

## **The Shrewd, Dishonest, Crafty, Crooked, Unjust, Manager/Steward**

Luke 16:1-13 (*The Message* translation)

June 25, 2006 Worship in the Park

It's been a good year for the men of the church, the Presbyterian Men.

In September, we kicked off the church year with a tour of the Ferguson Center for the Performing Arts at Christopher Newport University where we also hosted Nicole Belanus on her first official day of work as Children's and Youth Minister. It has been one of many long days for her, and we are grateful for her ministry.

In October, the men prepared dinner for the Presbyterian Women's meeting, and later in the month Bo Keese was the speaker for the men's meeting on the topic of special operations aviation at Ft. Eustis.

In November, we hosted our own covered-dish dinner meeting with Mourad Amer and his wife, Tahani, who presented a program on Islam.

In January, our own Van Rhodes spoke to us on the theologies of Islam and Christianity.

In March, Dan Dail was our speaker on the role of the military in civil affairs following armed conflict, a role he is currently fulfilling in Afghanistan. It was at our March meeting that we voted to ask the Session to approve our affiliation with the National Council of Presbyterian Men. The session approved, and a certificate of membership was awarded in April.

Also in April, the men celebrated Earth Day with a work day on the church grounds mulching flower beds. Our April dinner meeting hosted Chavis Harris, EEO manager at Northrop Grumman as our guest speaker.

In May, we met jointly with the Presbyterian Women for dinner at Second Street Café and a program presented by a community service officer from the Denbigh police precinct. Our service project for May was the re-stripping of the parking lot, which was mainly accomplished by the men looking at Jonathan Banner and his fellow boy scouts do all the work. We hope to do more projects that involve the labor of others!

We began June with another service project by cooking breakfast for the confirmation class on Saturday morning following their lock-in at the church. We will conclude the year tomorrow evening at 6:30 with a steak cook out and social at Don Eason's, so if you have not signed-up, you are still welcome to attend with a \$4 contribution as we have bought extra. Just see Geoff Rogers following the service.

A good year indeed: Seven dinner programs and four service projects, and we're not done yet as we are planning an Adopt-a-Spot clean-up for July. More about that later. And Jim Robinson and I will be attending the Men's Conference at Massanetta Springs in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in mid-July, and it's not too late to sign-up if you are interested. The cost of \$219 includes the conference registration, six meals and a room for the nights of July 14 and 15. Speakers include Mark Early, former Attorney General of the Commonwealth and currently president of Prison Fellowship, and Willie Lanier, former NFL player for the Kansas City Chiefs, including when they won Super Bowl IV.

A good year indeed—until today that is. All these good parables we will be hearing about this summer—Suzanne Fleming preaching last week on the Sower and the Seed, the Wise and Foolish Builders next week, the Prodigal Son on July 16 when Nicole preaches. And what do the men get? Well, depending on which translation of the Bible you read, it is the parable of the Shrewd, Dishonest, Crafty, Crooked, Unjust Manager/Steward/ and we might add Slave as noted on your bulletin cover. One preacher has called this “the prickliest parable of them all.” Even the Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible says, “Interpretation of this parable has led to considerable debate.” No kidding!

Let's review. “A certain rich man (the master) has received the report that his goods are being wasted by his steward, his manager, his slave. The steward (we'll go with that title) is told that he must give an account of (his) stewardship—he must close the books—and give up his position. The steward seeks a way to provide for his needs after he is put out of his stewardship. He is not strong enough to dig and ashamed to beg. He decides to help the master's debtors gain reduction of debt, so that they will offer hospitality in his time of need. He tells one debtor who owes 100 jugs of olive oil (550 gallons) to write 50 and one who owes a hundred sacks of wheat (500 bushels) to write 80.”

Now, here's the prickly part, verse 8. In fact, *The Message* translation that Jim read from says, “Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked

manager! In the *New Revised Standard Version*, “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...” In *The Message*, “Because he knew how to look out for himself.”

Now the term translated “master” really means “Lord” and is one of Luke’s typical titles for Jesus. Does Luke have Jesus commend, not condemn, commend shrewdness, dishonesty, craftiness, crookedness and injustice? If you have a Bible with Jesus’ words in red, this whole passage, except the part that says, “Then Jesus said to his disciples,” is in red. It just flies in the face of that modern idiom, “God said it, I believe it, and that’s all there is to it.” Well, for this passage, God said it, but it’s hard to believe, and there must be more to it. Please say there is more to it. How did the men of the church get stuck with this parable?

One interpretation that makes the commendation in this parable a little more palatable is that this steward was paid on commission, that he was expected to maintain himself out of what was collected. In this interpretation, which I found prevalent in Catholic and Anglican commentaries, 100 jugs of oil and sacks of wheat included the steward’s commission, so by taking 50 and 80 he was not depriving his master of anything, but sacrificing his own commission. He was “shrewd” in realizing that friends go further than money. This may be a reasonable interpretation for in verse 9 Jesus says, “...make friends for yourselves even amidst dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Quoting Donald Tuttle of First Christian Church in Corpus Christi, “Our possessions are not for the purpose of our earthly security, but rather for use toward our eternal security.” And the Geneva Study Bible of 1599 comments that “we ought to take heed that we do not abuse our earthly work and duty and so be deprived of heavenly gifts; for how can they properly use spiritual gifts who abuse worldly things.”

There was an article in yesterday’s *Daily Press* headlined “Intimate friendships are on a decline...” The article, based on a recent survey, said that “Americans are far more socially isolated today than they were two decades ago....A quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal problems.” A Duke University sociologist quoted in the article said, “That image of people on roofs after Katrina resonates with me because those people did not know someone with a car.” The steward in this parable is like someone without a car. He looks to friendship to be his car, his transport from an uncertain future to a safe and secure

place, and the master commends him for his shrewdness in placing friendship above ownership.

For me, I think Jesus tells us, his disciples, this parable to help us prepare in this age for the age to come. This is about how we are to live now. We are after all stewards. “God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.” We are stewards who have been fired: “therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden...He drove out the man.” It wasn’t Donald Trump who coined the phrase, “You’re fired.” It was God.

Perhaps one of the reasons we come to the wood is to regain Eden. Indeed, Barbara Brown Taylor “refers to a gossamer thin veil between this world and the next, the sense of catching a happy glimpse of the holy which is almost close enough to touch.” Almost, but not close enough. Like Adam and Eve, we are fallen. Like the steward, we’re not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg, even if it would get us to holy ground. Like the steward, we plaintively ask, “What am I to do?” Can’t you just see the fired “apprentice” headed down the elevator, satchel in tow, to open the door of the cab headed to oblivion?

What am I to do with this body of injustice and crookedness into which I have fallen and in which I live? What am I to do? And the great I AM answers, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” As Eugene Peterson states in the foreword to *The Message*, “Jesus is the descent of God to our lives just as they are, not the ascent of our lives to God.”

This parable is about the collision of God with this world in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the world of shrewd, dishonest, crafty, crooked, unjust people and conditions. It is the world of Mammon. It is also the world of the Master. It is the world of God and the Bank. That gossamer thin veil that separates the holy from the unholy has been torn in two. Luke himself records it later in his gospel on the day of Christ’s crucifixion when the veil in the Jerusalem Temple that separated the holiest place on earth from the earth—the veil that separated God from the Bank, was torn: “It was now about noon, and the darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain in the temple was torn in two.” The curtain that separated the holy from the unholy has come down, and now we face a choice of where to live because we cannot serve two masters. Oh, we can and do try. We go to church on Sunday and to the

board room on Monday. On Sunday, it's the great I AM. On Monday, it's the Donald.

So here we are, one foot in the holy, one in the unholy, straddling through life, trying to serve two masters. No wonder we sometimes feel we're being pulled apart, that we have no center, no solid, no meaning. We cannot serve God and the Bank. Or as William Barclay translates this verse, "We either belong to God totally and altogether, or not at all." We think we can keep straddling the fence, but the Bible tells us we cannot serve two masters without hating one and loving the other. We must choose. With the Donald, we're always subject to being fired. With God, in Christ, we're forever being rehired and being rehired forever.

You choose: God or the Bank. Let us pray.

It seems such a simple choice O God, but it is not an easy one. You have blessed us with so much, but in our fallen state we have become convinced that we earned it – that we are owners only and stewards not at all. Call us to account, O Master and forgive us our debts. Grant us thy Holy Spirit and enable us to jump the fence from the Bank of Mammon that corrals us into the freedom of thy presence that credits us, yea smothers us, with Thy love. Amen.

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