

Parables of Jesus Week 6: Extreme Measures Luke 16:1-15 **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (August 15, 2021)**

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. We're back to our parables series today. This is our sixth week looking at parables. So far, we've looked at the parable of the Samaritan, the workers in the vineyard, the lost sheep, the ten virgins, and the unforgiving servant. What do you remember from these parables?

I'm going to start today's message with a question: What is the most extreme thing you've ever done to avoid getting into trouble? Maybe trouble with your parents when you were young, or a boss or the cops ... who would like to share? I promise we won't judge you too much ☺.

Imagine that you are the boss of a paper company. You are going through a monthly report from one of your salesmen, and you realize that the commission he is claiming doesn't match the actual value of the products he has sold. He seems to be overcharging most of his clients and ending up with a much higher commission than he should be making. You tell him that you will need to see him first thing Monday morning. You come in early on Monday morning, and you're going through your email and you notice that you have several messages from some large companies in the area, including a hospital and a school district you have been trying to supply with paper for years. They are congratulating you on your covid promotions and saying they are excited to be new clients. You are unaware of any covid promotions, and you're still puzzling over these messages when your salesman arrives for his meeting. He confesses that he has been overcharging his clients, but says that on Friday he reached out to most of his clients and asked them to renew their contracts for the next two years at a discount of 20% if they paid upfront. He also asked them if they had any leads for new clients to join at this special rate, and got five new organizations to sign up for the next two years. You are amazed at how he managed to do this, and although you're still trying to figure out how he will be disciplined for his overcharging and problematic financial forms, you applaud his ingenuity in getting new clients signed up.

How do you respond in a crisis? When you go through extreme times, which for most of us have aptly described the last couple of years, what do you do? When your back is against the wall, where do you turn? There's a story that Jesus told that relates to these times of crisis. Turn with me to our passage for today from Luke 16.

Shrewd Manager - Luke 16 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

³ "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵ "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’

⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.

This parable is a doozy. I think it is by far the most difficult of all the parables. Just out of curiosity, have any of you heard a sermon on this parable before? Let’s dive in and see what we can make of it.

It starts with two main characters: a rich man, and his manager. The manager has been accused of wasting and mismanaging the rich man’s possessions. The story begins with the rich man calling the manager to give an account of himself. I’ve drawn a few lessons from the story that I’d like to share.

1) Our faith affects our finances.

Jesus has a lot to say about money and poverty. Two statistics often used are that 11 of the 39 parables are about money and that 1 out of every 7 verses of Jesus’ words talks about money, about 15%.

How are you doing right now with your financial stewardship?

The Bible is clear that God has entrusted us with resources: of time, of abilities, money, the physical world, and so on, and that we will be asked to give an account of them at the end of our lives. If you had to open up your financial books right now and give an account of how you’re doing, what would it look like?

I heard about a guy who had his credit card stolen. But after a couple of days, he decided he wouldn't report it, because the thief seemed to be better with money than he was: he had made some credit card payments and was now spending less than he normally did, so he was now actually doing better financially.

My dad is an economist, and he's pretty good with money, and he taught me how to budget and track expenses. When I was eleven, I got an allowance and would use spreadsheets to track every single expense I would make. We lived in Japan at the time and it was mostly train tickets. For many years, I would keep every receipt from every purchase I made and would enter all of them in spreadsheets. It eventually became too much and I now use software for budgeting and tracking expenses and is easier. You don't need to take the same approach I do, but do you know how you're doing financially?

The way we handle and think about money is a great revealer of our values, priorities and beliefs. It can also be an area of great temptation. Our desire to keep what we have or get more can lead us into all kinds of trouble if we're not paying attention.

We are in the process of making some big financial decisions, looking for a second car and preparing to eventually buy a house, and we've been asking ourselves questions like: what does this financial option say about our faith? Which of these two options is a greater sign of faith? Are we putting trust in ourselves if we do this, or are we trusting God?

One important question to ask when thinking about finances is, Do you control your money, or does your money control you?

Jesus is very clear: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." Between God and money, who has ultimate control in your life? Your spending and your giving is often the most accurate measure of what you value and what you prioritize.

Besides money, this parable also touches on other dimensions as well, which brings me to my second point.

2) Extreme times require extreme measures.

This parable is difficult to understand – but most interpreters have focused on how it teaches shrewdness in managing money, and how to navigate a crisis. Verse 8: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." When he was facing a crisis and needed to set up a plan for how to support himself if he lost his job, the manager came up with a creative solution to use the resources and connections at his disposal to gain allies for the future. He didn't hesitate but did what he was able to do.

Have you ever been in a situation that required a very creative solution? Children are often very good at coming up with creative ways and lies to avoid getting out of trouble. Unfortunately, not everyone can solve problems that way. I remember once on a road trip we stopped at a McDonald's and they had a problem with their credit card reader. It wouldn't work to scan the card, so this young guy who was

the cashier looked at it, thought what to do, and said um your order is free. I was about to get out cash to pay for it, and I expected that he would insist on another form of payment since the credit card machine wasn't working. It wasn't a big order, like one thing of fries, so I was like ok, I guess I'll take it then. Then the person behind me went to pay, and this guy was really flustered, and was like ok this machine isn't working, so it's free for you too. I was thinking there is no way this is McDonald's corporate policy; this guy is going to lose them a ton of money. The logical thing to do would have been for us to order everything in the building, actually I'd like another 35 burgers please, but we didn't do that.

At the Global Leadership Summit, Malcolm Gladwell told a story about a research division set up by Xerox in Palo Alto in 1970 that came up with most of the innovations that came to define the era of the personal computer. They came up with a graphical interface, laser printing, the design for ethernet, a computer mouse, and other major departures and innovations from the existing computing setup. Shortly after Steve Jobs started Apple, he was told to visit and check out what these researchers had come up with. He was amazed by the computer design they showed him, called the Xerox Alto, and immediately returned to his garage and said they needed to toss their existing work to start over with their computer design to include the mouse, graphical interface, etc. The reason we don't associate all of these innovations with Xerox is that they didn't have a sense of urgency; they were content to keep and perfect the technology and didn't have the sense of urgency to get it on the market right away.

Jesus often sought to create a sense of urgency through his stories. In telling this story, he is inviting those hearing him to consider how they should respond to the challenges they are facing. Israel was facing significant hostility with Rome, and in a few decades Jerusalem would experience catastrophe and ruin.

A key aspect of leadership is what you choose to create a sense of urgency about. For us as a church, on one level our mission of making disciples and building community has been around for millennia, and will continue to be necessary for a long time to come. Perhaps that doesn't make it seem the most urgent. But when it comes to the people around us, it is urgent, because we all have a limited time. Today is a unique day that we will never experience again. This year, 2021, is a unique year with unique opportunities that we won't have the same way.

I really believe that the next few months will be pivotal for us as a church. It is essential that we're able to reach out, broaden our impact, and connect with new people in the months ahead. As we promote our family series, and invite people, I see this as a crossroads for us as we navigate this covid landscape. We must figure out ways to speak into the lives of the people around us, and how we can connect with them.

Klyne Snodgrass writes, "Just as the steward acted in his world to safeguard his well-being, how much more in this eschatological crisis should Jesus' hearers act to safeguard their own eternal well-being" (*Stories with Intent*, 416). Many of us have probably done something we considered extreme for the sake of our health: maybe you gave up sugar or fast food for a year. Maybe you cut off certain relationships for the sake of your emotional wellbeing. It is just as important to safeguard our spiritual

well-being as we do our physical and mental health. What we do matters. Our finances matter. As we face these extreme times spiritually, we need to be ready to take extreme measures to protect our faith and pursue God's mission.

After the manager had cut the debts and sought to gain favor with his master's debtors, this is what Jesus said: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted **shrewdly**. For the people of this world are **more shrewd** in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." Jesus seems to be saying that in some areas the people of the world are shrewder than the people of the light.

This is the same word, **phronimos**, that was used in the parable of the ten virgins; five were wise, phronimos, and five were foolish and unprepared. This is what word Jesus used in Matthew 10:16 when he said to his disciples I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, therefore be as wise or shrewd (phronimos) as serpents and as harmless as doves. I think part of the key to understanding this parable is to focus on what the manager was commended for. And Jesus said that he was commended for his shrewdness, his quick and sharp judgment.

Since all truth is God's truth, we can gain wisdom from many different sources. We should aspire to be astute and shrewd in the way we handle crises and solve problems. We should learn from the best in whatever field, and pursue excellence in whatever we do, whether it is social media, recording, programming software, teaching, or fixing cars.

3) Accept what we don't know.

Finally, my last takeaway from this passage is that I don't have to completely get it. BG and I were talking about the difficulty of reading, interpreting and teaching the Bible especially on issues that aren't quite as black and white as we would like. Like I mentioned earlier, this is one such passage that is difficult to understand and draw one clear application from. Part of the difficulty in interpreting and understanding this parable is that it seems to validate the man's dishonesty. Even though his means were not above board, his boss commended the outcome and forgave the manager.

The Bible is full of such stories and I don't understand verse 8 or verse 9; why this seemingly dishonest behavior was commended, and why we're told to make friends with our worldly wealth. That seems out of alignment with other teachings of Jesus on money. Also, how does making friends with our worldly wealth set us up to be welcomed into eternal dwellings? I really don't understand.

It seems that what the manager does is wrong. He is able to recoup some of his master's debts, but by offering a huge discount that would seem to create a loss. Biblical scholars have offered all sorts of explanations for this parable. Some have said that the amount the manager discounted was actually interest on the loan payment that shouldn't have been charged at all, since the law prohibited the Jews from charging each other interest. Some have said that it was just the profit on the contract that was beyond the actual amount owed, so he wasn't defrauding his master but was taking a personal loss. But there's nothing in the text to imply that this is the case. There's no evidence that this is what happened.

Another suggestion is that verse 9 is ironic, or sarcastic, so Jesus is saying the opposite of what he meant: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to 'gain friends' for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." But again, there's no indication that this is ironic, and that it is intended as the opposite of what it seems to say.

It's easy for us to try and sanitize parts of the Bible that seem unpalatable, or to offer quick and easy explanations to complicated issues. But the thing to remember about the Bible is that it is a book about human stories, and human stories are complicated! Jesus told parables as a way of helping his hearers make self-judgment on various issues. But in this story, it's hard to figure out what kind of judgment to make. Should we compare ourselves with the manager and try to handle affairs as he did? Are we to see ourselves in the boss's response in commending a dishonest man simply because he used ingenious means to get out of trouble? Sometimes we need to sit and wrestle with Scripture and ask, what is God really saying to me through this? What does acting shrewdly with my spiritual affairs and worldly affairs look like for me? We may not always come away with a clear understanding or lesson and that is okay. It is okay to accept that we don't know what we don't know. The key to living out God's Word is to obey what we do know as we seek clarity for what we don't.

There are some parts of scripture that have become clearer to me over time, but there are other parts that I struggle with even more now than I used to. But I have also gotten more ok with what I don't know. I am content to live with incomplete understanding.

Here are the lessons we have explored today:

- 1) Our faith affects our finances.**
- 2) Extreme times require extreme measures.**
- 3) Accept what we don't know.**

Reflection Questions

- 1. How are you safeguarding your spiritual well-being?**
- 2. What are some measures you can take this week to be a better steward of your faith and resources?**