

Luke 16:1-13 The Shrewd Money Manager

South Arm UC 18 Sep 2022

Intro

Last week we looked at the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. And we learned that parables are not just cute stories we can take at surface level and be done with, but an oral and literary device meant to teach us deeper lessons, to shine light on something and to even confront and challenge us.

What a strange story we have in the scriptures again today. A property owner is not happy with a shrewd person who is managing their property and calls them to give an account. Finding out that the shrewd manager has gone around and cut their patrons debts down to win friends and influence them to his favour when he's no longer employed, the property owner praises his craftiness. The owner lets him go. These two are suited for each other. They both value money and looking out for their interests number one.

And the punchline? You cannot serve 2 masters – God and money. Either you will love the one and not the other or the other and not the one.

Digging In

Notice please that the passage is not saying money itself is evil. Money is a tool. It's making money our master, worshipping it, giving our life in pursuit of it alone and putting it above all else that is not beneficial. With money we can serve ourselves and with money we can do our part in God's plans in the world, taking only what we need and blessing others who have less.

Let's step back and look at this scene to try and break down the elements of what is going on and what we might glean from it today.

The parable has 2 primary characters – the property owner (implying wealth) & the property manager (who would have enjoyed benefits like social status of being a manager of an estate, a roof over their head and a good job). But uh oh, it seems this manager has been squandering/mismanaging the property and has now been caught. Now he must quickly find a way to fend for himself when he loses his job and so he devises a plan. He goes to the debtors of the

owner and cuts their bills, wanting to be in good relations with them all so when he has no roof and income – he might be welcome in their homes and receive their favour.

The amount of debt the owner is owed and the amount the manager forgives are substantial.

At first glance it appears that the owner is praising the craftiness of the manager

If we think about it, what the manager was doing in forgiving debts was redistributing wealth amongst the poor by forgiving great portions of their debts. Some commentaries have suggested that the amount the manager forgives is the interest accumulated but that's not 100%.

“In Jewish tradition, wealth is not inherently evil, but, in the Lukan presentation, neither can one remain neutral in one's relationship to it. Wealth is either used faithfully --- that is, in the service of God and thus in solidarity with and on behalf of those in need --- or, as in verse 13, it takes on a personified, cosmological status...” (my words - that is out of alignment with the ways of God's Kin-dom).

Source: Reid, Barbara E. and Matthews, Shelly. *Wisdom Commentary: Luke 10-24* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 586-598.

Perspective: “You’re Richer Than You Think”

If the parables are meant to carry a deeper lesson and confront us - What are we being confronted with here? Brace yourselves, I’m about to take a turn.

I’m sure when most of us think of the rich we think of people like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates & Oprah. Or perhaps you think of various movie stars, top athletes and top music artists?

But do we include ourselves? To quote a current Scotiabank ad, “You’re richer than you think”.

“Billions of people around the world are continuing to suffer from poor access to water, sanitation and hygiene, according to a report by UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

Some 2.2 billion people around the world do not have safely managed drinking water services,

4.2 billion people do not have safely managed sanitation services, and

3 billion lack basic handwashing facilities”.

<https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>

We have clean water from the tap. We shower and bathe freely in our homes. We do our Mother Nature business and flush it down a functional toilet and it's gone. It gets whooshed away to a sanitation facility that we don't usually even think twice about. And we wash our hands with soap and clean water in the sink and dry off.

To billions of people around the world – that all sounds like the American Dream.

Please be aware that much of the world do not have such luxuries.

Let's look at just a few more staggering statistics:

1. There is more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet

My commentary: As people of God that is likely not a surprise that a good, creating God would provide for all our needs.

The issue is that those beautiful, abundant resources are not equitably distributed.

2. As many as 829 million people worldwide go to bed hungry each night.
3. Small farmers, herders, and fishers produce about 70% of the global food supply, yet they are especially vulnerable to food insecurity – poverty and hunger are most acute among rural populations.
4. Conflict is a cause and consequence of hunger. In 2020, conflict was the primary driver of hunger for 99.1 million people in 23 countries
5. An estimated 14 million children under the age of five worldwide suffer from severe acute malnutrition, also known as severe wasting, yet only 25 percent of acutely malnourished children have access to lifesaving treatment.

<https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/world-hunger-facts-statistics>

Conclusion

Last week after the message that asked more questions than it provided answers, someone asked me quite accurately, What is the big takeaway? Is there a call to action?

Today might I suggest the take away is the Scotia commercial, “You’re richer than you think” & the call to action is between you and God – but may I suggest that it might have something to do with thinking about how we spend our lives and the resources with which we have been entrusted by a loving, generous God who provided enough for all?

Remember,

“Jesus told parables because they serve, as keys that can unlock the mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions: how to live in community; how to determine what ultimately matters; how to live the life that God wants us to live. They are Jesus’s way of teaching, and they are remembered to this day not simply because they are in the Christian Canon, but because they continue to provoke, challenge, and inspire”.

Source: Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2014), 297.

** * Page number is based on the Kindle edition and may not match perfectly if you get a paperback copy. The page was the first in the section called, “Conclusion”) ***

So in what way does this parable provoke, challenge and/or inspire you?