

Stewards of Knowledge and Truth

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I will be the first to say this passage from Luke is so confusing. It opens up with Jesus telling us there was a dishonest manager. We're starting off on a straightforward note. The manager is corrupt, or at the very least, doesn't have a whole lot of integrity.

Ok, we can go with that. Where are you going to take us next Jesus?

The master got word of this and called the manager to account. He told him I'm hearing bad things about you. So... you're fired. Give me an accounting of what you've done, then get out. This is a paraphrase of course, but it's basically what was said.

Ok, still with ya Jesus.

Then we get this internal monologue from the manager as he tries to reason through what's happened and what he can do for his own self-preservation. 'Well what am I going to do? I can't be manager anymore. I'm too weak to for physical labor. I'm too proud to beg. I know!'

This next part is where the dishonesty is carried through.

'...I'll call all my master's debtors and deal favorably with them, so when I am put out, I will have those who will take care of me. They'll be honor bound to show me favor in return.'

Definitely sounds dishonest. Ok, keep going.

So the manager calls in the debtors. He asks them each what they owe and tells them to change their bill. To a man who owed 900 gallons of olive oil, he gave instructions to slash it down to 450 gallons.

Still going with the dishonest theme.

In the same way he deals with the first debtor, the manager deals with the second debtor. He told a man who owed 1000 bushels of wheat to make it 800 bushels.

Again, still going with the dishonest theme.

But then comes this strange twist in the parable. Jesus, in his telling of the parable, says, "the master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly."

Wait... what?

Let me back track here. Dishonest, dishonest, dishonest... commendation.

Ya lost me, Lord.

Do we sometimes feel that's what's going on in the world?

I mean we look out into the world and we see numerous examples of people acting without any value to what is ethical or moral. People commit dishonesty after dishonesty after dishonesty

and they end up with all the fancy toys. People are working as though dishonesty is a tool and are put into power. People lie and cheat and steal, all the while we might be wondering, where's our cut of the good life?

I mean, here I am being a good Christian boy, preaching, teaching, serving in the ways I can, looking for more ways to serve... Where's my cut, Lord? Where's my commendation? When are you gonna say I'm the "shrewd" one, whose doing these things, and making friends, and carrying forth the gospel?

Let's take a breather. It seems there's an understanding of this passage we might be missing. I wonder, what are the ways this passage can be interpreted?

The first is what we started with this morning. The dishonest manager was indeed dishonest. He did something dishonest with his master's interests and he benefited from those dishonest actions. There's a lesson in there Jesus is trying to teach us which we need to find.

The second interpretation is the dishonest manager was changing his ways and acting righteously. If we look in the Hebrew Testament in Leviticus, the book of law, the Bible has something interesting to say about charging interest. In Leviticus 25, God specifically prohibits charging interest to a fellow Israelite. If they do, they would be guilty of not following the statutes of God and they would incur God's anger as described in the following chapters (starting at Leviticus 26:14).

So, one interpretation of this passage is the manager was canceling the interest on the debts owed, acting righteously in accordance with the law. Because of the righteousness of the managers actions, the master would not be able to reinstate the interest after it was cancelled. In so doing, the manager is gaining favor with the debtors.

A problem with looking at scripture this way is the amounts the master is dealing in. The two debtors mentioned in the passage had debts of 900 gallons of olive oil and 1000 bushels of wheat. These are not small amounts of product. You don't go to the store and buy 900 gallons of olive oil. Maybe one gallon. But even then, you only need that much if you're doing a whole lot of cooking with recipes that call for a lot of olive oil. No, these are commercial amounts of produce. The size of the amount also goes to illustrate just how wealthy the master is.

The question comes in with the amount of interest. The first debtors bill was cut in half. It went from 900 gallons of olive oil to 450 gallons of olive oil. If we're talking about slashing off the interest, that's 100% interest. That's exorbitant. In today's society we would call that "highway robbery".

A third interpretation also paints the manager as changing his dishonest behavior. It's possible the manager was cutting off his take. As manager, he would've been entitled to a commission. If so, he could cancel his own commission without any fear of repercussion. The master isn't being cheated out of anything, the debtors are getting a break, and the manager is stocking up on good faith by sacrificing what is his.

We've got some things to think about. Either this man was dishonest and cheating his master out of what's owed him for his own gain, he was righteously following the law, or he was being self-sacrificial. Sinful, good, or good. Yet, even with these ways of looking at the passage there's still a lot of confusion. How do we know which interpretation is the one we're meant to work with? That's when we have to look to Jesus and try and reason through what Jesus saying in this passage? Why is he teaching about a dishonest manager and then giving us potential examples of how to be good stewards?

What it comes down to is how we use dishonest wealth. In terms of this passage, dishonest wealth is wealth of the world. How do we come about and use money and resources and power? Honest wealth is what Spirit deals in, or what we deal in spiritually. It's the gifts and graces we are given by God.

If we go to the passage from 1 Timothy, Paul is giving us examples through his encouragement of how to be good stewards of honest wealth. He tells us to pray, offer supplications and thanksgivings, lift people in prayer offering them to God's grace. He says to do kindness and service for our communities, to work for the kingdom of God. That's how we use the honest wealth of the kingdom of God.

But then we go back to the Gospel, and Jesus is teaching his disciples, "be shrewd." He tells them to work by means of dishonest wealth... Well, now I'm confused again.

Sometimes you're reading your Bible and you just wanna say, "Jesus, just come out and say it straight!" I mean parables are great. They give us these wonderful, imaginative pictures of how the kingdom can work on earth. But for crying out loud, just tell it to us straight.

So... I'm gonna try to do that...

What it comes down to, as Saint Aquinas might put it, is we are citizens of the City of God. Even though we are in the world, we are not of the world. We are stewards of all that God gives us. That could be worldly wealth. It could be spiritual gifts. It could be accessibility to natural resources. We are stewards of all that God gives us.

The question is, are we going to be dishonest stewards or are we going to be stewards of integrity? Are we going to act shrewdly in a way that cheats the created world out of God's gifts? Are we going to take the resources placed in our hands for the purposes of working God's mission here on earth and selfishly misuse them? Or are we going to be good stewards who use these God given gifts prayerfully, in spiritual wisdom, shrewdness, and practicality for the blessing of the world in God's abounding grace?

That word, "shrewd." It gets to be troublesome. The word "shrewd" carries with it a negative connotation of sneaky and manipulative. Let's replace it with another word. Let's replace it with the word, "prudent."

Think about the manager's actions. He realized he needed to set things up so he'd be provided for once he couldn't be the master's manager anymore. Now, while he was acting dishonestly, it

can also be said he was acting prudently. He was using worldly wealth and knowledge to set up systems whereby he could survive; at least until he figured out his next step.

You see, even though he was fired, the manager still had a little bit of time while the master was waiting for the manager's final accounting. This is the time he used to consult with the debtors. Because the manager's action would have been seen as merciful and righteous in the debtors' eyes; either relieving the pressure of burdensome interest or his own commission, the master is put between a rock and a hard place and has to honor the adjusted debts. In addition, because the manager acted mercifully toward the debtors, they are now honor-bound to treat the manager with kindness. It goes back to those Levitical laws.

Leviticus 25:35-37 says, "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit."

Because the manager had taken care of the debtors, the debtors would be more inclined and even legally bound to now take care of the manager. The manager's actions were definitely dishonest. But his actions were also prudent in that he's set himself up with a means of survival.

So now how do we work with this piece where Jesus says we need to act shrewdly? What sense can we make out of Jesus saying we need to make friends by dishonest means?

Let's look at it this way. One of the things this passage says is if you are dishonest with worldly wealth, how can you be trusted with spiritual wealth? If you are dishonest in very little, how can you be trusted with a whole lot?

I'm sure we've all experienced examples of this in someway or another. We've all had dealings with people in different relationships. We've all worked alongside people. There are people you realize cannot be trusted with certain things. You likely have people in your lives whom you know you can trust with your secret ventings, and those whom you know you can't. The person you can't trust has proven they are not trustworthy, so you're not going to trust them with a *big* secret.

Employers use the same logic. They can test the skills of their employees to learn who is best suited to what roles. Maybe the employer gives the employee a small project. When that employee doesn't do well with the project, they're not going to be given a bigger project. Instead, they might be put on a team with lots of supervision.

In money matter, you lend someone five dollars. They say they're going to give it back to you. They keep promising they'll pay you back. You never see the five dollars again. You're not likely to offer them twenty dollars the next time, or fifty dollars the time after that. They've proven they don't hold to their word.

The point I'm trying to get to here, perhaps without a lot of clarity, is how honest are we? How well do we act as stewards of what we're given? How well do we act as stewards of what God is entrusting into our care? Do we use what we have selfishly, without thought for others? Or do we

use what we are given compassionately, sharing the blessing with the community around us, that it may grow and blossom into more blessing and greater usefulness for the gifts we're given?

But then the passage goes on to say one cannot serve two masters and further goes on to say we cannot love both God and money. We cannot serve both self-interest and humanitarian advancement. We cannot act in both selfish ambition and selfless compassion to deliver gospel-love-in-action to the world around us.

What Jesus is asking is, which one is it going to be?

To answer we need to do some self-evaluation. Can you function in a dishonest world making use of worldly resources for spiritual gain? Is it even possible? Can we be blessed with an abundance of money, resources, and power, and still be faithful Christians? Can we take our worldly wealth and put it to the service of God in sacrificial ways that seek the kingdom over personal gain? Can more be given to us so that deeper and more meaningful ministry can be asked of us?

Take the various technological resources in the world today. These resources are only growing. But these resources are something of the world. Cell phones, computers, the internet, tablets, wi-fi, blue-tooth, the digital age are all resources at our disposal. Do these technological resources have spiritual value? Perhaps, at first, they were created to bring us closer together. It can be argued now, though, these resources have actually pulled humanity further apart. It can also be argued what started as a venture to advance the human race has now become just another way for people to make money off each other. As technology advances, the populace craves what is newer, faster, better, and the profit margin increases.

But we can take this thing of the world, and we can turn it toward spiritual use. This sermon and this entire worship service is being broadcast on Facebook live. It's allowing people who cannot be with us in person, or others who are looking for a church, to join us for worship. We have a website so people can see what Faith United Methodist Church is all about. Churches have been known to host online Bible studies to provide easier access and expand the knowledge of, and interaction we have with, scripture. It's being used as a way to bring about a deeper relationship with the Holy.

We are using what the world has to offer in spiritual ways. It's a way in which we have been given much, so much from us is required. God has blessed us by making technology available. We are to be good stewards of that blessing.

Getting past dishonest managers. Getting past what how many gallons was or how many bushels was. Getting past all of that and coming straight down to it, how do we use the gifts and the blessing we have been given?

In We Make the Road by Walking by Brian D. McLaren, the book we are studying as a conference, there's a chapter in there that talks about the Garden of Eden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There are two trees in the garden. There's the tree of life, of which Adam and Eve could eat anything that grew. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil however was forbidden. Adam and Eve were not to eat anything off this tree.

So which one did they go for? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of course. This action gave Adam and Eve insight and the ability to differentiate between what is good and what is evil. In other words, it gave humankind the capability to make judgments. Before this, only God was capable of judging what is good and holy and right. Judgment is still only for God. That is an inherent part of who God is as the ultimate authority and Creator over creation. The sin was in reaching beyond our place in creation to be more like God, usurping some of God's authority for ourselves.

Now, because of the sin in the garden, we have another responsibility. One that we were not prepared to take on. We have the responsibility to judge the world as we see it. For us as humans, this is a two-edged sword. We judge for good, and we judge for bad. We judge for the right reason, and we judge for the wrong reasons. We are constantly judging. We judge without even thinking. We can't help it. Judgment has become so engrained in our psyche. We judge based on taste, appearance, emotion, difficulty level, and more.

I bring this idea of judgment in because this too requires us to be good stewards. In eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we were given reasoning skills to decipher. One of the ways the McLaren's book talks about using those skills is in how we use our hands. We can be wrapped up in self-defense and self-preservation, clenching our fists as weapons, ready to fight off anyone who challenges our perceived reality. Or we can open ourselves to new experience and higher truths by offering our open hands in peace, using them as tools to grow and learn about the world and the people around us.

In this world, we are stewards of the resources God puts at our disposal. Those resources could be money, technology, natural resources, knowledge and experience, adaptability, or simply the ability to emotionally care for another human being. Stewardship goes into every aspect of our lives.

So how are we going to be good stewards? How are we going to bring about the kingdom of God? How are we going to be shrewd with worldly resources? Not like the manager in the parable. He was working shrewdly for his own survival. Rather, what can God work with us and through us if we're able to act shrewdly for the kingdom of God; not for our survival, but for the saving of souls?

We're not the only ones asking this question. There are a number of faithful organizations out there working out how to turn worldly wealth into healing ministry. Faithful organizations are using investments, financial know-how, government grants, scholarships, collective experience, and volunteers ranging from those with their GED to those who have multiple PhDs in order to meet the needs of God's people. Faithful organizations are using these resources to create shelters and even homes for the homeless, food pantries for the hungry, clinics for the sick and ailing, schools for the undereducated, training for the development of marketable skills, jobs for the jobless, safe space for the endangered, peace and sanctuary for the war-torn, and opportunity, voice, and advocacy for the oppressed.

This is the point of this morning's passage. We are not of the world, but we must live in the world. We must be shrewd with what we attain in this world and not become tempted or distracted

by it. For it is, in a way, a necessary evil. The question comes in as to how we use the world's wealth. How do we use the blessings God has given us for the righteous management of worldly wealth and resources? We use what the world can offer prudently and powerfully to bring about spiritual change and growth by walking faithfully with Christ in ministry to the world.

In Jesus' name, Amen.