

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 4: LECTURE OUTLINE

THAT CONNIVING BUSINESSMAN (LUKE 16:1-13)

ANOTHER PARABLE TO RUB US THE WRONG WAY

- The Parable of the “Unjust Steward” or the “Conniving Businessman” (Luke 16:1-13). Here it is in the RSV Translation:

¹He 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.”

- What’s “wrong” with this story?
 - The master of the story *commends* a dishonest manager (who has just ripped the master off). If written in English, we might have expected the master to *condemn* the manager!
 - *Jesus* uses this act of dishonesty in his moral instruction – as if it’s commendable! But how can dishonesty be a model of righteousness?
 - Are we really supposed to use money/mammon to make friends and secure our “eternal habitations”?
- There’s a lot in the parable that would make us think, “Jesus should know better.”

SAVING JESUS FROM HIMSELF (WHAT ELSE COULD IT MEAN?)

- Several interpretations attempt to solve the problems of the text (mentioned above), but end up being more problematic than they’re worth.
 - Maybe the manager didn’t forgive “debt,” but interest.
 - Maybe the manager didn’t forgive the master’s debt, but gave up his own “commission.”

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- Maybe the actions of the manager “loosen up” the master to be able to take a joke, laugh in the face of adversity, and to forgive.
- Maybe the actions of the manager backed the master into a corner.
- Maybe the master is just being sarcastic in “commending” the manager.
- None of these rises to the level of a comprehensive, holistic interpretation of the parable that doesn’t also raise new questions and problems.

THE PARABLE . . . IS JUST AS BAD AS IT LOOKS

- Remember “images from common life made strange”? Here an unjust steward, whom we would expect to be condemned, is commended.
- The “parabolic pump-fake” of the *commendation* of the manager is meant to “tease the mind into active thought.”

MAKING SENSE OF THE COMMENDATION

- So, we ask, does the commendation of the steward/manager make any sense at all?
 - Commendation does *not necessarily* mean approval. What, in fact, is commended?
 - ♦ The master grudgingly concedes the manager’s shrewdness (v.8a)
 - ♦ Jesus forcefully commends the manager’s shrewdness (vv.8b-9), while the Lukan context rejects his dishonesty (vv.10-13).
 - We can concede the shrewdness without endorsing the dishonesty.
- What is this “shrewdness” (*phronimos*)?
 - cagey wisdom, street smarts, situational savvy
 - It is not intrinsically shady or morally questionable.
 - Compare Matthew 10:16: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise (*phronimos*) as serpents and innocent as doves.”
 - To be *phronimos* doesn’t mean “dishonest” – we can (must!) be both “shrewd” and “innocent” at the same time.

SHREW (PHRONIMOS) FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- What’s Jesus’ point?
 - Worldly people know how to be shrewd in the world (like the steward of the parable).
 - The “sons of light” need to understand how to be shrewd (*phronimos*) for the kingdom of God.
- What does it mean to be “shrewd for the kingdom of God”? Pay attention to the details of the application in verse 9:

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- Make friends with “unrighteous mammon” (worldly currency).
- “When it fails”? When worldly currency has no more value . . . *in the age to come*.
- When it fails, you stand *having made friends for yourself* through concrete acts of charity (i.e., by your use of worldly currency).
- Those friends will then “receive you into eternal dwellings” (in the age to come).
- Notice the parallels between v.9 and v.4:

<p>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.</p>	<p>⁴I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.</p>
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- The steward made friends for himself by the use of worldly currency (“unrighteous mammon”).
- What the steward decided to do in v.4 (and then did in vv.5-7), Jesus tells us to do with our whole lives (v.9).
- But rather than securing an earthly future, this use of worldly currency (or material resources) has *eternal* implications.

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF MONEY (VV. 10-12)

- Pay attention to the contrasts as Jesus goes on to apply the parable:
 - One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much.
 - One who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.
 - If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?
 - And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?

Worldly Wealth
 very little
 unrighteous Mammon
 another’s

Eschatological Reward
 much
 true riches
 your own

- Applying the Parable:
 - Together, vv.8b-12 teach us to be “shrewd” (but not dishonest).
 - v.9 applies the lesson *specifically* to material resources.

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- So . . .
 - ♦ If money is merely temporal (that is, if the day comes when it will fail) . . .
 - ♦ If eternity hangs in the balance . . .
 - ♦ The shrewd thing to do with our money is . . . to get rid of it.

THE PUNCHLINE

- The shrewdest thing to do with money is spend someone else's to secure our own future.
 - The unjust steward spent his master's money to secure his future.
 - The disciple of Jesus spends the Lord's money toward eternal consequences.
- We can't buy our way into heaven – of course – but if we recognize that our resources are not ultimately our own but God's, and that they are therefore most appropriately directed to his purposes and the economy of his kingdom, then . . .
 - The use of money is one of the most reliable indicators of the authenticity of our faith.
 - Radical generosity with temporal resources is one of the surest indicators of genuine trust in God.
 - A life committed to acquisition and hoarding, and to indifference to the poor, is a life of practical atheism.
- Acts of generosity with our resources are another way of saying the Creed.
- John Wesley: "Make as much as you can. Save as much as you can. Give as much as you can."
 - These are all good activities under God.
 - We are to do all three.
- God blesses us with all that we need – we yield all to God who blesses us so that we can return to him what is already his own for the sake of his kingdom.