

Pentecost 15 / September 18, 2022

Luke 16:11

“If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches.”

Unrighteous wealth and righteous wealth

Known as the parable of the unjust manager, this is one of the most enigmatic of Jesus' teachings. By enigmatic, I mean hard to understand. The central figure in the story is about to get fired for his poor work, possibly stealing from his employer. He is ultimately commended by his employer for stealing again, in order to find a safe haven after he loses his job. Having been given notice he is going to lose his job; the unjust manager quickly gathers his masters' debtors and slashes the amounts they owe by twenty and fifty percent. How would you feel if an employee did that to you? What would you do? Commend him or call the police? People like the unjust manager are the reason companies terminate employees without warning and immediately escort them out the door with no time to cause harm. But instead of expressing anger, the employer commends the unjust manager for his shrewdness. Even more surprising, Jesus concludes saying, “The sons of this age are shrewder than the sons of the light in their generation.”

Jesus didn't approve or encourage dishonesty, but He certainly encouraged wisdom and wants discernment on the part of His followers. When He sent the twelve apostles to preach and teach in the villages of Galilee He said, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” God has given us minds to think. He wants us to use them. God has given believers the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and give us understanding of the things of God and the ways of humans. He wants us to use our insight. In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul says God has given us the mind of Christ, so we may be able to discern those things that are pleasing to God. Jesus wasn't commending the dishonesty of the unjust manager. He was pointing out that if sinful humans have the wherewithal to see the writing on the wall and look out for their own best interests; believers enlightened by the Holy Spirit, should be able to discern light from darkness, walk in paths of righteousness and use the things of the world to the benefit of ourselves and others in time and for God's glory in eternity.

Wisdom was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Wisdom was an expression of His divinity. In wisdom God created all things. All things were created through Christ and in Him all things hold together. Wisdom was a sign that He is the Christ, the anointed descendant of King David. Even as God blessed David's son Solomon with wisdom to prove his legitimacy to reign, so Jesus proved His kingship with a wisdom no one could withstand. Through wisdom Jesus proved His claim to the kingdom God promised David, which would never end. Jesus expressed wisdom in His mastery of the scriptures, as He debated with the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. In the book of Proverbs it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” Insight is to know the world in which we live. Wisdom is to be aware of ourselves; our weaknesses, our temptations, our sinfulness so that we avoid the dangers, traps and the pitfalls of sin. Knowledge is to know the Lord and His will, so that we conduct ourselves according to His goodness and bring glory to His name.

Jesus wants us to be wise in the knowledge of God and in the ways of the world. The unjust manager had no fear of God, but he was wise in the ways of the world. He knew what happens to people who lose their jobs; digging or begging. He couldn't dig and he was ashamed to beg. He knew he would be left destitute after losing his position. He was dishonest, but he wasn't stupid! He had no knowledge of God, but he was smart enough to ensure that after he lost his position in his master's house that others would give him shelter.

In 1 Corinthians 4:10 Paul called himself and the apostles, “fools for Christ,” referring not to their lack of intelligence, but to their apparent foolishness in giving up everything to follow Jesus. Being a fool for Christ in the eyes of the world is not the same thing as being stupid. Jesus wants us to use our intelligence and the insight of the Spirit to provide for ourselves and yet be innocent of sin. He wants us to live wisely in the world, without taking part in the sinful ways of the world. He wants us to be aware of the dangers within us and around us and not blithely say ‘the Lord will take care of me,’ as if nothing depended upon us. The Lord does take care of us. One of the primary ways He does this is by blessing us with minds to think and with wisdom to guide us.

He wants us to seek wisdom through the understanding of the scriptures. The bible is the most practical book in the world. It has a message of life for time and eternity. It has provided guidance for daily living for countless millions for thousands of years. Jesus wants us to learn the scriptures. They testify to Him. Jesus wants us to express the wisdom we gain from scripture in the way we live our lives and manage our affairs. In the parable of the talents, three men are given talents to use for their master. One who foolishly misused his talent, is condemned. The two that used their talents wisely, to the best of their ability, are blessed. Jesus wants us to use the things He has given us wisely to His glory.

He especially wants us to express wisdom in the way we manage His affairs as members of His body, the Church on earth. In the first letter to the Corinthians Paul referred himself and the apostles as “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Paul and the apostles were entrusted with the management of God’s gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. As believers we all share in the stewardship of the mysteries of God in the things we say and the things we do. We are all called by the Spirit, both to believe and to share the gospel of salvation which Jesus earned through His life, death and resurrection. Jesus wants us to use the things of the world to His glory, by proclaiming Him as Saviour and Lord. Jesus wants us to live in the world in such a way that we bring glory to His holy name and offer the wealth of His salvation for others to receive.

The key to understanding this apparently enigmatic illustration of the unjust manager are Jesus’ concluding words, “You cannot serve God and money.” The unjust manager didn’t serve God, for he stole from his master. He obviously didn’t serve his master, because he mismanaged and stole his property. Money was his master, which he desperately needed to survive after he lost his position. If this man whose insight was darkened by sin, could read the writing on the wall and had the smarts to take care of himself, how much more should those whose minds have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus and training in the scriptures, be able take care of themselves in a godly manner and serve God. We cannot serve God and money, but in Christ we can serve God with our money and with all the other resources God provides us with in this life.

Money is a rather narrow translation of the Greek word “mammon,” which refers generally to all the resources of this world, which are given for our physical benefit in time and pass away in time. There is nothing wrong with money, or any of the physical resources God gives us in time. It’s a matter of how we view them and how we use them. Do we serve them or do we serve God with them? We serve mammon when we see it rather than God as the source of our lives. All the money in the world cannot extend life indefinitely, raise the dead or give true happiness. We serve God when we realize He is the giver of those things. Money and material resources are the means by which God sustains our lives and gives blessing to us in this world that passes away. Jesus’ blood and righteousness are the true wealth through which God gives life to us body and soul in time and for eternity. He is the most precious treasure.

God bless us with the treasure of His grace in Christ Jesus. God bless us with His Holy Spirit, so that we may receive His material blessings in life with gratitude, use them to His glory and return them to Him in peace when our lives end and He calls us to Himself. In Jesus Name. Amen.