

Sermon Notes – September 18, 2022

(Luke 16:1-15)

I missed you guys last week. It's good to see you! Today is one of the most puzzling parables that Jesus told. In fact, New Testament scholars say it's the most puzzling of all of them in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels. Most New Testament scholars think it means different things, and most of us who taught Sunday School (or if you taught Sunday School this morning), you were puzzled, too, when you came out. So, we're going to try to hit it from different angles.

But, I want to tell you a little story about a landlord who had a farmer (that worked for him) and who owed him a lot of money. It's a fable – a story that was told about a farmer who owed a lot of money to the landlord. That farmer had a beautiful daughter. One day the farmer and the daughter went to see the landlord and tell him that the farmer couldn't pay the money he owed to the landlord. The landlord says, "Well, I'll tell you what. If your daughter will marry me, I'll forgive your debt." Well, he could tell that she didn't want to marry him because he was older and "not-so-good-looking." So, he said, "How about if I put two pebbles (a black pebble and a white pebble) in a bag and your daughter can pick out a pebble. Now, if she picks the black pebble, that means that she will marry me and I will forgive your debt. If she picks the white pebble, she does not have to marry me and I'll still forgive your debt. But, if she refuses to put her hand in that bag and take out a pebble, I'll throw you in prison so fast that you won't know what happened to you and you'll stay until you pay that debt." Well, the girl was pretty smart and she happened to notice that the older landlord picked up two black pebbles and put them in the bag. He thought she didn't notice and he knew the farmer didn't notice. Well, the girl had to think about, "Well, what do I do now? If I pick the black one, I have to marry him and maybe he'll forgive my dad's debt, but I don't know for sure that he'll do that." So, she hatched a plan. She picked a pebble and she dropped it on the ground where all the black and white pebbles were so that the old landlord wouldn't know which pebble she dropped. She knew he had put two black pebbles in the bag, but the old landlord didn't think the farmer

or the girl knew. The farmer's daughter looks at the older landlord and says, "Sir, put your hand in and draw out the remaining pebble. Whichever pebble is in there, you'll know that I had the opposite color." So, he pulls out the black pebble and guess what? ... She didn't have to marry him and he still had to forgive the man's debt. She was a pretty smart girl, wasn't she? We like stories where the good guy or girl defeats the villain, don't we?

Well, today's parable is about a man who was dishonest. When you read through that story, you think, "Is Jesus praising con-men and women?" ... No. Is he praising the dishonest man? ... No. Here was a story of a landlord who had a steward (a manager) working for him. Now, a manager in that day was "a steward." Steward comes from two words - one meaning "house" and one meaning "manager." So, a manager was a house steward - he was in charge of that man's estate and home; he had financial and administrative authority. He was a steward over the landlord's resources - his land, his property, his money - everything he had. And, it's implied in the story that the landlord is kind of absentee, and he left this manager in charge of his estate. While he was gone, the manager (steward) had squandered the master's resources. What happened was that a third party told on the manager. He went to the landlord and said, "This guy has been squandering your money and your resources." So, the landlord calls him in and says, "Listen, I want an accounting of what you've done with what I gave you. I want a written report." So, he didn't just fire him immediately - he gives him some time to go back, write this report, and turn it in to him. Well, in the meantime, the guy knows he is going to lose his job, his power, his position, and his money. So, what's he going to do? Now, he could've felt sorry for himself, but instead he was pretty street-wise and he said, "Man, I'm going to hatch a plan that will prepare me for my future." So, he took action and made a decision that would affect his future. "If I'm going to lose my job and my money, what can I do?" He pulled in all the debtors of his master and he asked, "How much do you owe?" One of them says, "A thousand bushels of wheat." He says, "Cut it down to 800. That's all you owe. How much olive oil do you owe the master?" "I owe 800 gallons." He said, "You cut it down to 450 gallons." What he was doing --

was investing in people so that when he lost his job, he had some people that maybe (just maybe) would help him in the future with a job or money. You see, he knew he was going to lose his job and his money, but **he was investing in people who, maybe, would help him when he did lose his job and his income.**

Jesus also said something else in that scripture that was puzzling -- “Use your wealth to make friends so that when it’s gone, you’ll have access to eternal dwellings – to heaven.” In other words, invest in people. You see, your money is going to be gone – you can’t take your money with you. So, invest in people and relationships because they will transcend death – money doesn’t. Use your money to help people in need. Use your money to help spread the gospel and to help other people know and find Jesus. Is he praising the dishonest manager? ... No, because how many times in the story does it say he was a “dishonest manager?” But the gospel lesson said that the master praised the manager because he acted shrewdly. Now, shrewdly can be taken as a positive or a negative -- I’m going to take it positive here and say that Jesus was implying that we’re to be smart and clever. We’re to be smart in how we spread the gospel, how we do God’s work, and how we use our resources.

Now, many scholars would say that this parable is about being a steward of what God has given you – a steward of all that God has given you. One day there is going to be an accounting, just like that master called in his manager and said, “Give me an accounting.” One day, God is going to ask us for an accounting of our stewardship. We know that our stewardship includes our time, our talents, and our financial resources, but it also includes God’s church and his created world. So, it’s a stewardship of all that we are and all that we have. So, one day, there’s going to be an accounting. Jesus calls us to be responsible and faithful in how we use our resources.

I want you also to think about another part of that story where Jesus says, “Use your wealth to make friends, so that when it’s gone, you’ll have access to eternal dwellings.” For what did he praise the dishonest steward? ... For being clever and for taking action. He looked at his

future situation and he took action in the present. Have you ever met people that are paralyzed by fear, uncertainty, depression, and anger when something happens in their life? They just can't function; they can't make a decision, or they decide that they just want to pray about it. They want God to handle it. But, God calls us to pray and to do what we know to do. God is not going to do for us what we can do for ourselves. He wants us to pray in difficult situations, but also to keep doing and acting in the present moment based on the possibilities of the future. This manager knew he was going to lose his job, his position, and his money. Rather than feeling sorry for himself, he took action and was trying to prepare for his future.

There's a story told about two men who worked for AT&T wireless years ago. When AT&T wireless merged with Cingular wireless in 2005, these two men lost their job. One was 54-years-old and one was 56-years old. They both lost their jobs. One was so depressed about it that his anger, his bitterness, and his depression at the company carried over and it just paralyzed him. He couldn't seem to function. "What am I going to do now? I'm too old to get a job. What am I going to do? This is all I've done for my whole life." The other man, who was 56, said, "Well, I've networked during my life and I know some people who work for Verizon and other phone companies. I've still got another ten years to work. I believe I can find a job. I'm going to pray and then I'm going to do what I know to do." So, he went out and connected with his network and he prayed at the same time. I want you to know that he ended up with a job in two months. Guess what happened to the 54-year old? ... Two years later, he was still looking for a job, paralyzed by his fear, his lack of confidence, and his negative attitude.

God wants us to be a people of prayer and of action and I think he was trying to tell the disciples, "Listen, you're going to get into some tight situations. You're going to get into some bad situations. People are going to call you troublemakers; they are going to throw you in prison; and they're going to do all kinds of things. There's a tendency that you're going to be paralyzed by fear, doubt, uncertainty, and you're going to want to give up. ***I want you to keep praying, but I want you to keep***

doing. Be smart and street-wise. Be as clever as those people who are not redeemed. Do something -- pray and do. Don't just give up and be paralyzed with your fears, doubts, and uncertainty. Keep working for the kingdom of God."

Well, I've tried to give you a couple of ways to think about this parable. There's one scholar that says it's about forgiveness because the manager forgave some of the landlord's debts. But, I didn't buy that because I think that he didn't forgive all his debts; he just reduced them. **Most scholars say it's a parable about stewardship. But, I also think it's where God is calling us to be a people of action in the kingdom of God.** What way can we invest ourselves, who we are, and all that we have in the kingdom of God - our money, our time, our resources to serve him? You know it's often easy for us to say, "Let somebody else do it. Somebody else will come along and do it." What's that old saying about, "Everybody thinks somebody will do it and anybody will do" -- that's not the part that God wants us to do. He wants us to accept that he has called us each to be a part of his kingdom work and to be a people of prayer and a people of action.

What's the story about? Is it about us being good stewards of all that God has given us? ... Yes. Is it also about us being a people of action and not being paralyzed by our fear and uncertainty about the future? ... Yes, I think so. It's a puzzling parable, but Jesus' parables are meant to make us think and stretch our minds. I hope you'll re-read and ponder this passage of scripture. Amen.