Sermon | Proper 20C
TEXT: Luke 16:1-9

Sept. 18, 2016

Shrewdness and Generosity

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints,

We have before us today one of the most difficult parables of our Lord, and it’s called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager from Luke 16. And it’s not like, you know—the Parable of the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son—where we all are familiar with the story, we’ve heard it before, and know it by heart.

No, this one is going to be unfamiliar to us, and we might find it difficult to understand what Jesus means by it. So let’s start by getting a brief recap. The story opens with two people: there’s a master, and this master has a money manager—kind of like an accountant, a person who is in charge of his master’s books and ledgers and accounts. But this money manager has been dishonest. He’s been cooking the books, and stealing his master’s money. And so he’s fired. The master says, “Turn in your books and go home.”

So the man goes home. And he goes home and thinks to himself, “What am I going to do now? I’m not strong enough to dig. I’m too proud to beg. So he creates this plan for himself. And his plan goes like this: he’s going to go to all of his master’s debtors, people who owe his master money, and going to reduce their debts. He’s going to reduce their debts, to get in good with them—so that they’ll like him, and maybe they’ll let him into their homes once he’s fired, and he can couch surf with them for a while until he gets back on his feet.

So that’s what he does. He goes to all of his master’s debtors, one by one, and reduces their debts. He goes to one and says, “You owe 100, write me 50.” To another, “You owe 100, write me 80.” And here, we have to understand, this is not good behavior. This isn’t even legal behavior. We would call it stealing. This guy is taking advantage of his master’s money, in order to get in good with his master’s debtors.

But look at what it says at the end of the parable. It says, when the master found out what his servant had done, v8, *the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Commended*. Means, he praised him, he patted him on the back, he gave him an attaboy, said, “what you did was pretty clever.”

Now, I always ask—especially when we talk about these things in Bible Class—I always like to ask, when we’re dealing with a parable of our Lord, where’s the surprise? Every parable of Jesus always has a surprise, and we want to figure out what that surprise is, because the surprise holds the meaning.

And here, what’s surprising first, is that the master commends the guy. Think it—if this happened to you, would you really be commending someone from stealing from you? No I think you’d have some pretty harsh words, angry words, not nice words, words of praise. So that’s the first surprise. He commends him.

The second surprise is the master let this guy keep the books in the first place. Think of this—if you owned a business, and you had an employee that you knew was stealing from you, cooking the books, would you let that person hang on to your books for a second? No, you’d call the office security to escort the person out so they wouldn’t be able to touch your stuff for another minute.

So isn’t it surprising? This master let’s himself be taken advantage of. He lets his dishonest manager keep the books, and change the books, and reduce the debts of his debtors. And we’re never even told the master changes anything back. All of it shows that this master is what? Generous. And the manager banked on the generosity of his master and cancelled the debtor’s debts.

And so what we’re dealing with is two things: 1. the manager’s **shrewdness**, and 2. the master’s **generosity**. **Shrewdness** and **generosity** are the two main themes in the parable.

And so we’ll start with shrewdness. What does shrewd mean? It’s not really a word we use a lot today. But to be shrewd is to be extremely wise in worldly matters, to be really good at doing business, making a deal, and overall, being clever in worldly stuff.

You know the picture I have in my mind when I hear the word ‘shrewd, the show on TV, ‘Extreme Couponing.’ Have you seen this? It’s a show about people who don’t go to the grocery store like you and me. Extreme couponers don’t just have six or eight coupons, looking around the store for a couple sales. No, no. And extreme couponer will wait for an item to go on sale, and then find a manufacturer’s coupon for that item, and then a store coupon for that item—until it’s like when the sun, moon, and stars align, and all of a sudden they have a three dollar bag of Chex Mix for a penny. That’s shrewd.

I’m kind of the opposite of an extreme couponer. I’m what the marketers would call an ‘impulse buyer.’ I’m the reason they have all the candy and movies in the checkout lane, because I’m the guy who will grab that stuff, and realize an hour later I didn’t need it. Not an extreme couponer. But we can all understand how extreme couponing is shrewd, right? To be shrewd is to be wise in the ways of the world.

And so the master commends this manager for his shrewdness. For his cleverness. And then listen to what Jesus says in the next verses. These are verses eight and nine: *for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.**And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth,so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*

Now I’ll admit, that’s a pretty difficult passage to understand. But what Jesus is saying is this, “Look at this guy. You see how he was shrewd? You see how he used his shrewdness to make friends, so that they would let him into their homes?” And then Jesus says, “It’s often the worldly people, the secular people, the people of this world who are evil, and don’t even know God, like this dishonest manager, who are often more shrewd than Christians”—whom Jesus calls, the sons of light. “So you Christians,” this is what Jesus is saying, “You Christians go out and be like this manager. Use wisely the gifts that God is giving you. Be shrewd stewards of those gifts, to make friends for yourselves in heaven.”

And that’s the whole idea behind the concept of Christian stewardship. And we use the word ‘stewardship’ because none of the things we have really belong to us. God is the creator of heaven and earth; everything on earth and in heaven belongs to him. And so, all that we have is God’s, and we are simply *stewards* of God’s gifts. It’s like this: if you’ve got money in the bank, that money belongs to God. But God has put it into your hands, why? Not only to bless you, but so that you would use it to bless your neighbor, to put it in service to your neighbor. And Jesus says, be shrewd about your stewardship, be shrewd with what you have, so that by your shrewd stewardship, you can make friends for heaven.”

And how can we do that? How can we make friends for heaven? Well, how is it that people get to heaven? By hearing and believing the Gospel, right? So this is Jesus’ way of saying, “Use what God has given you, be shrewd stewards of what God has given you, to support the preaching of the Gospel.”

And that’s what your tithing and your offerings are all about. Supporting the preaching of the Gospel. And where those offerings go once their collected—whether it’s to support your pastor, so that I can read, study, and pray, preach and teach, whether it’s to keep this building from falling in on our heads, whether it’s toward the various missions and outreach avenues of our congregation, even if it’s filling up the gas tank for the lawnmower—whatever we do, it’s all for that purpose—so that sinners might hear and believe and be saved, so that we might have friends in heaven.

That’s the first major takeaway from this parable: again, **Jesus is calling us to be shrewd stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us, putting our time, talent, and treasure in service to the Gospel, so that we can make friends in heaven**. And that’s really the Law part of this passage.

But the Gospel is found in the master’s generosity. And that’s the second surprise. Remember how this master was generous? How he allowed his unrighteous servant to keep the books? How he allowed his manager to reduce the debts of his debtors? How he didn’t hold his debtors to what they owed, but allowed their debts to be cancelled? Suprising, right? Suprising generosity.

And that points us to the generosity of God. Our God is the God who canceled the record of debt that stood against us, by sending his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus shed his blood for us on the cross. And through the blood of Jesus Christ our debt to God is paid. And so this parable teaches us, that we have a generous God, a giving God, a God who isn’t looking first to get something from human beings, but a God who is looking first to give something to his human beings—forgiveness, and the cancelling of our debts.

And Christ has done it for us. We have a generous God. You know, we have this great verse, 2 Corinithians 8:9, which says, “*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you, by his poverty, might become rich*.” In other words, Jesus was the rich God, the God who had everything in heaven, but the God who, nevertheless came to earth, and emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. And it was all for you. It was all Jesus giving everything he had, even his life, for you. That’s what Paul means by “*he became poor*.” And why? So that we, by his poverty, could be rich; so that the righteousness of Jesus, and the holiness of Jesus, and the perfection of Jesus—all the merits of Christ—might be credited to our account, and we would be rich with the Lord’s mercy and kindness. We are the receivers of God’s generous mercy.

That’s the Gospel. And just like the manager banked on the fact that his master was a generous master, so we bank on the fact that our God is a generous God. And we bank on his mercy every day, confessing our sins, turning to him for mercy, knowing and believing that he will forgive, because he has forgiven everything at the cross. This is our comfort. Our God is a generous God. And we pray the Holy Spirit would work in our hearts that same generosity in our stewardship, so that the Gospel might be preached and proclaimed, so that we might have friends to rejoice with in the resurrection.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*