

October 24, 2021

God Knows Our Hearts!
Luke 16:1-14
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As Alaina Fenton recovers from her brain surgery a few months ago., her medical costs have become another difficulty she needs to resolve. Last Sunday, there was a special spaghetti dinner fundraising event for her. Many of her friends and acquaintances helped make that a very successful event. Sun and I went to Shirley's restaurant in Mancelona around 5 p.m. and found the place crowded with many people. Besides the money that was donated that night, it meant a lot to her that so many people, who love her and are willing to help her, gathered there. That event is an excellent example of how beautiful things will happen as we volunteer to share our hearts, money, and time with those in need.

What will happen to our church as we combine our love, thankfulness, joy, cooperation, and unity for our church and its ministries?

Through examining today's scripture, I would like all of us to think about a specific dedication to God. Because the scripture today is very difficult to interpret and contains the theme of money, pastors tend not to choose today's scripture for preaching. That was true for me. I think I have never preached on today's scripture. Regardless, I chose to preach it because I had a spiritual challenge as I meditated on what scripture to use for the stewardship campaign. As I read today's scripture, I realized that I should not avoid preaching on this parable. (slide1) Since our Lord had thought it important to address money-related themes as spiritual issues, it would be very arrogant not to preach this scripture because of my individual preference and taste. And if I would be hesitant to preach this scripture because I consider that people would not like to listen to money-related preaching, it would be wrong.

As I was preparing today's sermon, I prayed that all of you would not view this sermon as mainly money-related, but as a very spiritual message.

The scripture today is known as The Parable of the Shrewd Manager. A rich man fired his manager, who had wasted his possessions. The manager had employed cheap tricks to secure his future life after being fired. He called in each one of his master's debtors and lessened their debts. Specifically, (slide 2) he reduced a debt of 900 gallons of olive oil in half, and a debt of 1000 bushels of wheat to 800 bushels. He was not authorized to do that. He had his own way of gaining help from those who had received his favor and prepared his future security in life. The manager continued to act in dishonest ways while managing his owner's possessions. Regardless, the owner commended the manager because he had acted shrewdly to prepare for his own future.

(slide 3) You may feel confused and frustrated by how the rich man dealt with his dishonest manager. If you had been that rich man, would you have responded in the same way to the manager's dishonesty? Why didn't he punish his manager for his cheating and betrayal, as well as the material losses that the rich man suffered? It is natural for us to think this way when we first read this parable.

However, let's remember that a parable is a specific way of communication that the teller uses to convey a valuable lesson. It is not appropriate that we tend to find all of the answers to our curious questions from a parable.

What did our Lord want to emphasize through this parable?

(slide 4) First of all, let's read verse 9. "***I will tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.***"

What did He mean by that? I think the Lord meant to emphasize how important it was for God's children (the children of the light), including His disciples, to have a deep spiritual concern for worldly possessions.

The manager in the parable represents people who do their best to gain worldly wealth to secure their future in the world at any cost. To ensure their wealth, they even do the wrong things without any feelings of guilt.

The Lord did not teach His people to model the dishonest manager. (slide 5) Instead, He taught His people to go beyond their limitations. While worldly people want to meet their needs of self-satisfaction and self-achievement, by gaining worldly wealth, God's people should have a different view of worldly wealth. They should regard material wealth as spiritual resources to prepare their future in heaven. Jesus wanted His people to consider their worldly possessions as spiritual resources, which were necessary to get into God's kingdom.

We Christians tend to view worldly wealth as a potential obstacle to our life of faith. In some respects, we believe that Christians are supposed to live a simple, frugal, abstinent life and believe that we should not focus on gaining worldly wealth, that is, money. However, the Lord did not teach His people to stay away from worldly wealth. Instead, (slide 6) He said that His people should be wise enough to regard worldly possessions as spiritual resources.

Second, (slide 7) Jesus intended to teach His people how important it was to manage worldly wealth for God's sake and His kingdom. Many people spend their entire lifetimes possessing and accumulating worldly wealth in order to secure a stable life, believing that the more they have, the happier their lives will be, but end their lives without consuming all their possessions.

Just as the manager in the parable shrewdly used worldly possessions to gain friends who would take care of him after he lost his job as a manager, Jesus taught His people to use their worldly possessions to secure their heavenly life.

Jesus pointed out that God's people should live a different life in terms of their worldly wealth, not being satisfied with physical possessions and the accumulation of wealth, but using and sharing their wealth for God's people and kingdom.

We, as His people, are supposed to live our lives in managing our possessions for God's sake and His kingdom, not gaining and accumulating worldly wealth for ourselves. What challenges can we have from this understanding? And how does it affect and change our very lives? Let's ask ourselves these questions and strive to find some answers.

Third, let's think about what Jesus said at the end of this parable. (slide 8) "***Whoever can be trusted with very little, can also be trusted with much.....So you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches***" (v.10-11). What Jesus meant by this is that God looks at how we handle our worldly wealth, which is 'very little', but to which we are entitled. (slide 9) How we can handle the material wealth here on earth determines whether we could have spiritual wealth in His kingdom.

We are God's people who were saved by faith in Jesus Christ and who are called to live a sanctified life (or holy life) accompanied by the Holy Spirit. However, this is a very inclusive statement about who we are and how our life should be lived. We need to specify how we should live by our faith, especially regarding our financial life. I am convinced that what Jesus taught through today's parable gives us profound wisdom for how to do that. We must be accountable in the management of our material possessions because it is deeply related to our future in heaven.

Have we done a good job dealing with our worldly possessions? We may not feel confident about that. We may have no idea what other people have been doing with their material wealth. We may make some excuses for our failures in managing our wealth. However, we should know that God knows our hearts. (v.15) He knows how we have dealt with our worldly wealth here on earth.

In this regard, we should strive to do our best in managing our worldly possessions. We should figure out how we should handle them for God's sake and His kingdom.

(slide 10)How can we manage well our worldly possessions?

At the worship service two weeks ago, Vi Gregory, Sharon Stockford, and Michael Neihardt shared their lives, faith, and thoughts in terms of stewardship. Thanks to the three of you for sharing your precious experiences and wisdom. I watched their witnessing stories later through the church's Facebook webpage. I was moved to hear what Sharon shared. She must have spent a lot of time preparing her presentation. She is a born teacher. She suggested many ways for us to manage our time, talents, and resources for God's sake and His kingdom. I think all of you have received a stewardship packet. There are beneficial materials in the packet that Sharon included to help you better serve God and His faith community. Among the ideas that were suggested, I think a very creative one is to 'sell items on the internet and donate a portion of the sale to the church.' If we are concerned about making use of our worldly possessions for God's kingdom, there can be many diverse ways to make beautiful things happen through our stewardship. Though I am used to buying used items on the eBay website, now I am motivated to sell some items that I don't use to make some money to donate to the church.

Let's summarize today's message. (slide 11) we should have a spiritual view of our material possessions, make use of them for our spiritual purposes, and remind ourselves that how we deal with our worldly wealth(very little) is deeply related to what kind of spiritual life we can have in the future. In God's view, all of us should effectively manage our worldly and material wealth.

Because we are so vulnerable to the temptations that come with gaining material wealth, let's ask the Holy Spirit to work through us. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us as we manage our possessions. At the end of today's scripture, we see that some Pharisees were listening to all Jesus said and sneering at Him. Seeing through their minds and hearts, Jesus blamed them for their hypocritical attitude regarding worldly wealth. They were the very people who were most in love with money. Jesus left this message for them, "you are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts." (v.14-15)

(slide 12) God knows our hearts!! He knows how much value we place on our material possessions. He knows how we have managed and used our wealth. He knows whether we have double standards regarding our possessions. He knows everything about how we have managed our material wealth.

Then, what should we have to do? Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, let's continue to figure out how each of us can become a wise manager of our possessions from God's perspective.