

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 9, 2022

+ Luke 16:1-13 +

“Take the Long View”

**Jesus also said to his disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager who was accused of wasting his possessions. The rich man called him in and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you can no longer be manager.’**

**“The manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, since my master is taking away the management position from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from my position as manager, people will receive me into their homes.’**

**“He called each one of his master’s debtors to him. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘Six hundred gallons of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and write three hundred.’ Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘Six hundred bushels of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write four hundred and eighty.’**

**“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings. The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much. So if you have not been faithful with unrighteous *mammon*, who will entrust you with what is really valuable? If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own? No servant can serve two masters. Indeed, either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and *mammon*.”**

Jesus likes stories with surprise endings. Some of his best-known stories have surprise endings: The Good Samaritan; The Prodigal Son; and the one we’ll hear next Sunday: the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus designed all those stories to startle his audience at the end and to teach them: the way the world sees things is not the way God sees things. The way the world runs things is not the way God runs his kingdom. The Father has his own eyes, and his own system.

The problem for us, though, is that perhaps we’ve heard those stories of our Savior so many times that the element of surprise has worn off. It’s like watching “The Usual Suspects” for the tenth time. It’s hard to be surprised when Kaiser Sose’s true identity is revealed. But today we hear Jesus tell us a story that maybe isn’t so familiar. And even if it is familiar to you, the ending is so strange by human standards that it still may manage to surprise you.

A manager has been busted by his rich master for wasting the master’s money. And it turns out that not only is the manager wasteful, he’s also dishonest. As soon as he hears the axe start swooshing down, he starts plotting: I will soon be unemployed. And for a guy like me, that’s big trouble. I can’t do physical labor because I’m not strong enough, and I can’t beg because I’m too ashamed. But I do have an idea. I will call in the people who owe my boss money and, on the down-low, have them reduce the amount they owe. I won’t let them wipe it out entirely, just lop off a healthy chunk. And then, after I’m out of work, they will remember that they owe me, and they’ll show me kindness.

So, here's the surprise ending. How would you expect the holy Son of God to end the story of this wasteful, dishonest, scheming manager? Well, he ends it this way: **"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."** Of course, the manager does not commend the dishonesty or the slimy machinations of his manager, but he does give credit where credit is due.

The manager was shrewd, wasn't he? He took the long view. He looked out toward the future and used the resources at his disposal (even though they were *someone else's* resources) to set things up for the future.

But the surprise doesn't end there. Because then Jesus tells his own disciples to like that manager, at least in this respect: Be shrewd with resources. Take the long view, and use them to set things up for the future: **"For the children of this world [unbelievers] are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation [other unbelievers] than the children of the light [believers] are."** Say what you will about unbelievers, they're shrewd in using their resources – more shrewd than Jesus' followers.

And that's not a good thing. Jesus wants his own people to take the long view – in this case the very long view – and use their resources to set things up for the future – in this case the eternal future. **"I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings."** "Unrighteous mammon" is the wealth of this world, which, as Jesus reminds us, does eventually run out. It runs out when either worldly circumstances or physical death make it run out. Until then, Jesus says, use that worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves who will one day welcome you into heaven. Take the long view with your wealth – think "eternity." That's the shrewdest approach of all: to use worldly resources not just to set things up for the future in this world, but to set things up for eternity.

But what exactly is Jesus referring to when he tells us to use wealth to make friends who will welcome us into eternal dwellings. Is he teaching us simply to give to the poor? Or is he teaching us to support the spread of the Word, so that more will hear and be saved and welcome us when we arrive in heaven? This is a point that Bible scholars fight over like UFC contenders, and do not want to give an inch. Is Jesus talking about giving to those in need, or using our wealth for the spread of the Word?

I would like to make peace between those two camps. It can be, and should be, both. When you use your wealth to help the poor, you are helping Jesus himself, who saved you from your sins and will one day welcome you into heaven. Not only Jesus, but all the poor you helped and who trusted in him will welcome you to. And, at the same time, use the worldly wealth God gives you to spread your Savior's gospel, so that more will hear, believe, and welcome you into eternal dwellings.

These do not need to be competing concepts. Take the long view with your worldly wealth; keep eternity in mind. Do it by helping those in need. Jesus himself and those you helped who believe will welcome you into heaven. And keep eternity in mind by using your wealth to spread the Savior's love, so that all those who believe will welcome you.

Not only will you be welcomed for keeping eternity in mind, you'll be blessed. **"The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much. So if you have not been faithful with unrighteous mammon, who will entrust you with what is really valuable? If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own?"**

Before we get into the blessings of keeping the very long view when we use our wealth, Jesus gives us a couple of needed reminders. He says the wealth of this world, is **“very little.”** And that’s true, because as Jesus said earlier, it does eventually run out. It runs out when you move from here to heaven, and in some cases sooner. In the grand scheme, even you have a lot, it’s a little. Jesus also reminds us that our worldly wealth **“belongs to someone else.”** Like the shrewd manager, the wealth we use is not really ours. It belongs to our master. It came from him, and will go back to him.

That’s two more reasons to keep the long view of eternity when we use worldly wealth. Not only will we be welcomed into heaven, but worldly wealth is temporary, and not really ours anyway. But now Jesus gives us even more reason. Those who are unfaithful with their wealth – who use it only for themselves and worldly pleasure – will not be entrusted with what is really valuable, something of their own. But those who use worldly wealth with the long view will be.

God does promise to richly reward those who use their worldly wealth. Sometimes he does it by blessing them richly here and now, in this world. But whether he does that or not, Scripture makes it clear that those who use their wealth with the long view to help those in need and to spread the gospel of Christ will be richly rewarded after they’re welcomed into heaven. Do you remember the parable of the minas, or the parable of the talents? What happened to those who were faithful with what their master gave them? On Judgment Day, he blessed them beyond their imagination.

Please understand: this isn’t buying our way into heaven. Jesus already paid the full price for us to enter heaven. But God does promise to welcome and bless richly those who use their worldly wealth with the long view.

Finally, Jesus gives us the ultimate reason to take the long view when we use our wealth. Not only will we be welcomed by those we helped and those to whom we spread God’s love; not only will God reward us in the heavenly kingdom; but most importantly, we’ll be serving the right master. **“No servant can serve two masters. Indeed, either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon.”**

Just about every adult has worked for several bosses. So, assuming you’ve worked for several bosses by now...please close your eyes and think of the worst boss you’ve ever worked for. Maybe he was incompetent or she was pushy or he was arrogant or all of the above. Now that we’re through with that unpleasantness...please close your eyes and think of the best boss you’ve ever worked for. I hoped you pictured Jesus.

But that wasn’t quite fair. Maybe if you’d heard the word “master” instead of “boss,” you would’ve gotten it right. God is the best master there is. And wealth is the worst. Next Sunday you will hear a lesson from Ecclesiastes 5, which will include this verse: **Anyone who loves money is never satisfied with money, and anyone who loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is vanishing vapor.** Wealth is a gift from God, and it’s a blessing when used with the long view. But if you love it, you’re never satisfied, and no amount is ever enough. Not only that, but Jesus reminds us that one way or another, **it runs out.** Or, as Solomon puts it: **This too is vanishing vapor.** Wealth is the meanest and most fleeting master.

And yet, many try to serve God and wealth at the same time. Jesus says point blank that this is an impossible spiritual position to take. The maximum number of masters anyone can have is one. It has to

be either God or worldly wealth. It cannot be both. Jesus uses powerful words. Love and hate. Devotion and despising. Those are absolute contrasts. It cannot be both wealth and God.

Serving God is better. Infinitely better. While serving wealth leaves a person dissatisfied and empty, serving God leaves us satisfied and fulfilled. When you serve God, you are serving the one who made us what Jesus calls **“children of light.”** Into a world shrouded in the darkness of sin, the Light of the world came. He broke through the darkness of sin with his holy light, and conquered the darkness of sin and Satan with his death on the cross. Not even the darkness of death could overcome Jesus’ light.

Our risen Savior came to bring the light of salvation to this world, and God has placed Jesus’ light in our hearts by bringing us to faith in him. Even more than that, after he rose to defeat death, Jesus ascended to prepare heavenly dwellings for us. Many mansions wait for us, crafted by God’s Son for his children of the light. It won’t just be your earthly friends welcoming you into your heavenly dwelling. Together with his Father and Spirit, the One who came from heaven to earth will be welcoming you into the dwelling he built for you, because he has made a child of his light.

Our God loves us. He sends the Light of salvation, calls us to it, and welcomes us into eternal dwellings. It’s far better to serve him than flighty wealth that never satisfies the ones who serve it.

And we know how to serve God rather than wealth: use that wealth with the long view of eternity. Use it to help those who need help, and to spread the light of Jesus. Then, when you reach those heavenly dwellings, both God and the friends you made will welcome you. And because God is good, your reward will be rich: **what is really valuable...something to be your own** in your eternal dwelling. Amen.