amused and extremely impressed. Can you hear him congratulating the steward? "You clever dog, you always land on your feet! I need someone like you to manage my property. Too bad I don't trust you!"

Now it's in Jesus' closing commentary that the point of this parable gets confusing. Jesus said, "...for the children of this age are more shrewd...than the children of the light." Point taken if the children of the light were as committed and enthusiastic in denying themselves, taking up the cross and following Jesus as children of the world are in making money, the world would be a better place.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He continued, "And I tell you make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon (money or riches) so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitation." (Luke 16:9)

What the heck does that mean? Is Jesus suggesting we get our hands dirty and make as much money as we can any way we can because when it runs out you'll have friends in high places to get you into heaven?" Not exactly. Jesus advocated making money not just to satisfy yourself, so it can be used to build friendships with people who can never pay you back. In other words instead of spending your money just to pleasure yourself, you can sacrificially spend your money on worthy charities and causes. In God's eyes true wealth is measured not by what you keep, but by what you give.

But Jesus wasn't finished yet. "He who is faithful in very little is faithful in much and he who is dishonest in little is dishonest in much." If then you have not been faithful...who will entrust you with true riches...No servant can serve two masters; for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 10-13)

These two verses are much easier to understand. Simply put, if you can be counted on to carry out small tasks, you will then be trusted with the bigger ones. An entry level employee who does his job well will soon be promoted and given even greater responsibilities.

But Jesus was saying more than that. Speaking in the context of eternity Jesus taught whatever you accomplish for good in this world has eternal implications, affecting not only you but also others in the next.

Now the salient question is, what kind of steward do you want to be, dishonest, squandering our Master's wealth for self-preservation or faithful, carefully managing everything given over to our care for the greater good? To help you and me answer that

question Jesus laid down his marker in the next verse when he said, “No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth.”

That last verse is probably the most disturbing of all. You have to choose between living only for yourself, or expanding your circle of influence by living for Christ and all of God’s children sent your way.

If you do choose to heed Christ’s call to discipleship you can’t just pray, “Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four no more, Amen.” In God’s economy that won’t do. Now your prayers are required to be more expansive to include others in your immediate orbit, but not just in your prayers, but especially in the giving of your time, energy and resources to the greater good. Then your prayer will become more generous, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

That’s a prayer God will listen to, and honor, because now you’re placing yourself and all you have under God’s authority to be used intentionally and creatively.

Hopefully by now the parable of the Dishonest Steward has been neatly explained and packaged for your consumption. But now comes the hard part, me saying something thought provoking enough to motivate you to get out of your pew and into your neighborhood to become a committed steward of Christ’s Gospel of justice, love, truth and life to people who not only need to hear it, but also experience it, through you.

Just this week I read an amazing quote from the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. Being the free thinker he had an antagonistic attitude towards religion in general and the Church in particular, but what he wrote shows a firmer grasp on Christian discipleship than many of us think we have. Here’s what he wrote just over one hundred years ago:

*“This is the true joy of life, being used up for a purpose recognized by you as a mighty one, being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can.”*

A “religious” person, knowing Shaw wasn’t a believer, might dismiss him for being spiritually irrelevant because he said, “My life belongs to the community,” instead of saying the theologically correct thing, “My life belongs to God.” But isn’t it safer to say, “My life belongs to God,” than “My life belongs to the community?” Saying “My life belongs to God,” can become just another insipid platitude that gets you off the hook. But saying, “My life belongs to the community,” gets you closer to where Jesus was and wants you to be, in your community, spending yourself building friendships that will pass the test of time by accomplishing something for the greater good.

I don’t know if George Bernard Shaw ever personally spent any time in the mean streets of his community, nevertheless that doesn’t detract from the power of his manifesto, it’s better to be used up for a mighty cause than to be a feverish, selfish little

clot of ailments and grievances. Jesus said practically the same thing nineteen hundred years earlier, “If you try to save your life (if you live only for yourself) you’ll end up losing it, but if you lose your life for me and my Gospel, you will save it.”

Question: How is Jesus expecting you to lose your life for him and his Gospel?  
Another question: Have you discovered yet that mighty purpose waiting to use you up?  
Third question: If not, is it because you’re not quite sure where to begin or where to go to help you discover what your purpose is?

Here’s the short answer: it begins with prayer, honest, gut wrenching, risk taking prayer, the brand of prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane before he finally accepted his cross. That’s why I hope and pray you’ll all carefully consider Elder Pearson’s invitation to join a small group this fall for prayer and meditation on the scriptures. I believe the biblical record proves that all the great achievements God made through the patriarchs and prophets, the saints and apostles were born of prayer, not the “Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four no more. Amen,” variety of prayer, but the bold and even unsettling prayer, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

This sermon’s theme has been about learning from the dishonest steward how to be a faithful steward. The dishonest steward was consumed with living for his own good. The faithful steward is consumed with living and dying for the greater good.

Listen to the next paragraph of George Bernard Shaw’s quote. It could have been said by the Apostle Paul.

*“I want to be thoroughly used up by the time I die, for the harder I work the more I live... Life is no brief candle to me, it’s sort of a splendid torch...which I want to make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”*