



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 27, 2013

"Working It!" (Gospel of Luke Series)

The Rev. Dr. Drew Hulse

Today we continue in our series in the Gospel of Luke.

1 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'

3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'

5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'

7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

9 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.

10 "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.

15 So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human

beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

Now, I don't want to sound like a broken record. I love the opportunities Dan gives to me to preach, but I am sensing a pattern here of being assigned challenging passages. Maybe it's just the Gospel of Luke. One of the great things about preaching through an entire book is that you can't avoid things, as much as you'd like to. If it's there, God must have put it there for a reason.

But let me tell you. This particular passage with its parable, is almost universally accepted as one of the most difficult there is to understand. It is the story of a rich man, a manager getting fired for blowing the rich man's money, then his going behind his boss's back, wheeling and dealing fast and loose with his boss's money, and in the end getting commended for doing a good job, to the point that Jesus makes it an example of what great discipleship looks like. What are you going to do with a passage like that? I know what I'm going to do, I'm going to invite Dan up to come and explain it.

As we begin, I need to acknowledge help from many people and commentaries. Special thanks goes to John Ortberg, Senior Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for some of the great work he did with this passage. You've got to love those Presbyterians.

Okay, let's jump into this passage and see how much trouble we can get into. As we start, there are some important contextual things we should know.

First, coming from the Law, Jews were forbidden to charge interest to other Jews on the money they borrowed.

Exodus 22:25 - *"If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them."*

That seems pretty straight forward and I love that God says, "To My people."

So, if you're a first century businessman and you're in the business of lending money, how do you get around that? Notice that the verse says, *"to the poor"*?

Well, what really is poor anyway? Isn't it all relative? The way the lenders at the time got around it was to say that anyone who had any oil or wheat could not be poor. Therefore, they could lend money to them and do it with usury, or excessive interest. It was kind of like the Pay Day loan companies used to do. They would loan people money who were poor enough that they couldn't get a loan from a bank and then, because they had them over a barrel, would charge them excessively high interest. In Jesus' time, it was technically legal, but not holy.

It is in this context that we find the story of the manager who is in hot water. The passage tells us that the land owner has gotten word that his manager has been squandering his money. We don't get many details, but the manager doesn't seem to deny anything. Maybe he knew this day was coming or there had been a down

turn in the economy. Whatever it was, the spreadsheet has apparently hit the fan.

The manager seems to have a narrow window of opportunity in order to evaluate the situation and make a plan. He doesn't seem to have thoughts of keeping his job, so he needs to take care of his future. It will apparently take a little time for word to get to all of the land owner's debtors or for someone new to be hired, so the manager assesses the situation. He knows he's not cut out for hard labor and he's not going to become a beggar, so he needs to act quickly and decisively. I love the Greek here when he says, "I have decided what to do." The flavor is actually something spontaneous like, "Sweet, I've got an idea!"

He begins to call together each of the land owner's debtors and evaluates their situation. Notice he does them one at a time, so they don't get wise and before word gets out to the others and the land owner. He asks the first debtor what he owes and he says, "A hundred jugs of olive oil."

Now, I'm pretty sure most of us don't deal in jugs as units of measure so the amount doesn't mean much to us, but let's try to understand it. A typical oil jug of the day held approximately 8.75 gallons of oil. The debtor said he owed 100 jugs of olive oil, or 875 gallons of oil. That would be the equivalent of the harvest from 146 olive trees. In other words, it was a substantial debt. The manager cuts the debt in half to fifty and then moves on to the next debtor.

This debtor is asked the same thing and he says he owes the land owner 100 koros of wheat. Of course, we all know that a koros is equal to ten bushels, and all of us know that a bushel works out to 60

pounds of wheat. Do all the math and that means this debtor owed 60,000 pounds of wheat, or the yield of about 100 acres. Again, it was a substantial debt being reduced.

The manager doesn't stop here. We can assume there are many other debtors he goes through one at a time, reducing their debt. Some commentators would say since it was probably the manager who had made the original deals with all of the debtors on behalf of the land owner, and he knew what the original loans had been, the reduction being made was probably taking the loan back to the original amount before the excessive and biblically questionable interest had been added on.

Now we come to the face off between the land owner and the manager and this is where things start to get really challenging in understanding. Let's look again at the passage.

8 "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

What???? The manager had just, uh, done to the land owner a term I can't use here. We'll just say the land owner just lost a lot of money because of what the manager did. And what does the land owner do? He commends the manager. He tells him he has acted shrewdly.

The land owner understood that the manager saw a tough situation and went out and worked it to his advantage.

And why did it work? The manager put the land owner between a rock and hard place.

If the land owner puts all of the debts back, he has two major problems. First, he's stopped the party in town of everyone who is now celebrating and he becomes the bad guy. Second, the land owner would be revealed for the corrupted guy he was for charging excessive interest that was really forbidden by the law. Instead, if he just eats the loss, he is seen as wonderfully pious and the hero of the town. What can he do but say to the manager, "Well played sir, well played."

Our struggle with understanding what has happened is it seems as if Jesus is giving credence and praise to crafty, if not illegal, business practices. Clearly, that's not what Jesus is doing.

Several times in the parables Jesus tells stories with shady characters in them, and He uses a rabbinic technique that was called "from the light to the heavy." Usually, it involves the phrase that compares one to the other.

An example of this can be found in Luke 18 when Jesus tells the story of a widow who persists with a corrupt and stingy judge until finally she prevails. I'm not sure who Dan is going to stick with that passage, but that will be *their* challenge!

The point of the story in Luke 18 is not that God is stingy. Jesus doesn't say that God is stingy like this judge. Jesus' point is, if this widow can persist with a stingy, unjust judge, how much more should we persist with God, who longs to give us good gifts. He goes from a light example, almost comedic kind of shady characters, to the substantial reality—light to heavy. Jesus is doing the same thing here with the manager.

Look at the rest of verses 8 & 9.

8 *"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."*

9 *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."*

Jesus is not commending the manager's dishonesty, but his prudence, his savvy. The manager wisely used a present opportunity to effect his future welfare. You notice Jesus doesn't say the manager got his job back. When Jesus is saying the children of this age are more shrewd than followers of God, He is saying that at times, the followers of God, as well-intentioned as we can be, often lack the wisdom to use what we have as wisely as the worldly use their possessions for a far different purposes.

Jesus is saying, "I want some street smarts from you. I want you to face reality. I want some savvy." He uses the same word in verse 8 that he uses in Matthew 10:16: *"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."*

He sends the disciples out on a mission there and says, "I want you to be innocent as doves," but He also says, "I want you to be wise as serpents."

Serpents were known as crafty animals. There were in Jesus' day two primary words for wisdom, "sophia", which had kind of a spiritual, pious ring to it.

But then there was another word, "phronimos", which meant savvy or shrewd—street smarts.

That's the word Jesus uses in Matthew 10:16: "I want you to show some street smarts, some savvy, crafty like a serpent." It's the same word that He uses in this parable right here—innocent as doves, wise as serpents.

The business world will bring all of their skills to help them be successful. Did you know McDonald's spent one million dollars to discover whether the catsup should be put on the bun or on the burger? They use every tool to help them be successful. That's the type of savvy Jesus is talking about.

The amazing thing is, and I say this very humbly, with no credit going to myself because I wasn't even here, but I think Jesus would be rather impressed with FPC's shrewdness and faithfulness in our move to Ko'olau. Clearly, as it is laid out in the presentation of the Miracle of Koolau, the acquisition of this property was an act of God, but the instruments God used were wise and gifted businessmen like Freddie Noah, Don Parker, Ron Mathieu and more who used their gifts for the glory of God.

It's now at this point in our passage Jesus uses his parable to teach on discipleship. Look back at our passage.

10 *"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much."*

11 *If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?*

12 *And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*

13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

What Jesus wants us to know is the phrase that describes discipleship is: "Whole-hearted."

Initially, the audience for this parable has been the disciples and Jesus wants them to know what God's desire is for what they are being given. God wants to give the disciples the keys to the Kingdom of God and He wants to know they are both committed and have the character to handle it.

Faithfulness is no accident. Faithfulness grows with practice.

(Photo is shown) When you see this picture of two little girls running a lemonade stand we understand something. We learn to do the big things by learning how to do the little things. Jesus wants the disciples to understand it is the same skills they have learned, lessons learned in dealing with what might seem like the little things, are those lessons which will help you to deal with the big things. And the ultimate lesson Jesus wants the disciples to hear is they must be totally sold out, whole-hearted for Jesus.

The first church staff I served on I served as the Director of Music and Worship. Don't worry, Roz is safe. When I was hired, it ended up I was hired at 3/4 time. What that meant was, I was hired at a salary that wouldn't support Cathy and myself, but supposedly gave me time to do other work to supplement our income. Cathy and I were really excited about the ministry position and opportunity, but not so thrilled about the financial challenges. To make it was

going to take a lot of work. It meant painting houses in my spare time while doing ministry full time, because no one does ministry 3/4 time.

The senior pastor at the church had a plan for us. He wanted us to learn that God provides as we apply ourselves to Him and work hard. Of course, he was the kid who paid his way through college and seminary by being a photographer and became a landlord by buying old apartment buildings and remodeling them. He became financially independent through his hard work and investments. He would get audited almost every year by the IRS because he gave away 90% of his salary. He led his church in stewardship to commit one-third of its budget to missions challenging them to know that as they were faithful God would provide. He spends his life working it, using his skills and the Holy Spirit to do the will of God.

He wanted us to learn the same thing. I hope we have in part. We know that whatever the circumstance, as we remain faithful to God's call upon our lives, God will provide. And God does. At times we have needed to be crafty, but we have always been able to work things out.

It is at this point in the story Jesus gives to them both a challenge and a promise.

12 "And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"

The challenge is, none of what we have belongs to us in the first place. Everything we have belongs to God. We are stewards, managers of all God has given us and God desires for us to be faithful with what He has given us.

The promise is, when we are faithful, God will entrust to us the riches of His Kingdom. God wants us to be disciples who will "work it" for His kingdom.

And the way we "work it" is to not have a heart divided.

13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus gets down to the nuts and bolts of things and makes it as straight forward as can be. Using an example all of listeners were familiar with, that of a slave, Jesus lays it out. A slave can only serve one master. You might try to serve two masters, but only one is going to get full devotion. God wants us to serve Him whole-heartedly.

(Photo is shown) This picture of a person straddling between a boat and a dock is an illustration of what Jesus is talking about. How many times have we tried to live with divided interests, with one foot on the boat and one foot on the dock and, never fail, ended up in the water? We know it doesn't work.

And now Jesus turns his attention to the situation all of those gathered knew.

14 "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. 15 So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God."

Jesus knew the Pharisees pretended to be pious and holy, but the fact was, they were lovers of money and position.

The Pharisees believed their wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Jesus gives an ultimate indictment of them when he says "God knows your heart." The phrase is literally, "God sees right through you."

We love it when the Pharisees get it. We hear Jesus' words and say, "Stick it to them, Jesus." The problem is, Jesus is also speaking to us. He sees right through us. He knows our heart. He knows if we are just playing the game, giving Him second best, or whether we are sold out in our discipleship, working it with all we've got, using every bit of street smarts for the Kingdom of God.

Remember the promise, what God's desire is for us? Jesus wants to give us the keys of the Kingdom and He's looking for workers, disciples, who are ready to bring everything to the table. God invites us to work it, to use all of the gifts He's given us for His glory. And when we do, He will entrust more and more to us.

Can you imagine a person saying they want a job, but they want to make sure it is God who gives it to them? They say something like, "I'm not going to write a resume, or check any job listings. I won't take any initiative. I won't pursue any conversations. I won't make any applications. I won't do anything, and that way if I get the job, I know it will be God and not me."

Sometimes people can get confused thinking being passive is a technique to guarantee that I will get God's will for my life—that passivity is a technique in spirituality to guarantee what happens is God's will and not our own.

That's like a person who is hungry saying, "I won't buy any groceries or fix any food or go into a restaurant and order any meals, and that way I'll know if any food makes its way into my body, it'll be God doing it, not me operating in the flesh."

I'm sure that's going to go over real well in most homes.

This is the moment that Jesus slaps us in the face saying, "Snap out of it." This is a good time for the wisdom of Solomon. "Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise."

God doesn't want us to evade hard work. In fact, He calls us to it. Generally speaking, friends, God's will for human beings is not passivity. His desire is that we learn to take the initiative, to exercise judgment, to accept responsibility, to make the best decisions we can and humbly learn from the results.

I've had the opportunity to do a bit of White water guiding on the Deschutes River in central Oregon. The Deschutes is loaded with Class 4 & 5 rapids, the highest a rapid is rated. The first thing you do when you get in the raft is to have your crew practice paddling. You need to figure out who your strong paddlers are so you can disperse them evenly around the raft in preparation for what's to come.

It's not the slow, placid times you're worried about. The important times are when you're getting ready to take on a class four or class five rapid and you need to get the raft in the right position. You don't just float through a rapid. You paddle your heart out. It's tough work, and if you do it correctly, it's amazing. If you don't, get ready to meet the river in a whole new way.

And so it is for discipleship. God is looking for people whose hearts are sold out to Him, who are ready to work it, to bring, to bear all they have and make it available to God to use for His glory.

If you're faithful and ready for an amazing adventure, wait until you see what He's going to entrust to you. It's awesome!

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Please note: Kirk Leavy is the Executive Coordinator and Director of Outreach at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu.

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