

Sermon on Luke 16:1-13
Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone
“A Call to be Clever”



This fellow is in a bind. He has been caught cheating his boss, and he's about to get fired. What will he do? He's not about to pursue any kind of manual labor. And he refuses to beg.

I don't know how networking and references worked in the ancient world, but I imagine this guy is not in the running for another management position. He was charged with overseeing the property of another, and has not proved himself trustworthy.

Now, before we judge this soon-to-be ex-manager too harshly, it's important to know a little more about the standard business practices of the Roman Empire. It's important to know a little more about this manager's boss. The rich man is probably not a fine, upstanding pillar of the community who worked hard to earn his position. As one biblical scholar puts it, he's a "loan shark." He lends to peasants at outrageous interest rates, with confusing terms and hidden fees, and he

annexes their land when they can't pay up. This is how land and wealth were amassed in the Roman Empire.

The rich man's manager, or his debt collector, tacks on his own commission to those charges. It was a system that trapped people in debt. A system that trapped people in desperation, taking advantage of those who had no other options, and a limited understanding of what they were signing up for.

(And this is not just an ancient way of accumulating wealth. Think of those scammers who play on our fears by telling us they are from the IRS, or loved ones calling from jail. Think of those colleges who misled students about their job placement statistics or how their debts would be paid if they didn't find jobs promptly.)

Regardless, for the manager in Jesus' parable, his time is running out. He needs to find a way to provide for himself. He has to come up with something. How will he use the time and the resources he has left?

As the church, we, too, are in a bit of a bind. A different kind of bind, but a bind nonetheless.

We have fewer resources than we once did. Fewer people. Lower offerings. And as the typical church membership ages, our abilities are different than they used to be. We might have less stamina, less muscle mass, more fixed incomes, more maintenance: of our own bodies and our aging buildings. The church is not the cultural force it was in decades past.

And yet there is still great need in the world around us. We are still called by God to love our neighbors and share the gospel. We still hold resources that God has entrusted to us. But someday, we, too, will be relieved of our earthly duties. So how will we use the time and the resources we have left?

It seems strange, maybe even preposterous, but Jesus seems to suggest we take a cue from this dishonest manager. In his desperation, the manager decides he better

make some friends while he still can, with what power he still has. So he begins to make the rounds, reducing the bills of his master's debtors.

Some scholars suggest this manager is giving up his commission, hurting only himself. In a way, that would be a turn toward generosity. But Jesus' parable doesn't call this manager generous. Jesus' parable calls him shrewd.

Whatever else he's doing, the manager is using his final hours in this position to try to make some friends. Some friends who might hire him, despite his reputation. Or at least let him sleep on the sofa.

The shrewd manager is using the time and the resources he has left to build a roster of people who owe him. Whether his master is God or some rich landlord, this manager seems to be interested in serving himself above anyone else.

Yet his master commends his shrewdness. Even Jesus seems to commend his shrewdness. What are we to make of that? Maybe the earthly master has little choice. After all, he can acknowledge his employee's smart move or he can demand even more dishonest money. So maybe it's an image thing.

But Jesus, what do you mean by, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth?" To be honest I wish this were one of those parables where the disciples ask Jesus to explain a little further, and then he does.

But it is not. So we are left to wonder. And sometimes that is a good thing. I wonder: What might we as children of light, as followers of Jesus, learn from the dishonest manager?

Jesus suggests it has something to do with our lack of shrewdness in dealing with our own generation. Could Jesus be calling us to be more clever? Cleverer?

And I wonder: How might we be shrewd with the time and the resources we have left? Not to serve ourselves, but to serve God. Perhaps we can use less of our time to make money and members, and more of our time to make disciples.

Even now, instead of letting leftover food donations go to waste, we feed our older neighbors. Instead of letting our spaces sit empty during the week, we open our doors to Girl Scouts and recovery groups and rambunctious kids.

How else might we use our wealth, our social position, our connections, and our possessions for the sake of God's kingdom - for the sake of healing and liberation, forgiveness of debts and forgiveness of sin? Or will we use our wealth to grow in wealth?

We can choose to focus our wealth primarily on growing in ways that the world counts, like attendance and square footage and bank accounts. Or we can share our wealth, and grow in things like faith and generosity and hope and love.

Jesus has taught us, "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

How can we hear those words as a call to cleverness? Jesus doesn't tell us wealth is bad. But he warns us that it can turn into our master, the god we serve above all others. And eventually, that will put us in a bind.

We can use our wealth, no matter how great or small, primarily to make more wealth - and contend with the thieves and the moths and the inevitable end of our own tenure as managers of all that God has given us. Or we can use our wealth, no matter how great or small, to serve God.

Remember, God knows what we need. Jesus has told us: Strive first for God's kingdom, and all those things you need will be given to you as well. That promise frees us to use our wealth to join in God's work in the world. I think Jesus is inviting us to take one of this world's most common and most worshiped false gods, and use it to subvert the world's idolatry.

To use our wealth - our time and resources - to serve the purposes of the one true God: the purposes of healing and liberation and forgiveness. How clever is that?