

Sermon Text: Luke 16:1-13

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the mediation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There was once a golfer with just about my golf skills. I've played four times in my entire life. He set up the ball, and he made a mighty swing, and he missed, and he kicked up a clump of grass about the size of a man's toupee. If anyone's wearing a toupee, lift it up so we can see. He killed 100 ants. He set up the ball again. He got ready to swing. He hit on the other side of the ball, kicking up another clump of grass, and killing another couple of hundred ants. As he drew back the club to take one more swing, one ant said to another, "We better get on the ball!"

Get on the ball. This is one of the messages in Jesus' parable about the dishonest steward. This is one of the most difficult and confusing of all Jesus' parables. We read it, and we ask ourselves, "What was that about?" Even St. Augustine said, "I can't believe this story came from the lips of our Lord." He is not telling us to be dishonest. He is using the story to tell us to get on the ball, be decisive, take action, be shrewd, just as shrewd in spiritual wealth and influence as worldly people are shrewd serving and scrambling for earthly wealth. There's one point.

The Wall Street Journal had a quote in it once, an anonymous quote. It said, "Money is an article, which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except Heaven, and a universal provider for everything except happiness." It is a wonderful tool to make things happen, but a terrible master, which will suck the spiritual life and the compassion for others out of your soul if you serve it. Jesus seemed to be saying serve God with all the shrewdness and energy that some poor souls serve only money. How was this dishonest steward shrewd? Well, he was being fired because he mismanaged his master's property. He mismanages money and never considers prayer, never considers confession, never considers begging for mercy. He only considered the power of money, dishonestly using money again when he had already misused it and gotten himself fired in the first place. The only power he seems to know about is the power of money so he dishonestly tries to buy himself some friends, to buy himself some friends, by forgiving large portions of debt owed to his master.

Now, the dishonesty comes in because it was not his debt to forgive, but he thought, "I don't want to do any physical work. I want to cruise on the kindness of others. I'm going to buy me some friends." He makes friends by reducing their debt, and he is really, he's really triple shrewd because he has them, if you read it carefully, in their own handwriting reduce their debt making them complicit in the dishonesty, if and when he is caught. When the dishonest man's master found out about it, it seems that he had to smile and commend the man on his cleverness. Now, you have to think about it to really see why. The people whose debts were reduced did not know that he was cutting their debt without the master's permission so they went home smiling at what a wonderful, generous man the master was. There was no way then that the master of the parable

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could go back and reinstate the full debt without wiping the smile off their faces and looking like a greedy, miserly scrooge. That dishonest steward had bought himself some friends on the way out being fired by forgiving debts that were not his own, and did it in such a way that even his master could not undo it without looking bad himself. Wow!

It reminds me of the story that I read that’s supposed to be true. When Henry Ford visited Ireland way back in the 30’s, two local trustees of a hospital met him, and they talked Henry Ford into giving \$5,000.00 to the hospital. The next morning in the paper it said in a headline, “American Millionaire Gives \$50,000 to Local Hospital.” Well, Ford immediately summoned the two hospital trustees, and he said, “What does this mean?” They apologized profusely. They said it was a dreadful error, and they said they would print a retraction on the front page the very next day declaring that Henry Ford had not given \$50,000, but only \$5,000. That didn’t sound good so Ford sighed, and he went ahead, and he offered them another \$45,000 under one condition, that they would erect a marble archway on the front door, and he could decide a Scripture verse to put on it. That is what he did. It read, “I was a stranger, and you took me in.”

Now, think with me, and I think you’ll find the key to this difficult parable. What sort of wealth do we have from God that could buy us friends on earth and in Heaven and make God, our master, look good at the same time? What of great value do we hold in our power that we can give to others and make it a win, win, win situation for everyone, ourselves, our friends, and God? Hold on to that question.

If we are wise and shrewd, we will be quick to use the true wealth, the true power that we hold for the good of others and for God. Now, speaking of shrewd, I found this recently, and it is a wonderful illustration of being shrewd.

True story. Jay Wilkinson, son of the famous Oklahoma football coach, Bud Wilkinson, was an All-American football star at Duke back when Duke had a football team. Jay ran for Congress years ago, and everyone thought he had it in the bag. Here’s his resume: Jay Wilkinson, All-American at Duke, married a Miss America finalist, graduated from Harvard Divinity School, young, handsome, idealistic, the perfect candidate! Well, there was a television commercial that they ran. It was designed and had a picture of Jay and his wife, and they were walking hand in hand through an Oklahoma pasture, and as they walked, they were looking soulfully upward at the sky to an accompanying tune of soft music in the background and a banner that ran across the bottom, “A Better Tomorrow for All Oklahomans.” Here’s the shrewdness. The incumbent, Tom Steed, was a good ole country boy, and he scheduled just one 40-second commercial answer to Wilkinson’s commercial. He looked straight into the camera, nothing fancy, no music, no background, and he said, “I may not have a fancy degree from Harvard like young Wilkinson, but I do know enough not to look up at the sky when I’m walking in a cow pasture.” Steed won by not giving up or giving in to the perfect candidate. Steed won with cleverness.

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There are people who reject the spiritual wealth that we have and hold. Do we just give up? Do we just give up, or might there be more clever and more determined ways to share what we have from God, which is more valuable than money? We're facing a crisis in the church, and I don't mean just this church or this denomination. I mean the Christian church. If we keep the defeatist attitude that many church members have across the country, where we just maintain and not even really plan to grow, but just try to maintain and not lose too many members with young people drifting away and career-focused people drift away, too busy in their careers, and longtime members often lose focus on why we exist, but instead internally just maintain their congregation. We keep doing that. We will continue to die instead of going and making disciples, which is our marching order. We must reclaim what it is that is worthy to work for and spend for and serve with our whole lives.

There's an ancient story of some Roman gladiators, who almost converted to Christianity. They understood the water for baptism, understood that conversion meant complete ownership of all they were and all they had for God, and as they went under, the legend says, many of them lifted their sword hand high above the water and left it unbaptized. They gave all that they were to God except their sword hand. That, they kept for themselves.

Many Christians give all that they have to God except their talents, except their time, except their checkbooks. Lord, I am completely yours, almost! Consider the most valuable thing you have to share. Is it really money? The most valuable thing you possess with which to make friends – is it really money? The greatest riches you have from God – is it really money? I do not believe that this parable is only about money, far from it. There is something much deeper and more profound here. If you use money only for yourself or puff yourself up and serve yourself, and yes, Jesus did say you've had your reward already, that's all you get. If you want to think about it just in terms of money, when you're dead and your money is gone, that's it! Friends you made with money move on. Friends you made with money you won't see them again, they won't see you again, they won't think of you again. Relationships based on money end when the money goes away.

If you use it as a tool to show what you really value, the spreading of God's love and forgiveness, the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the downcast, the outcast, the doubters, the unforgiven, the forgotten, even your enemies, to share the love and forgiveness and eternal hope of Christ, then you make true friends for yourself and for God because when you value what God in Christ has done for you, and pass it on to others, you are truly serving God. You are truly making friends for yourself and God, friends you will see later in your Heavenly home. To me, that is the only way this parable makes sense.

To use and share with cleverness and shrewdness and determination and energy the wealth that belongs to your true master, the riches of forgiveness and grace, and you make friends forever with others and with God, the God who loves and forgives and wants to be in relationship with us forever. It all starts now, and is reflected in how you

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use your money and your time and your talents and who you are. I shouldn't even say your money because you do not have any money. It starts with how you use God's money and the gifts that God has given you and the talents that God has given you and every day of life, which God has given you and whether your actions show a shrewd understanding of your complete dependence upon God and his grace. Just as the dishonest steward showed a shrewd understanding of what money can do in the short term, let us use it only as one more tool to share our true riches – God's love, forgiveness and grace. Because of Jesus, we do have permission to write off the debts of others and forgive them what they owe us. In fact, we have a command to forgive others their debts just as we have been forgiven. We have true riches and instructions to make friends out of enemies. How? By forgiving them. Friends we can then see in eternity. How? By convincing them with the way we use God's gift that the Gospel is true and them accepting it for themselves.

You know, an enormously rich man once complained to a psychiatrist that despite his great wealth he was miserable. The psychiatrist took the man over to a window and said, “Look out. What do you see?” He saw men and women and children out there playing. Look through that window. That's what you see. Then he took him over to a mirror, and he said, “Look into the mirror. What do you see?” He said, “I see only myself. I see only myself.” The psychiatrist said, “Both are windows. Both are mere pieces of glass. The difference in the mirror is behind the glass there is a layer of silver. When silver is added, you cease to see others. You see only yourself.”

Whenever your devotion is to money and material things alone, you become self-centered. You in essence deny God's intention for your life. It is also a denial of Christ. For Jesus came into the world so that we might be in union with God and that we might work and use what we have to win others to God in Christ. If we work only for and believe only in the power of money above all, then we have some work to do, some work to do on our hearts and souls. God's love and forgiveness and grace are the true wealth that we have. It is the true wealth that we can use to make a lasting difference in our lives and in the lives of others. It is where true power lies. Amen.