

“The Steward’s Purpose”
Luke 16:1-13

Many of the parables of Jesus had their focus on finding and recovering something that had been lost. Specifically, they were aimed at lost souls. In the parable of our text for today the focus shifts to dealing with the life and living of those who have been found, to the faithful. Our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is reflected by the way we live. Therefore, the faithful people of God, for you and me, the way we go about conducting the day-to-day business of our lives cannot be separated from our relationship with God. That’s what Jesus is sharing with us in this parable of the shrew manager, also known as unrighteous steward. This parable touches the lives of every one of us, as we struggle to balance in our lives, our relationship with God, keeping Christ first and foremost, and our wants and desires and dealings with the things of this world, and what they offer to us. We are often misled, tempted into thinking that having more and more things of this world will make us happier and more secure, which is totally not true.

The parable of our text is a genuine picture of worldliness. Jesus aims it at Pharisees and scribes, and publicans and sinners. All those typical people who, in our minds, need to hear a lesson on worldliness because, from our point of view, they have this problem of being absorbed in thinking more is better. Guess what, my friends! Jesus also points this parable in the direction of the disciples, and so to us also.

If we are sitting here all smug and secure in our pews thinking, “Well, I’m not guilty of worldliness,” think again! No matter what our age, consideration of and involvement with the things of this world are part and parcel of all of us. We may not see or want to admit that often God’s purpose for our lives is replaced by the American dream, which is to live in a big house, drive fancy cars, and have large retirement accounts.

Three teens were talking about their future plans. One of them talked of being a doctor because he could have fame and people would come to him and be helped. He saw becoming a doctor as a way to gain popularity and recognition. His purpose in life was to gain fame. Another teen listened and decided he might like to be a doctor too. He described the car his doctor drove, a Ferrari, and that shared that being a doctor would mean he could have the Lamborghini he admired. He then started into a dissertation listing all the things his parents couldn’t afford that he would have. His purpose in life was to gain wealth.

The third teen was confused. He thought a few moments and then shared his desire to do something that God wanted him to do. Maybe that would mean becoming a doctor, or maybe he would be a nurse. His purpose in life was to glorify God by serving others. As he shared his purpose of serving others, the other two teens laughed at him.

In the parable we have a rich man whose business is extensive, so much so that he employed a general manager, a steward, who had full power to handle all his business affairs. We are not talking about a small business. Eight to 900 gallons of olive oil, 1,000 bushels of wheat show us the wealth involved. No doubt this steward lived quite a life commensurate with the wealth he dealt in.

As it turns out, the steward who managed the affairs of the rich man was a crook. Most of us are aware that is nothing new in managers who have powers like his. In the parable we look in on him at a time in his career when somebody denounced him to his employer. The evidence that is presented is apparently overwhelming and convinces the employer to fire the steward. It is interesting that the steward makes no effort to defend himself and so admits to his guilt.

The great emphasis of the parable at this point finds itself in the words of the text and the shrewdness of the steward. But before you go too far with your thoughts, please note that this concept of shrewdness is not the main point of Jesus' parable, although the main point does revolve around shrewdness.

The steward thought about his predicament. He decided and then acted very quickly. That shows us some good managerial skills. He figured that he wasn't strong enough to do hard labor like that of a hired hand, nor was he about to lower himself to have to rely on begging for his existence. His plan was to set things in motion so that his employer's debtors would take him into their homes so that he could live at ease until something better came along.

Having squandered his employer's possessions up to that point he decided to do it again, one final time. He pulled the debtors notes out of the strong box, handed it to him and told him to write a receipt for much less than what it really called for. For a second debtor, he repeated the process. In that day as in ours, tampered documents would invalidate a transaction, so new obligations must be drawn up and substituted for the originals. The deed is done. What a clever man! What a shrewd man!

How many of you here today are as clever and shrewd as this conscienceless steward? Let's answer that from a different direction. How many of you are concerned about your retirement years, or more precisely, your ability to financially exist in retirement? We read stories all the time of elderly people and their financial plight. The various media expose us to that quite often as they solicit our aid and assistance. Whether we help or not, one thing is for sure: most people determine not to let themselves get into that kind of predicament. The result is that we live our lives in the arena of worldliness, trying to accumulate as much as possible toward some mental picture of what is enough. We call it a "nest egg." Unfortunately, because we are prone to sin, worldliness can get a hold of us. It takes over our lives with greed and pride and lust for it so that those become our motivator. At that point we can lose sight of God and our need for a Savior. Then we are lost.

The shrewd way that rascal of a steward feathered his nest was praised by his employer who was shrewd enough to appreciate it. And now the question arises, what does Jesus have in mind by telling this parable?

In the verses following the parable, Jesus helps us apply the parable to our lives as his stewards. In verse 9, Jesus said, *“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”* In this verse Jesus referred to the Shrew manager who used worldly wealth in order to make friends for himself who would take him in when he was fired. Jesus tells us as stewards to use the same shrewdness in using our resources.

The difference between the Shrewd Manager and us, however, is the motivation and goal. God calls us to use all his gifts to us with the purpose of helping others come to know his Son. In so doing, we will be welcomed in heaven by those to whom we have witnessed and with whom we have shared our blessings.

In the next verse, verse 10, Jesus said, *“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”* We often fail to see the witness of Christian faith and conduct that we can communicate in little things: how we deal with our neighbors around the block, how we value our conversations with our children or our parents, how we play a game of cards. Our consistency of conduct, and our honoring of principles will be seen in the “little things,” and these may even constitute the practice field for the big things in life, what God entrusts to us.

Speaking of playing cards, I recently read of a pastor who had shared that a part of his theological interview for ordination consisted of playing pinochle with

three officials of his denomination who were doing his evaluation. At the time he related this to his classmates they thought he was putting them on. Yet, some of the older more experienced clergy understood what might have been the rationale for such an examination. Perhaps the examiners thought they could assess the young man's ability and commitment by how he approached and conducted himself in a game of cards.

With verse 13, Jesus concludes his explanation and application of the parable of the Shrewd Manager. "*You cannot serve God and money.*" I don't believe anyone here today would admit that he or she is serving money and not God. However, God looks at our hearts, and he sees how we use our credit cards and check books. God knows what motivates us and what we see as our purpose in life. When we seek God's forgiveness and help, God will take away our love for money and possessions.

In this parable, we see that the shrewd manager's entire focus was rest and ease in this life. But our motivation as people of God is not rest and ease in this life, it is serving God. It is becoming wise stewards of the material things that God entrusts to us by using them to fulfill God's purposes. It is loving God because he first loved us, enough to die for us. We respond out of thanksgiving and praise for who God is and what God has done for us, living each day as stewards who give God glory and honor. Amen.