

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

Date: 17 March 2022
Services: *Across the diocese*
Series: Parables of grace
Passage: Luke 16:1-15
Title: God knows our hearts

Luke 16:1-15

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 “‘Nine hundred gallons^[a] of olive oil,’ he replied.

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

⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels^[b] 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.

¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.

Today we’re looking at the Parable of the Shrewd Manager in Luke 16 and, without doubt, this is the most debated and, in my opinion, misunderstood parable in the whole Bible. Because, on the face of it, Jesus appears to be commending dishonest behaviour.

But that’s not what is happening at all. So let’s dive in and see what’s **really** going on in this parable.

As I said, on the surface, the parable seems to be applauding dishonest behaviour. A manager of a business is called in by the owner, by his master, and he is accused of poor management. Of negligence. He is told that he is about to be sacked but, before he is dismissed, the owner demands a full accounting of the state of his business.

The manager goes away and contacts the debtors – people who owe his master money – and he discounts their debts – he writes them down, in one case reducing the debt by 20% and in another by 50%.

Then when the business manager comes back to his master and presents these revised accounts, showing reduced debtors accounts, he is **COMMENDED** for his actions.

So what’s going on here?

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

The first thing to point out is that the business manager is **not** being dishonest here – he is actually helping his master. By reducing the amount of these debtors accounts, his master is now much more likely to be paid. Because these debtors appear to be overdue accounts were in danger of needing to be completely written off as bad debts. And the reason the business manager was being sacked was that he had allowed these debts to accumulate and had done nothing to try to recover them. So now, finally, he was doing what he should have done all along – negotiating with these wayward debtors to ensure that his master got at least something back from them.

Now there is no indication that these actions helped the manager to save his job. In fact, the strong inference of the parable is that he was definitely getting the sack. His actions were too little, too late.

And that, in fact, brings me to the more important meaning of the parable. Because not only is this debt reduction helping the master's business, by recovering some bad debts, but by reducing these debts, the business manager is also helping **himself**. He's setting himself up for his own future.

By writing off a fair chunk of each debtors bill, he is currying favour with them in the hope that they will remember his generosity and look upon him favourably when he is soon to be unemployed. His hope is that these other business operators might, at the very least, throw him some charity when he is on the unemployment line, and perhaps even provide him with employment so that he is not left a destitute beggar.

We see this motivation clearly articulated in verses 3 and 4:

“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.”

And here is where we get to the heart of this parable's meaning. Jesus is commending this man's actions to us. He is saying to us: Just as this man provided for his future in **this** world, so we need to act wisely to provide for our **eternal** future. Jesus actually spells this out more clearly in verse 9:

“I tell you, use the things of this world to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

And that phrase **“to gain friends”** in the Greek is “hodopoieo philos” which has the sense of directing beneficence towards others – of blessing others generously. He is urging us to live for eternity by being generous with our money and possessions in this world.

Jesus reinforces this message in verse 13:

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

You might notice something very familiar about these words. This is a direct echo of the words of Jesus in **Matthew 6:24**, which is the final statement Jesus makes after urging us to store up treasures in heaven:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

So, what is this Parable of the Shrewd Manager really all about? Jesus is urging us to make sure we have a **spiritual retirement plan**. This shrewd manager curried favour with influential people, so that when he lost his job, he would be looked after. And Jesus is saying to us, if we are **half** as wise as this worldly manager, we ought to live our lives in such a way that when we lose our life – not just our jobs, but our very lives! – we will be welcomed by God into his eternal kingdom and given great reward – we will be looked after by him.

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

In other words, Jesus is urging us to instigate a spiritual retirement plan, to invest our money and possessions to bless others and serve God in **this** life, so that in the next, we will receive a **rich reward in heaven**.

Now, you might think that this sounds very mercenary – very transactional: Serve God now so that you'll be rewarded in heaven. You might think that we ought to have a more pure motive for serving God and for blessing others – that we ought to do it out of love and a spirit of generosity, rather for anything we might get out of it. And of course, that **should** be our primary motivation.

But, here's the thing, on **many** occasions in the Gospels, Jesus was very keen to remind us that when we use our money and possessions to bless others and serve God we **will** gain a reward in the next life. Here are just a few examples of this kind of reminder from Jesus:

"When you give to the needy ... your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:3-4)

"Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great." (Luke 6:35)

"When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours ... But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

Jesus wants us to know that our generosity in this life will be richly rewarded by God in the next – and it's OK to be conscious of that and have it at the forefront of our thinking.

GRACE NOT WORKS

Now it's really important to stress a couple of things at this point.

Firstly, Jesus is not advocating salvation by works here. He is not saying that the way to get to heaven is by being generous and doing lots of good deeds. We do these good deeds because we are **already** saved. Christian generosity is an act of gratitude in response to the grace that God has **already** given us in Jesus.

In fact, Jesus is specifically addressing this parable people who are already saved. We know this, firstly, because verse 1 tells us he told this parable to his disciples, and not to the general public. And secondly, in verses 8 and 9, he says:

"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ So, I tell you, use worldly wealth to bless others, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

So, Jesus is urging his disciples, those who are already in the light (did you notice that phrase?), to be generous in this life. He's saying, you're already in the light, you're people of the light, I've made you my own, I've taken you out of the darkness and brought you into the light – you're **already** saved, so be generous!

So this parable is **not** teaching salvation by works. Let's be clear about that. It's an instruction to people who are already saved.

The **second** thing to point out here is that Jesus **really is** talking about money and possessions. He is urging his followers, his disciples, to be generous with their money and possessions. This is practical Christianity! It's putting your money and possessions where your mouth is.

And the strong inference here, is that while generosity is not a **means** of salvation, it is a sure **sign** of salvation – a sign that a person's heart has truly been **transformed** by the grace of Jesus.

**Preaching Christ....
...by the power of the Holy Spirit
...and the authority of the Word of God**

On the other hand, a lack of generosity, a tendency towards selfish hoarding of wealth, is an indication of the poverty of a person's heart. And this, of course, was one of the problems with the Pharisees.

Because did you notice the reference to the Pharisees at the end of this parable? We are told that the Pharisees overheard Jesus teaching these things to his disciples, and they were not happy. In verse 14 we read:

“The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.”

Note that comment, that they **“loved money”**.

So Jesus replies, in the very next verse:

“You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.”

Note the reference to their **hearts** and also the reference to their **values**. He is effectively saying to them, your miserliness with your money is an indication of the poverty of your hearts. Your lack of generosity reveals that you have not truly come to know God and be transformed by him. Because God values people over money, and you clearly don't!

CHALLENGE

What about you? Have you truly come to know God. Has the grace of Jesus transformed your heart? And has that transformation resulted in generosity towards others?

How is your spiritual retirement plan going? Does it need an annual review? I think we should all, at least once a year, sit down and review how we are using our money and possessions, as well as our time and talents, to see if there is anything more we can do to bless others and serve God.

May God guide you as you do that, perhaps in this next week. May the Spirit of God continue to stir our hearts to be givers, and not hoarders, to truly seek first God's kingdom and not our own comfort, to live for the eternal world that is to come, and not this fleeting world that will soon pass away.

****** I am incredibly inspired by the life of George Mueller, a Christian man in England in the 1800s who built and ran several orphanages. Over the course of his life he received literally millions of pounds in donations, but when he died, it was discovered that he had not a cent to his name, and he only owned a couple of sets of threadbare clothing. He had funnelled every bit of the money he had received, towards the orphanages, and hadn't kept a cent for himself.***

George Mueller is in the presence of God now, and I guarantee that he doesn't regret giving all that money away. Because he has received a reward that is far greater than anything he gave up in this life.

May God guide and bless you, as you review your own eternal retirement plan. May he help you to be a gracious and generous giver, living for the good of others and for the glory of his name.

Amen.