

Sermon: Making Friends & Influencing People

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

18 September 2022

Based on **Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13**

Way back in the late twentieth century, I worked as a software engineer for a company whose unofficial motto was, ‘Software makes hardware happen.’ Trust me, it’s funny. For the most part, we made our money building handheld inventory calculators and street traffic control systems. We also did a control system for the MBTA Green Line but that was before my time.

Anyway, we had a lab in the back of the building. It was about half the size of the sanctuary. That area was where we put the computer systems, and where we built prototypes. Hanging on one wall, we had a blackboard that would fill the space behind me. We used it to outline logic flows and complicated schematics, the kinds of things we needed to discuss and work through before we actually wrote any code or designed a circuit.

The best part of this blackboard was, it was actual slate, framed in wood. Writing on it was a joy; very smooth and easy. And only the person who could erase anything was the one who wrote it – because you never know.

Our boss was named Charlie and we sometimes amused ourselves by saying, “Chuck me the chalk chuck, Chuck.”

Today’s reading from Luke reminded me of that blackboard this week, because I could have used it to help me unpack just what it was that Jesus was saying, exactly.

Here’s my problem: Jesus used an unethical character as a positive example in a parable that says more about scheming and dishonesty than it does about salvation. How would Luke’s original audience have figured this one out?

A rich man had a manager who was *squandering* his property. Jesus uses the same word in the parable of the prodigal son, in which the younger son *squandered* his inheritance. He tells us that parable immediately before this one. Maybe Luke is making a point about wealth.

Either way, the rich man fires the manager, who realizes he’s no good for any other kind of work. His solution is to make some new friends who will support him, and fast.

He does this by reducing his master's debtor's bills one by one. Jesus tells us the 'master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly' (16:8). Why? This is where Jesus started to lose me. Suddenly mentioning 'the children of this age' and comparing them with 'the children of the light' didn't help.

The unrighteous steward's goal is to be welcomed into the homes of his new friends, whose debt he has now reduced. We would think the master would disapprove, but he doesn't. Apparently, the children of this age know how to use wealth for personal gain more shrewdly than do the children of the light, who rely on faith. In Luke's world, wealth was seen as part of an unjust system that oppressed the poor, so giving back was a proper response. But the manager's reasons had more to do with self-interest than with justice and fair play.

The crux of Jesus' teaching is this: a little faith goes a long way, and a little dishonesty is the same as being a little pregnant. But using unrighteous wealth to build fellowship and make new friends seems to be okay. Maybe Luke is bringing into question how we value wealth.

If we had read verse 13 first, we might have had an easier time of it. Jesus said, 'You cannot serve God and wealth.' That seems obvious and perhaps he could have started there and left out the parable altogether.

But we would have missed a very subtle transformation in the middle of the parable.

To better unpack the message, it helps to know a few things about a steward's role in first century Judea. Stewards managed households for often absentee landlords. Part of the steward's job was to oversee loans; more often than not, he would add a personal commission on top of the loan, giving himself an interest in the loan's timely repayment.

In this case, when the steward – the unrighteous manager – had the debtors rewrite their loans, he may have simply been eliminating his commission, and not defrauding the landlord.

Everybody wins, except the steward, who doesn't get paid and still gets fired.

So, where's the transformation? People are still in debt and the manager is still dishonest even though he has acted prudently, even wisely, on his own behalf.

What he has done, probably without realizing it, is give up material wealth to improve his ties to his neighbors – the landlord's debtors. Driven by his impending need, he's beginning to value relationships more than possessions. He's about to put himself at the mercy of others, and ultimately at the mercy of God.

If you were following along during the Gospel reading, you may have noticed that I monkeyed with the first verse. In the literal Greek, Jesus was speaking to the disciples *also*. The Pharisees and scribes who heard the previous parables were still there, only now just listening in.

After Jesus says, ‘You cannot serve God and wealth,’ Luke tells us that ‘The Pharisees, *who were lovers of money*, heard all this, and they ridiculed him’ (16:14). No doubt this was just one more thing for them to be peeved about.

But the joke may have been on them. In a letter written much later than this event, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith’ (1 Timothy 6:10).

Love of God, needless to say, has the opposite effect.

Jesus said, “whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much” (16:10b). My late friend and golf partner Dave Hartinger taught me a similar lesson when he said, “Anyone who will cheat on a golf course will cheat anywhere.” So, we came up with our own code of conduct and followed it *religiously*.

Not everyone is aware that they’re doing anything wrong when they act in what we might see as a dishonest manner, but which is, for them, business as usual. If their misbehavior only affects them, who cares? But if they are having an impact on others, as the steward’s squandering in today’s passage did, then it becomes a problem for everyone.

People who cheat on golf courses; the self-involved who will only look out for themselves; the Pharisees and scribes in Luke’s chapter 16 – they have lost their vision of who God called them to be. They traded their call for something else, whether it’s money, power, privilege, or even complacency.

One scholar wrote, “Too easily we separate life as it is from life in the future kingdom.”¹

The challenge is how to live in the present age while preparing for the future. But thinking about the future can be overwhelming. We worry about what the future might bring; are you ready? But times change. We need to change with them, like the steward in today’s reading. Jesus says we can.

And how can we do it? Make friends – good ones. Listen for God’s voice to guide you; it’s a still, small voice for a reason. And look for God at work in the world around you.

Amen.

¹ Helen Montgomery DeBevoise, In *Feasting on the Word* (p. 96). Essay, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.