

Using Dirty Money to Please God Luke 16:1-13

A number of Jesus' parables are hard for us to understand in our time, this one could be among the hardest. Let's see if we can figure out enough to understand it as well as the folks did in Jesus' time.

A rich man had hired a manager to be placed in charge of running his business. Then the rich man learned that his manager was wasting his money, so he fired him. Seems pretty straight forward at this point.

Now, the manager was a little upset, it had been a good job and quite lucrative for him. Yes he had worked long hours, but did not have to wield a shovel or an axe and the job paid well. Now he was out on his ear, everyone would see his disgrace. No one would be willing to hire him as a manager and he said to himself, "What will I do? I don't have the strength to dig and I'm ashamed to beg.

Then inspiration struck him. The news of his firing hadn't hit the streets yet, so he decided to do his master's debtors a favor. According to the standards of those days, one hand washed the other – if you did something nice for someone, they were obligated to return the favor. SO the man decided to do favors for people who owed his boss money, then when word got out he was unemployed, those people would be obligated to help him.

So, he went to one man who owed his boss and asked, "How much do you owe?" "A hundred baths of oil" was the reply. The oil in question was olive oil and a bath was equivalent to 9 gallons – so the man owed 900 gallons of olive oil, which was worth quite a bit of money. So the manager said, "Let's just adjust that a little, let's cut the amount in half, just cross out the 100 and put in 50."

Then he went off to another man who owed and asked him how much it was. He was told "100 cors of wheat." A cor is 10 to 15 bushels so the man owed between 1,000 and 1,500 bushels which is worth around \$7500 at today's prices. So the manager said "let's just adjust this a little, we'll cut the amount from 100 cors to 80. Would that be OK with you?" Of course, it was OK with the man.

So far, so good and so far, I understand completely, the manager who had been wasteful, also turned out to be dishonest as well. In his last moments of authority, he used that authority – at the expense of his master – to make friends with those who would help him once he was out on his ear.

BUT, and here is the hard part to understand. When the master learned what happened, Jesus tells us that he “Commended the dishonest manager because he had done wisely.”

Jesus explains, “for the children of this world (*in other words, the bad guys*) are in their own generation, wiser than the children of light (*the good guys*). I would have expected the master to be mad as a hornet – would call the police and have the crooked manager arrested and put in jail. But instead, the master commended the manager for shrewdness, for acting wisely to prepare for the future – while there was still time to prepare.

So, is Jesus suggesting that we should steal from our employer so that we might have security for the future? No, I’m certain that is not Jesus’ intent – so what does Jesus mean with this odd parable.

Once again it seems as though Jesus is commending the manager for acting wisely – for using the present time, what little was left of it, to prepare for the future. The he says that the children of this world are wiser than the children of the light.

The children of this world would be those whose hearts are focused on things of this world, materialistic people, simple people. But there is something to be said for them, the children of this world know how things work – they are smart about money, know how to buy low and sell high, know the value of compound interest, they know how to get along and smart about preparing for the future. They have it figured out so that if things are good, they’ll win big – but if things go bad, they’ll still be OK.

The children of light would be the Godly people kingdom of God people – people like you and me. Jesus like us, in fact he loves us – but he doesn’t seem to think very savvy. He seems to especially think we are not savvy about preparing for the future – our eternal future.

Now, don’t be offended by that, because we Christians live in confusing circumstances. We live most of our lives in the kingdom of this world, in this place where we have to be concerned about jobs and money and things like that. But, we also have one foot in the kingdom of God and the rules of this world are so very different than the rules of the kingdom of God. With one foot planted in this world and one foot planted in the kingdom of God is it any wonder we get confused?

In the kingdom of this world, the rule seems to be “get them before they get you.” But in the kingdom of God the rule is “Love your enemies and bless those who curse you.” (Matthew 5:44)

In the kingdom of this world another rule is “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In the kingdom of God the rule is “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:9)

In the kingdom of this world another rule is “The one with the most toys wins.” In the kingdom of God, the rule is “Don’t lay up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” (Matthew 6:19)

I could go on, but I hope you get the idea – we Christians live with one foot in this world and the other foot in the kingdom of God. Sometimes we feel like the Thanksgiving turkey wishbone – pulled in two directions or pulled apart at the seams.

In the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus encourages us to prepare for the transition – that time when we will have BOTH feet firmly planted in the kingdom of God. In this parable, Jesus is telling us to be like the manager, but NOT dishonest like the manager – but shrewd like him, focused on the future like him – preparing for the future like him.

So how are we to go about doing that? How would we go about preparing for our eternal future? What can we do now to prepare for that great day when we will see Christ, face to face?

Jesus answers us by saying “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

And then he warns, “If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches?” So Jesus calls us to prepare for our eternal future by using dishonest wealth and warns us of the consequences if we fail to do so. Some translations use the term unrighteous mammon in place of dishonest wealth.

So, we have to ask, what is unrighteous mammon? Mammon was a Greek word meaning riches or material possessions. When Jesus uses the phrase unrighteous mammon/dishonest wealth, we should think “filthy lucre” or “dirty money.”

So, Jesus is telling us to use our unrighteous mammon – our “dirty money” – to prepare for our eternal future. He is telling us that it is possible to use it in ways

that are pleasing to God. That seems to be an odd twist as he so often speaks about the dangers associated with money – money has the power to steal our affections so that forget God and if that happens we are in big trouble.

That does not have to happen, it is possible to use money in Christ-like ways. God gives us the resources to provide for our own needs, but also to demonstrate our faithfulness to God.

So Jesus tells us to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Make friends! With whom? How can we make friends that will welcome us into eternity?

Jesus does not answer these questions directly in this parable, but the next parable found in verses 19-31 is the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus which features two actors: the rich man and Lazarus.

The rich man has money, nice clothes, a luxurious home and lots of food. Lazarus is a beggar who sits at the rich man’s gate, hoping for some crumbs from the rich man’s table. The rich man studiously avoided Lazarus, in fact looks the other way as he passes. (sound familiar?) He does not care about Lazarus suffering on his doorstep.

Both the rich man and Lazarus die, Lazarus goes to the Kingdom of God and the rich man goes to Hades where is tormented. Finally, the rich man looks across the gulf that separates them and sees Lazarus and asks God to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with a drop of water – but God says, “Sorry, impossible!” Jesus does not tell us in so many words, that the rich man should have helped Lazarus while they both still lived – but that idea comes through quite strongly in the parable.

So, the point of the story of the dishonest manager is this – while living in this world, we need to be preparing for the future, for the kingdom of God. We need to be preparing for eternity.

How can we do that? How can we prepare for our eternal future? Well, there are lots of ways. We can be sure to help those who need help, we can read and study the Bible, we can pray, we can go to church, we can sing in the choir, we can do all sorts of “religious” things.

But Jesus reminds us that we can use even “dirty money” to please God. Jesus tells us one way to do that – we can please God by using our “dirty money” to help the Lazarus on our doorstep. Jesus tells us to do that – while there is still time.