

We are about to read another of the parables that Jesus told. Last week we read two of the parables of Jesus found in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke. We heard last week that Jesus told lots of parables. Those stories that Jesus told that used common images to convey an important message. We heard that sharing parables is like peeling an onion where there are multiple levels of meaning.

Last week we read the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Two parables about something being lost and someone searching and searching until the lost items were found. After these two parables in the 15th chapter of Luke is the parable of the prodigal son. Another story that Jesus told about something being lost but then being found.

Those three parables make sense. Or at least we can make good sense of them. And because they make sense they are parables which are routinely retold because they make a nice and clear point. But unlike the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, this parable we are about to read is very confusing. Not only it is confusing, it makes us uncomfortable because of what Jesus seems to be saying.

This is also a parable which has led to lots of different interpretations about what it means. And I will be very honest and say that like lots of others I struggle to understand what this parable is about. But once again, we don't just read the texts that fit with what we think God is about. We attempt to read it all and be open to being challenged to look at something with a different perspective.

Read Luke 16:1-15

So let's recap what happens in this parable that Jesus tells. Charges are brought against a manager who works for a big company. The owner of the company has found out that this manager has been squandering his assets. The owner of the company confronts the manager and the manager does not deny that he has been a poor or dishonest manager.

So the manager gets fired. That makes sense. He was a poor manager and so the owner of the company fires him. But this is where it gets intriguing. This manager then seeks out the people who have outstanding debts to the company and starts cutting deals with them.

This manager pretends like he is still employed by the company and starts going around to the people that owe money to the company. The first person owes 100 jugs of olive oil. This is a very large amount. The manager then says to this man who owes this large amount that he will cut him a deal. The manager says that the guy in debt will only have to pay him 50 jugs. The guy in debt is thrilled. His debt has just been cut in half and he pays it off.

The manager then goes to another person and cuts a similar type of deal. This second person owes 100 containers of wheat. The manager says he will cut it to 80. This guy in debt is thrilled also. He then pays off his debt.

And why did this manager do this? He cut these deals so that the people in debt would feel obligated to him. Then the manager could call on them to help him out. The manager feared that he would be on the street and he hoped that these two guys could help him with some handouts while he searched for a new job.

We would expect that the CEO of the company would be furious with this manager. The manager has been going to guys that owe the company money and cutting personal deals with them to help himself. But rather than being mad at him, the CEO applauds his former manager. The CEO says that the manager was very shrewd and clever. He commends him for the way he is using his resources in creative ways to care for his needs.

So it seems really strange that Jesus tells this parable in which the hero in the story is someone who was dishonest with the financial resources of the company. That makes no sense. But then Jesus says this. "No slave can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and wealth."

I can think of lots of ways that I would have chosen to make this point. But Jesus chose this story of a dishonest manager figuring out a way to make financial resources work. So what point was Jesus trying to make?

I want to share another story. This is a story about a man who was once caught stealing so the king ordered that the man be hanged. On the way to the gallows the man said to the governor that he knew a wonderful secret and it would be a pity to allow it to die with him and he would like to disclose it to the king.

The thief said that he could put a seed of a pomegranate in the ground and through the secret taught to him by his father he would make it grow and bear fruit overnight.

The thief was brought before the king. The thief then dug a hole and said, "This seed must only be put in the ground by a man who has never stolen or taken anything which did not belong to him. I being a thief cannot do it. So he turned to the king's attendant but the attendant said that in his younger days he had taken something which did not belong to him.

The treasurer was also with the king and he said he could not plant the seed because in dealing with all of the money of the kingdom he is sure he may have misplaced some. Even the king said that he had a necklace that he had taken from his father.

The thief then said, “You are all mighty and powerful and want nothing and yet you cannot plant the seed, while I have stolen a little because I was starving and I am to be hanged.” The king, pleased with the shrewdness of the thief, let him go.

So what does this odd parable mean that Jesus told? Well, like I shared earlier, this parable has stumped lots of people who have come up with lots of ideas about what it means. But I wonder if this parable is a challenge by Jesus to not let our resources and our abilities go to waste. A challenge by Jesus to not coast along through life. A challenge by Jesus to be creative and to use what you’ve got.

A lot of times we look at our money and our resources as ends to achieve. We think we are to work or invest in stocks in order to make money. We get focused on getting money and making money and it becomes an obsession. We become obsessed with making money. We become obsessed with making enough.

But I wonder if this parable teaches us that acquiring money should not be a driving force for us. I wonder if this parable teaches us that the acquisition of money should be done with the desire to use this money to make a difference in the world. I wonder if this parable teaches us that money can be a very good thing if used in a way that helps rather than hinders.

Again, if I was Jesus, and I am glad that I am not, I would have told a very different parable than the one that Luke records here. But I am thankful Luke records Jesus saying that a slave cannot serve two masters. I do think that Luke is right on when he quotes Jesus saying that one cannot serve both God and wealth.

There are lots of people that are demanding your money these days. We have bills and we pay taxes. Maybe it is members of your family that are demanding your money. The teenage child wanting to go to the movies, the brother who made some poor financial decisions and is hitting you up for a loan.

The parents who are facing retirement issues and they did not plan well or their 401K took a huge dive. The friend always asking for something. You may feel like people are pressuring you more and more for the money in your pocket.

But I think this story may teach us to use our money in a way that sheds some positive light in this world. When we collect offerings here at ACPC I hope we are asking ourselves how to use these offerings in a way that sheds light in the world. When you decide what you are doing with your money, I hope that you are being wise and I hope that you are being challenged to use your money in a way that brings light to the world.

Money should not be used as an end but as a means. As a means to create something good in the world. I pray that God challenges you to be creative with your money and your resources.

We are challenged to use our money in a way that does good in the world where we live. As Jesus says, "you cannot serve God and wealth."

May you use whatever wealth you have to serve God faithfully. AMEN.

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-The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 9, Abingdon

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