

UMH 399 - Take My Life and Let it Be

Sermon

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. ²And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' ³And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.' ⁵So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' ⁸The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations. ¹⁰"He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³No servant can serve two masters; for 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 God and mammon."

The parable of the Dishonest Steward is one of the most controversial of Jesus' parables, because in telling the parable Jesus seems to be commending the steward for cheating his employer. This doesn't seem to square with what we think that Jesus ought to be saying. Saint Augustine said of this parable, "I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord."

So what are we to make of this parable? What is Jesus trying to tell his disciples, and to tell us?

To be honest, when I saw that this parable was the Gospel reading for this Sunday, my first reaction was to avoid it and find something else to preach about.

There are places in the Gospel where Jesus teaches a lesson or relates a parable, and his disciples just don't get it. You read the passage, and get the mental image of the disciples looking at Jesus, then looking at each other and saying "Huh?" That is how I feel reading this parable. Like Jesus is telling me something and I just don't get it. So eventually I decided that preaching on this parable would be a way to learn more about it.

As you might guess, many people down through the ages have studied this parable and have many different ideas about what it means.

For instance, William Willimon, a prominent United Methodist preacher and scholar from Duke University, thinks that Jesus is just telling his disciples a funny story. He compares the story to the enjoyment we get when the little guy gets the best of the big guy.

In the movie, "The Sting", we cheer for Robert Redford and Paul Newman, who play two small

time con men during the Depression. In the movie they manage to swindle big time mobster Doyle Lonnegan, played by Robert Shaw, out of a large sum of money. Even though we know that Redford and Newman are dishonest, we cheer for them when they succeed. Likewise, in the movie “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels”, Michael Caine and Steve Martin play con men who cheat women out of money by playing on their affections. Eventually they are outwitted by one of the women they are trying to con. These stories are fun and we enjoy the unexpected twists at the end.

After telling the story of the dishonest caretaker, when the master commends him for his shrewdness, the parable takes a serious turn. Instead of a story about a dishonest caretaker, the talk turns to being unable to serve two masters, that you cannot serve God and mammon. But the serious talk seems to be unrelated to the story just before. How does serving two masters relate to the dishonest caretaker? Willimon suggests that Luke may also have been uncomfortable with the dishonest caretaker story, and added the verses to provide a clarification and moral to the story. He also suggests that Luke, who refers to money as unrighteous mammon, thought that money was inherently evil and corrupting. That doesn’t, however, invalidate the truth of the ideas in the parable.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, also preached on this parable. Wesley takes a different direction though. He essentially skips over the story of the dishonest caretaker, and goes straight to the moral at the end. And unlike Luke, who seems to believe that money is at best a necessary evil, Wesley has no problem with people working hard and making lots of money.

Wesley makes three points in his sermon:

1. **We ought to gain all that we can gain - but this it is certain we ought not to do; we ought not to gain money at the expense of life or at the expense of health.** That is, as long as we are not hurting our physical or mental, or moral health, or that of others, that we should work hard to get as much money as we can.
2. **Do not throw the precious talent into the sea.** Here Wesley means that having gotten money, we shouldn’t squander it on wasteful spending, but invest it to continue increasing wealth and improving society economically.
3. **Having, first, gained all that you can, and, secondly saved all that you can, then “give all you can.”** This is obvious. We need to use our money to improve the lives of others by giving generously to those in need.

Wesley is certainly not one who believes that money is the root of all evil, or that the capitalism that was developing so strongly in the England of his period was a bad thing. He did not shrink, however, from preaching on what he saw was the evil people do in trying to get money. He had harsh words for the English slave traders of his day, and spoke against not only drinking, but making and selling liquor. Wesley’s ideas are in tune with what has become known as the “Protestant Work Ethic” which is credited with the economic rise of not only England, but North America and beyond.

Coincidentally, I just finished reading the book “Total Money Make over” by Dave Ramsey. Dave is an author, public speaker, and radio personality on the subject of debt reduction and financial planning. Dave has created a 13-week program called “Financial Peace University”, based on Biblical principles, to help people get out of debt, save money, invest, and reach financial

peace. I and others, plan to teach this course at Christ Church for interested people. In the book, Dave's ideas of how to manage money closely parallel those of John Wesley. I guess that shouldn't be a surprise, since both men used wisdom from the Bible to inspire their ideas.

In "Financial Peace", Ramsay says that there are over 800 references to money in the Bible. It is easy to see that looking at Jesus' parables in Luke. Just before the parable of the dishonest steward is the parable of the prodigal son. And following it is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. All three deal with money and the consequences of misusing it.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the son squanders the inheritance his father gives him and is left penniless. Notice that the money does not buy the prodigal son any good will from his friends, as they all desert him when the money runs out. Will the dishonest steward succeed where the prodigal son failed?

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus has a stark warning for those with money who do not use it to help others when they have the chance. After dying, the rich man ends up in Hades looking up at Lazarus and Abraham in Heaven.

Another theologian, Patrick Brennan, the pastor of Holy Family Parish in Inverness, Illinois, gleans another idea from the parable of the dishonest steward. He writes:

Jesus wants us to be children of the light, but he seems to want us to develop some of the shrewdness of the children of this age. Translated for our day, I believe Jesus would like to see us take some of the skill, effort, time, and determination that we give to work, and apply it to living a spiritual life. He is not encouraging us to become dishonest like the manager, rather to become shrewd about what really matters in life.

The philosopher Thomas a Kempis expressed the same idea another way: "For a small living, men run a great way; for eternal life, many will scarce move a single foot from the ground."

Brennan continues: **One interpretation of the parable that we began with is this: the owner of the resources, the rich man, the master, is God. God is pleased when the manager, all of us, begins to be shrewd about helping those with few resources to share more in God's abundance. We are to be shrewd stewards of God's creation, shrewd about mercy and justice.**

This parable closes with a clear statement: we cannot serve God and mammon. God needs to be the center of our lives. All resources are to be seen as God's; and as stewards, we are to see that as many as possible share in God's resources.

It is not so much that wealth is wrong, or that wealth is bad, but what are we doing with it. You see, in the perspective of Jesus, when he told these parables He saw the owner of all things to be God and all we are is stewards and as stewards, we have a responsibility to share the richness, the abundance of the kingdom with everyone.

It seems that the thoughts of these theologians, preachers and philosophers do share something in common after all. That is, God wants us to be shrewd with how we use money, to be generous with others, and to use the resources that God entrusts us with for the good of his creation. In a way, God uses money as a way to teach us to care for others in the same way God cares for us.

UMH 398 - Jesus Calls Us

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Almighty God, giver of every good and perfect gift, teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are, that we may praise you, not with our lips only, but with our whole lives, turning the duties, the sorrows, and the joys of all our days into a living sacrifice for you; through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Benediction

Go forth now as God's servant. Remember God's presence often and draw strength from the knowledge that the One who calls and sends also sustains. Amen.