

A Good Lesson from a Bad Example (Trinity 14 - Luke 16.1-13)

The Gospel of Luke contains a lot of parables – it means: stories told by Jesus to help us understand how we are to live our lives.

Of all the parables in Luke, the **Parable of the Unjust Manager** is probably one of the most difficult parables to try to understand and, certainly, to explain. Most preachers try to stay away and do not preach on this. Apparently, St Augustine said of this: “I can’t believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” 1600 years later and many of us still don’t like this story! And yet, my first sermon in our church is about that story. Quite funny. But to be honest, this story has always fascinated me.

A rich guy has a manager. He gets a bad report about this manager. He calls him to account. The manager knows the gig is up. He’s guilty and he knows it. He’s losing his job. He’s losing his home. He’s losing his income, and he’s losing his reputation because now everybody is going to know that he was incompetent.

He realizes that he cannot go perform hard, manual labor. Hard work is not for him. He also recognizes within himself that he is too ashamed to beg. But he’s shrewd (he is clever, he is smart) enough to figure a way out of his mess. He’ll give the master’s creditors huge discounts to win their favour, defrauding his master, but garnering good-will for himself.

And the story ends with this strange comment that the master praised the dishonest servant because he had acted shrewdly.

What’s more, Jesus uses him as an example for his disciples!

That doesn’t make sense! If someone cheated you, would you praise their shrewdness? I don’t think so!

I recently been watching the American drama *The House of Cards*, and it’s about a politician named Francis Underwood rise to power. His strategies to make it to the top are not very commendable – they include, corruption, murder, blackmail... He is successful and his methods are effective, but as you watch, he’s so unpleasant, you’re unsure if you want him to succeed or not.

Similarly here, the hero of the story, the person we are called to copy in some way, is also not likeable... so why is Jesus telling this parable, what are we to learn from it?

There’s nothing in this parable that is secret or hidden or allegorical or mystical. It’s a simple story, but what bothers some people is Jesus commends the bad guy. Hundreds of different interpretations over the centuries, and still we’re rather confused.

So, let’s look at it again. Jesus is identifying two different groups of people. He is drawing a contrast between the “the children of this age” (unbelievers) and the “the children of light” (believers). Jesus is very clear about the contrast we need to hold onto. This manager is a “son of the world”. Disciples of Jesus are “sons and daughters of light”. But that radical difference does not mean we cannot learn things from the “the children of this age”. That’s what Jesus tells us

here. The parable is not commending dishonesty. It's commending shrewdness, and specifically, shrewdness with our money or other gifts.

If the crooked people of this world go to so much trouble and effort to be wicked, to be dishonest, to cheat, and to be so selfish — why we cannot put as much or even more effort into being followers of Jesus, the “sons and daughters of the light”.

We are here to plan for eternity; we are here to bring people into God's Kingdom. And one way of doing that is to use our gifts and our time to support God's work.

It raises important questions - what we are doing with our life and who we are serving? What are we doing with the resources, and gifts entrusted to us by God?

Just, think about all we have: time, money, ideas, dreams, and hopes. People and relationships. Love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy. Talents and abilities. Questions and curiosities. What if we were to give an accounting of our management of these today or tomorrow? What do they reveal about us?

This parable is not only about dishonest wealth and other gifts, it's also about having a long term vision. It's about expanding our horizon, getting the big picture of life. It's about understanding where we're going, long term, so we can know how to live our lives here and now.

If we pursue the Kingdom of God with the same vigour and zeal that the children of this world pursue profits and pleasure, we would live in an entirely different world.

Jesus informs us that God is watching what we do with the little things that He gives us that we call our life to see if we are faithful enough to handle more important things.

We use this principle in business. You don't put a young man or women, fresh from college, in charge of your business. You start him or her out on small jobs. If he or she can handle it, you move him or her up. The fact is that people tend to behave in the same manner, whether dealing with little or much.

So, we can view this life as a test for promotion to the next life. What will you do with the life God has loaned to you?

And in the end - Jesus concludes with a sharp statement as a way to sum up what he had been trying to say all along: “No 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” (Luke 16:13). Jesus doesn't want half-hearted discipleship; He wants total discipleship on our part.

That is what Jesus is asking in the parable, “where is your effort?”, “where are your priorities”? Are your priorities in things that will fade away, or is your priority to build the Kingdom of God here on earth and for eternity?

A lot of questions. And I'm not going to answer all those questions for you. I am here to be with you and to help you, to find your best answer for your life. Let's start today in our church with common prayer. Amen.