

September 22, 2019

"What does God commend?"

Luke 16: 1-13

Pastor Jonathan

How do we know the difference between right and wrong? Anyone? Our parents tell us. Our Sunday school teachers tell us. Our pastors and school teachers tell us. The media tells us. The government tells us. And God has an opinion on our life as well, and so Scripture tells us as well. And here we need some help to rightly understand the Word of Truth. God's standard is highest. And we need to take care that we don't adopt our standard against His standard unwittingly, always believing that what we believe is what God believes. We need correction from the Scriptures and from fellow believers in light of the Scriptures. Yes? This is a key truth in this day. Otherwise we simply use the Bible to teach what we want it to teach and not what it actually teaches. Yes?

It is difficult in this day and age to admit that the Bible teaches many things out of line with our cultural norms and truths. But it does. A day of rest, one in seven. Disciplining of children. That all humanity has sinned and needs God to forgive them and to be in relationship with the Creator God, who is the Ruler of the Universe. There is only one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus. I could go on to much more sensitive subjects. But generally, we understand that our culture will not affirm certain truths that Christians will affirm as important, even essential truths.

Jesus told stories to illustrate spiritual truths. He told the stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son to get at God's preoccupation with finding those who are lost, longing for relationship with us, and finding us, long before we find Him. Nevertheless, we must continue to search for those lost, as God searches for us, and tell them the truth lovingly. This is the ongoing Christian mission.

So, Jesus tells us a story in chapter 16 of Dr. Luke's gospel that is hard to interpret well. We know the elements of the story: There's a rich man who is firing his manager, because the manager is no longer trustworthy, that is, he wasted his master's possessions, just as the lost son wasted his father's inheritance. The manager is intelligent. He knows the value of his job, and that he could neither do manual labour or beg. So, he decides to get into the good books of his master's clients. He calls his master's client who owes him olive oil and another one owes him wheat. He reduces their bills, which may have been in his power to do, or not. But all of us have a sense when reading this that he is heating his master to get his own gain.

The twist in the story happens when we hear the master praising his manager he is about to fire, because he was shrewd. What is shrewdness? Why is the master praising him for such?

Shrewdness is being clever in a practical sort of way. Someone might translate this as "street smarts." This manager didn't just roll over and go passive. He did something. Was it right what he did? And why would the master be praising him if it was wrong and bad?

Some commentators note that the organization run by the master might charge heavy interest, and so the manager was reducing the amount of the interest payments, sort of like the breaks you get in trying to buy a car, with various incentives. As long as the factory or the higher up in the company allows it, you can buy the same thing for less money or owe less money. Other scholars were less satisfied with this explanation.

They note it is possible that the whole context for the company the master runs is a dark or illegal operation and the manager simply got too greedy and was reported for that.

Other commentators note that it would've been easier if the parable stopped at verse 8 or verse 9, where Jesus himself says, "I tell you..." to use your worldly resources and invest them in those around you. Then God will reward you as you have taken care of your neighbours in their need. That would be how I interpret, "when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" from verse 9.

But Dr. Luke doesn't stop at verse 9, he goes further. He reviews teaching that he has done elsewhere in Matthew 25: 14ff and Luke 19: 11ff, the parable of the talents. If you can't be trusted with little, you won't be given more. And vice versa, if you can be trusted with little, you will be trusted with more. So be trustworthy now with what is happening in your life. One area to show trustworthiness is money. Jesus teaches us by telling us how we are giving away or keeping our money demonstrates how we will be trusted with true riches, with spiritual resources. He also teaches that if you do not handle that which has been entrusted to you well, you won't be gifted with your own spiritual blessing or resources by the One who has seen you as unfaithful.

So, Dr. Luke strangely moves the story from the shrewd manager, to using your money relationally and wisely and in a trustworthy manner, to an overall comment that sums up the competition in many or at least some of our hearts: spiritual blessing vs. financial blessing, resources for the coming kingdom vs. resources for our own kingdom, God vs. Money as our leader.

Now how can Luke help us move from the commendation of those not of the children of light like the shrewd manager, who apparently uses money that is not his to his own gain; to a question of whether we care more about God than our own well-being and financial health? He does so bluntly, and the Pharisees are sneering at Jesus, because the Scripture says "they loved money." (v. 14) That doesn't mean they were rich or well to do. In fact, Jesus says elsewhere that they tithed the mint they grew in their garden.

Jesus is testing our values, our right and wrong. In our lives, Hebrews 12:27-28 notes that everything that can be shaken will be shaken. God is looking at our lives even as we are looking at Him. He says in this Luke 16 passage: "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." (v. 15) What might be in your life that is detestable to God? Are you willing to part with it?

And back to money. Sometimes we think what we might do with a few hundred thousand dollars, or a couple of million, or maybe just a few hundred dollars more. And the Lottery Corporation loves to advertise and play on this instinct, rather than tell you that you generally will simply be paying voluntary taxes through your lottery playing. And many get addicted.

So "Where is your heart?" Jesus asks. Where is your real drive in life? What consumes you? Be honest. That is where your life energy is being spent. Is that in God's direction, in God's kingdom direction? How do you know?

We used to say that your cheque book tells you more about your faith than how well used your Bible is. But who has cheque books anymore? So let's say your online banking tells you quite a bit about your faith...where your money goes...is the point. Every Christian should be audited by the CRA every year, if it is true that giving more than 5% of your income is a red flag that triggers an audit or review.

What would your finances tell me about your faith in God, if I were to see them right now? How about if I got an eight video of you on some random day? What would that tell me about your faith in God?

Sundays are important. Sunday worship is important. But it is also critical that you have at least one other group that helps you in your faith weekly. What is that group in your life? What might you change to find that group?

Did you know that have groups to go and a reason for living because of those groups can and does increase your life span? Those who something to look forward to every day and every week, tend to have better health. Do you believe that?

Jesus wants you connected to other believers. He is for us here at Grace. We will be discussing what has happened in this last year here in trying to call a permanent pastor and in what our denomination is deciding in terms of human sexuality. We respect your part in such processes, that you make time on the first Sunday of the month for the next three months, to talk to each other, to listen and to learn. The elders and leaders also will be debriefing what happened during the summer, and we need to pray for them as they do so at the beginning of this next month.

Meanwhile, I trust Jesus is meeting us right now. Let us determine more than ever this year to trust Him with our finances, our money.

Let us pray.