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Riverside Covenant Church
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Luke 16:1-13 – Eternal Life Insurance

My insurance agent is a part of Riverside. And I actually got a new life insurance policy this year to protect my family if something were to happen to me. And if you have life insurance you know that the company sends a nurse to you and they draw blood and take your blood pressure and a whole host of other tests to determine your risk of dying. Before they insure my life, they want to know the odds that I will die. And I obviously am hoping that those odds are fairly long. I try to eat healthy, exercise when I am able, avoid drugs, etc. I try to ensure my health as well. We all do this. We want to build up some security on earth.

We have a natural self-interest in preservation. We generally don't want to die and that is a good thing. We work hard to keep our lives secure. But we are always fighting against time and the decaying or dying nature of things. Every physical thing is naturally decaying and dying. Plants grow and produce fruit to eventually wither and die. Your computer has a life to it, it will eventually fail you. Even rocks weather and become less and less substantial over time.

This weekend I helped someone build a new deck where their old one had been. We first demolished a large portion of the old deck and I know that when it was originally built the builder must have thought how beautiful and sturdy it was. Now years later, strangers are tearing it apart because it has rotted away. And so we built another beautiful and sturdy new deck that is rotting away too. It is the nature of life and we do our best to fight against it. The wood we used was jam packed with injected preservative.

Our passage this morning pushes us to think about our eternal lives and our stewardship of them in the same way that we steward our physical lives. We say often that we are first and foremost spiritual beings. We are eternal spirits created with God who because of the Fall are living in decaying bodies. It is just a matter of time before our physical bodies fail us. It will absolutely happen. Our spiritual selves, however, do not die. They are eternal. And we either spend eternity with God or we spend it without God. That is what is determined now during our time on earth.

Jesus is always pushing us towards understanding an eternal reality rather than a temporal reality. Jesus wants us to focus on what God is and has been doing forever, but we generally want to focus on what we can get and do before we die.

Here is how Jesus makes his point. Read Luke 16:1-13.

This is one of the most difficult parables we will look at in Luke. It is difficult because upon first glance it looks like Jesus is affirming the dishonest behavior of the manager.

Jesus basically says, there is a rich guy who is being ripped off by the manager of his business affairs.

The manager is wasting money so the rich guy tells him that he needs to make a record of all that he is doing and then leave. So the manager is pretty concerned because he can't and doesn't want to do anything else, so he comes up with a plan to make some well-connected friends by forgiving large portions of debt owed to his rich boss.

Now it is important to realize what is going on here. **The manager is an agent of the rich guy.** The rich guy hires him to manage his stuff and his debts and gives him the authority as his agent to make decisions for him, to enter into contracts, to function as if he were the rich man himself.

So the manager takes advantage of his agency status and goes up to a couple guys who owed the rich man money and tells them that they can substantially lower their debts. Although the rich man was really rich, everyone in this parable is rolling in the cash too. The debts owed by the other two guys indicates that they were very wealthy as well. Although suggestions about the exact amounts owed varies, 800 gallons of olive oil would have been equivalent to 3 years wages for the average worker. And 1000 bushels of wheat would have been enough to feed 150 people for a year or 7 ½ years of labor for the average worker. No chunk change.

The manager tells each of the guys, take your bill and mark it down. Now let's understand clearly what is going on here. You own a business, and you send out bills to everyone explaining what they owe you. One of your employees then goes around and starts marking down those bills. Let's say Jim owes you \$500 and your employee marks down the bill to \$250. Good deal for the customer, but not such a good deal for you.

Here is the twist in Jesus' parable though. What the manager did was not a good thing by most standards. He ripped his boss off in an effort to make friends with those folks that owed his boss money. But here is the twist, the boss, the rich guy, does not get angry or call the police or beat the manager up . . . our passage says that, **“he commended the dishonest manager.”** What? In most circles the manager would be thrown in jail.

Why in the world would the rich master commend a dishonest manager? His explanation is **“because he had acted shrewdly.”**

This is why this is one of the most difficult parables of Jesus to understand. One commentary I looked at this week had 16 different interpretations. The passage is difficult because it is pretty odd for Jesus to be telling a story about a guy who is praised for being dishonest. On the surface it seems quite out of character for God.

Here is Jesus' point though. The manager went to extreme lengths to get what he wanted. Jesus' followers should be willing to go to extreme lengths too, but for a different purpose. Jesus says, “the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

Shrewd in this context means “sharp in practical matters, or astute.”

Jesus his statements about shrewdness with another odd one. **“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”** It sounds like Jesus is saying the more friends you buy the more likely you will get into heaven.

I was in a fraternity in college and that was people used to say about us. I had friends that used to always talk about how lucky they were because they did not have to buy friends like us fraternity folk. I Jesus saying that you should send out cash for more Facebook friends?

What Jesus is really trying to say is for what purpose do you use your stuff? For what purpose do you employ your wealth? Do you use what you have for any truly beneficial purpose at all?

Jesus is not promoting dishonesty. In fact, it is clear from the story that what the manager did was wrong and not to be encouraged. He is clearly referred to as the dishonest manager. But what Jesus does point out is that even though what the manager did was dishonest, it was effective. It was the wrong thing to do, but it worked. The manager was about to lose his job and so he wanted to make friends with some wealthy people. Cutting their debt in half is a good way to do that. If you want to be my friend you can show up at my door with a Pefcu shirt on and cut my mortgage in half. And not only did the manager get some rich folk to really like him, when his boss found out, he commended him. The rich master had to acknowledge that the move was pretty smooth. Plus, the boss had to look like a charitable hero to those guys who had their debt relieved. What a great guy they must have thought he was.

The rich master praised the manager for his quick thinking, his shrewdness or wisdom, to insure his own future. And Jesus uses the praise of the manager as an accusation against the “children of the light.” That is us, Jesus followers. Jesus is saying, the manager, as a child of the world, knew how to handle the system to his best advantage, but the children of light do not know how to live wisely within *their* system. That is, they do not know how to live with an eternal perspective.

Jesus is repeatedly clear throughout the Gospels that money tends to corrupt and he now says, **“make friends by your use of money, which is so easily put to wrong use.”** One commentary paraphrased verse 9 as, **“put yourself in a good position through your use of money, which so easily leads you astray, so that when this age is over God will receive you into his eternal dwelling.”**

So you see now that Jesus is setting up a contrast. Just as the manager acted in his world to safeguard his well-being, how much more should Jesus' hearers act to safeguard their eternal well-being. What is commended by Jesus is action born of wisdom in view of our eternal selves. The parable is about the wise use of possessions in view of our eternal nature. If it is true that we are destined to spend eternity with God in heaven, then this impacts how one views material possessions. Our hopes, dreams and aspirations do not rest upon things of this world.

In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus says quite clearly, **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

Money is to be used wisely, given eternal economics, rather than for immediate and self-centered purposes.

The contrast Jesus is drawing between the dishonest manager and Christians is that the dishonest manager is living sold-out for the now. He is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve what he desires in the moment. He is desperate and passionate to not have to beg or to work, so he goes to whatever means are necessary to achieve his objectives and takes advantage of his master.

Jesus says to his followers, “you are not like that.” And we would generally respond quickly, “darn right we aren't, and it is a good thing because that guy was dishonest.” But Jesus isn't focusing on the dishonesty, he is focusing on the desperation and passion. The manager is aggressively attacking the opportunities in his life. Jesus says, Christians, who have a so much more noble purpose don't do that. Jesus followers are not generally as crafty and creative, and if they are it is for the wrong reasons. What Jesus wants from us is for us to be as aggressive and crafty and wise for Him as the dishonest manager was for himself and the world.

I hope this does not sound too bad, but I have often thought Christians were kind of lame. My image of Christians growing up and even in college after I really starting living for Christ was that we were to be passive. Not really get into any trouble, just sit on our hands and be polite and nice and soft spoken. Walk around with a smile on our faces all the time. And I definitely didn't want to be a pastor because I just thought pastors were nice people that couldn't do any other jobs. They became pastors because they couldn't get a real job and church people hired them because church people are supposed to be nice to everyone.

Pretty high view of Christians, don't you think. Many people read the Bible and believe they must disengage from all things of this world. And they believe that if you become a Christian that leaves two career options open for you, either become a pastor or become a missionary. But Jesus' message is never disengage from the world, it is always live in it differently.

Martin Luther once said, “there are 3 conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, mind, and the purse.” It is simply not enough to claim Jesus Christ in your heart and to understand Jesus Christ in your

mind. If your faith does not change how you view the world and how you use your stuff, then it is not the faith that Jesus calls us to.

After Jesus tells us the parable of the dishonest manager he says, **“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.”**

Jesus has no silly notions that we can separate from the world and not use money or have anything to do with it. We need money. We need things. There are no lines in the sand we can draw here. You might buy a Wii because it creates great fellowship for your family. You might buy a really nice car because you plan to keep it a long time and it will last longer. What Jesus wants to change are our motivations. He wants us to consider why and how we use what we have.

Are we purposeful and skillful and astute in how we use our resources? Are we strategic in buying a house with a large living room to better facilitate a small group? Do we buy a van because we want to be able to be the one that takes our friends kids to school and baseball practice? Do we network in the community not to further our careers, but also to connect people to Christ? Do we make an effort to shop at the same stores to build relationships with people? Do we invited co-workers and new friends over for dinner to develop relationships with them? These things are strategic for God. We know how to be strategic in getting good parking spaces, and getting good seats at events, and preparing for retirement and countless other things, but are we strategic in our work for God? Are you planning on how you may be able to increase your giving next year? Are you thinking about who in your sphere of influence you can discuss God with and how you will do it?

So how do we move beyond serving money to serving God with our money and other things. First, you have to come to grips with your feelings about money. What childhood experiences have formed your understanding of money and resources. Did you grow up in the Depression, or with very little money, because then you are likely to want to hoard and build it up to feel a sense of security. You may be obsessed with the unpredictable and determined to save as much as you can to avoid chance.

Maybe you did not have any money in the past and your goal has always been to get to a point where you did not have to think about money. Worrying about what you buy and why seems oppressive to you. You want the freedom to do whatever you want with your money.

Maybe you grew up quite wealthy and you feel that watching what you spend is a waste of time.

So honestly assess your feelings about your stuff and why you do what you do with it.

Once you know your feelings about it, second, let's us admit that we are generally wealthy. We can always look around and find some one wealthier than we are, but we must move towards a global understanding of all of God's creation with regard to wealthy. We are extraordinarily wealthy in comparison to the vast majority of the world.

Finally, let's figure out ways that we can use our wealth not to further our own agendas, but to serve the Kingdom of God. How do we put our resources to such a use that God is glorified?

Money is dangerous. It is more often than not used for evil purposes. The dishonest manager knew this. Money is used as a weapon to bully people and to keep them in line. Money is used to buy prestige and honor. Money is used to enlist the allegiance of others. Money is used to corrupt people. Money is used for many things; it is one of the greatest powers in human society.

What Jesus advocates for us is that we employ this great power for Him. We take it, and all its dangers, and use it to further God's work in the world.

The accusation is painfully true that people of this age are wiser in their arena than the "children of the light" are in theirs.

Any serious discussion of this passage leads to the reduction of hoarding and consumerism, changes how we view and attain security, enables various ministries, and relieves the plight of the poor.

Use your money and resources to buy eternal life insurance. Don't serve money . . . use it to serve God.

If God places ministries we need to be doing on your heart, you need to get them going, or you need to call or email me . . .

References consulted:

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