

Sermon File # 609

Scripture Text: Luke 16:1-13

Sermon Title: *Managing the Material: the Stewardship of Possessions*

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Managing the Material: the Stewardship of Possessions

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, Luke 16:1-13. Last Sunday, in the message from Psalm 90, we considered what Moses wrote about “numbering our days,” as we reflected on the stewardship of life. Today we will consider what Jesus says about the stewardship of possessions as we look at his Parable of the Shrewd Steward. Next Sunday you will be blessed and challenged as one of our elders, Denzil Walton, shares with you about the stewardship of the earth.

The Parable of the Shrewd Steward, or Manager, is considered one of the most difficult to understand and even to accept as being from Jesus. The problem seems to be Jesus’ use of a wasteful manager as an example for his disciples to follow. But as Helmut Thielicke wrote, Jesus often used “sham saints” to teach us important lessons (such as a grouchy neighbor and an unjust judge in Luke 11:5-13 and 18:1-8. See Thielicke’s *The Waiting Father*, pages 93ff). The story Jesus tells us today is another one of his “how much more” arguments. Our Lord is saying that if this less than noble manager does something commendable with his management, how much more should we do likewise as his disciples.

Most scholars say this is a parable, having some of the same elements and themes of the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example. But at least one eminent New Testament scholar suggests that this is not a parable at all, but that Jesus is relating a current event that would have been well-known to the people and then makes application of this event to kingdom of God truth (Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*). But in any case, whether through parable or current event, Jesus tells us something important about managing the material.

Follow as I read **Luke 16:1-13**.

Suppose you are a small businessperson and the only vacant building where you can open your new enterprise is here in the near-by village of Sterrebeek, Belgium. You suspect the building's owner is taking advantage of you and is charging more than is reasonable, but you decide you can make a go of it. You've met other business owners in the village that also are renting from this same owner, but they've managed to make a profit even though they also think the rent's too high. Then one day along comes the business manager for this owner. Somehow this managing employee has arranged to reduce your rent payments by 50% for the balance of the year, which of course is a huge benefit to you as well as to the other business owners who occupy this man's property. You are all grateful to the manager and also to the owner for this "new lease on life."

Next, you learn that this manager, who's just helped you greatly, has been fired by the owner and is in desperate need of a new job. So, you and the other shop owners get together and try to help this man find a new job. You all feel indebted because of his generosity. When the owner finds out about this, he's not angry about the reduced rent, but actually impressed with his fired employee's tactic, which still covers the owner's expenses and gives him, the owner, a huge PR boost. So, just maybe the owner will restore the fired manager to his job.

And so Jesus tells a similar story about a fired and maybe a somewhat corrupt manager and says he is a crooked man who gives us a good example to follow in kingdom living and serving. Jesus says he's a good example of the shrewd management of the material side of life that has a parallel with the kingdom of God side of life. And Jesus said a lot about the impact of material and financial reality upon our spiritual lives. Jesus said more about money than he did about anything else except the kingdom of God, devoting about one fifth of all of his teachings to money and matters and managing the material aspect of life (See Craig Blomberg, page 83, *Preaching the Parables: from Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*).

Jesus spoke and warned about the impact of the material and financial, which in the realm of this fallen world is a force to be reckoned with. Jesus used the word "mammon" when referring to money; and mammon is not an inert commodity but is substance which can easily become an idol. "Mammon" was the name of a Syrian god who presided over wealth (FW Robertson, page 787, *Robertson's Sermons*), and unless money is under the lordship of Christ it indeed becomes a god we worship and the object of our greed. Money itself is not the root of all evil, but as Paul says it's the love of money that's the root of all sorts of evil (1 Timothy 6:10), and greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Remember, when Jesus warned about the wrong use of the material, he was not addressing the wealthier class, but the working class, most of whom would be poor by our current Western standards. He needed to warn those even among the poor who thought that material wealth would be the solution to all of their problems. Paul said that those who “*want to get rich* fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6:9).

Let's note from Jesus' story of the shrewd manager that managing the material demands, first our...

Accepting responsibility

The man in the parable (or “current event”) proved to be less than fully responsible. In some way he had mismanaged and wasted his master's possessions. *The Message* paraphrase takes the liberty to say that the rich man “got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses” (verse 1). In any case, Jesus uses the example of a less than stellar character to teach that in our managing the material we are to accept responsibility...

As God's managers

Jesus addressed this story to his disciples. All who claim to be Jesus' learner-followers are inherently and necessarily his managers/stewards. When Jesus speaks about counting the cost before becoming his learner/followers (Luke 14:25-35), he teaches us that our claim to saving grace is bound up with our surrender to him as Lord. We cannot separate his lordship from his Savior-hood.

All things are essentially God's and yet certain things are on loan to us, entrusted to us to manage (1 Corinthians 3:21ff). As redeemed followers of Christ we realize that we are not our own—we have been bought with a price, and a great one at that (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 1 Peter 1:18f). And because we belong to Christ, so all our possessions, just as our bodies, are actually God's property. Just as in first century Palestine a manager of a wealthy man's estate meant that he relinquished certain personal rights and privileges to become a manager, so we too have relinquished our personal agenda to serve as God's managers...

In Kingdom of God living and serving

As God's managers, we are living under kingdom of God authority and by kingdom values and with a kingdom perspective on life and service. The manager in our story seemed to forget that he had an obligation to serve his master and to be faithful in his responsibility.

As children of God and followers of Jesus we are part of a heavenly, invisible and everlasting kingdom of God. The material world is real but also it is part of a dying and decaying world order that has been under the authority of the Evil One. Redemption and kingdom of God work means that God is in the process of bringing

this fallen world back under his dominion. Our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) and the creation itself, though now undergoing decay, will be reclaimed and redeemed as God's New Creation (Romans 8:22f).

God's managers realize that all things are God's and we belong to him and are called to be his managers of his creation and especially of the things that are entrusted directly to us. The ownership of God was acknowledged in the Old Covenant through the practice of the tithe, that symbolized and expressed that God is actually owner of everything; and also the practice of the Sabbath Years and the Year of Jubilee, the 50th Year, when ownership was relinquished and returned to the dispossessed. Now under the New Covenant we acknowledge that God owns all things and that this present order, including our bodies, is passing away (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). This was certainly the attitude of the church in Jerusalem, which was united "in heart and mind. No one," writes Luke, "claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32).

When John Wesley heard that his home had been destroyed by fire he exclaimed, "The Lord's house burned. One less responsibility for me" (Quoted by Richard Foster in *Money, Sex and Power*). Would that we had more of that emotional disconnect from material possessions! Such a holy indifference to the things of this world comes with an awareness of the true worth of the material against the backdrop of God's everlasting kingdom that shall never pass away.

As followers of Jesus we are now responsible to him in every area of our lives, including all of our material and financial dealings. This includes more than our tithes to the church and offerings and gifts to kingdom of God activity and ministries. We must bring all of our finances under the Lordship of Christ and allow him to dictate all that we give, save, spend and invest. This means that God cares about the home you buy or rent, the car you drive and the entertainment center you purchase, as well as your pension and your children's educational fund.

The man in our story had failed in his responsibility, but he quickly makes an adjustment that leads to his redemption. Although the man in Jesus' story had failed in his management job he was vindicated by his...

Seizing the opportunity

The man in the story was fired from the job, given his "pink slip," his official notification of his job termination. And rather than being defeated by this devastating news, this man seized an opportunity before him. An unsatisfactory employee thus becomes a good example at least in one aspect of his financial management. And thus for us in the kingdom of God, managing the material demands our seizing the opportunity that we are given by God, our Father...

With a sense of urgency

The manager had just been notified of the termination of his employment and he acted with a sense of urgency. He still possibly had another week's pay remaining, but there would have been no severance pay over an extended period of time. He

realized that he would be reduced to living on the streets if he didn't do something quickly. He knew he didn't have the physical strength to do manual labor and he was too proud to become a professional beggar. He had to do something and do it quickly.

In the same way, we need to realize that our opportunity to be God's managers of the life and calling he has given us is short-lived. As we noted last Sunday from Psalm 90, our lives are brief and are fragile and we have no idea how much time we have remaining on this earth to prepare for eternity. The Bible's wisdom literature is replete with warnings against living for today and against the folly of being absorbed in the pursuit of transient gain (Psalm 49:12; 62:10; Proverbs 11:28; 17:16; 19:10; 27:24; Luke 8:14; James 5:1-6, etc.)

I was reflecting the other day on the impact of the lives of people like Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), for example, and marveled to think how they accomplished so much with such brief lives on earth (Kierkegaard died at age 42 and Bonhoeffer at 39). By contrast I had to think of my life, already much longer than either of theirs, which left me much to ponder.

However long our earth sojourn, against the backdrop of eternity the longest mortal life is brief and our opportunities to be God's managers are limited, singular and fleeting. The opportunities we neglect will never return to us, can never be repeated in exactly the same way. We have a singular and urgent opportunity to invest transient wealth and temporary income and possessions in Kingdom causes that will affect eternity and have lasting implications for our lives and for those to whom we give.

As with the less than noble manager, we must seize the opportunity in living and serving with urgency and by...

Investing with wisdom from God

This fired manager acted swiftly and sagaciously by going to his master's debtors and offered them a generous reduction in their debt. Scholars debate whether Jesus' story might have indicated that this man was waving his personal "take" of the profits or if he was cutting into the owner's profits. In fact, it was customary for a manager or middle man to make something like a "tip" from his master's debtors, but what he offered was far more significant than his own "tip." He reduced the rent owed his master by amounts equaling three to nine plus years' wages (See Darrell L Bock, pages 419-420, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*). These debtor/renters would have been overwhelmed by his generosity and with a sense of indebtedness to him. Thus, the manager used his master's property and wealth to ingratiate others to him. Thus, these grateful renters would doubtless feel obligated to hire him themselves, or at least give him a solid job recommendation.

The fired manager was taking a risk, but was doing the wisest thing he knew to do. He was counting on the grace and generosity of the owner, his former boss, to make good on the offers he had just made and not to react angrily by having him thrown into jail for incurring these losses (Kenneth Bailey says this is the main point of the parable, the faith of the manager in his master's "saving" mercy in accepting and

paying for his actions. See page 102, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary and Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*).

This is, I believe, the main meaning of the story. The master commended the fired manager for acting shrewdly. Jesus then commented that the people of the world are shrewder in doing their worldly business with one another than are we people of the light in doing kingdom of God business. People of the world are busily making investments and building worldly wealth and empires that will pass away. And yet we, who are part of the eternal kingdom of God, are often slovenly, careless and neglectful. People of this world invest more time and energy in temporal matters than do we in matters that have an eternal impact.

The kingdom of God is worthy of our best efforts, just as the church is worthy of the best that we can give, in terms of our finances, the use of talents and spiritual gifts and the investment of time and energy. What a different place church would be if we invested our best into worship, Bible teaching and various ministries of outreach! (I'm sure we would have no trouble paying our deficit with Project Restore. We'd even have enough to pave our parking lot and perhaps even build a new worship center!) And as the fired manager did what allowed him future security, by endearing himself and indebting others to him, we should seek to prepare for our eternal future by investing in the lives of those we will meet some day in heaven.

Are we aware that in bearing the fruit of the Spirit, i.e., our spiritual growth in godly character, and in our living, witnessing, loving and giving, we are laying a foundation for eternity? I think this is the picture Jesus is giving us. Paul spoke of the Thessalonian believers as being his "crown, glory and joy" when Jesus comes again (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). In our story Jesus is saying that whatever we invest in people, in terms of love, prayer, and ministry, is never wasted and will be eternally remembered and rewarded. The best financial expenditures we can make in this life are those gifts that will impact lives for the gospel. Those that God has allowed our giving to touch will be among those who will "welcome us into eternal dwellings" (verse 9). Our present giving and investing, whether through the ministries of the church or missions and other ministries that you support, are an investment in eternal rewards.

And do not discount the simple acts of love and generosity you express to strangers and others that God places in your daily path. Although I realize the need to be wary of professional panhandlers that are well-placed throughout this city, we nevertheless need to be open to opportunities to give to those in genuine need. In all likelihood, you will meet the most needy and least likely to ask for assistance right here in the context of this Body of Christ. We need to remember that when we give to others we are actually giving to Jesus, who dwells within his people who are hungry, thirsty, in need of hospitality, clothing and visiting (Matthew 25:31-46). Whatever we do for "the least of these brothers of mine," says Jesus, we do for him because his presence is within them and they are his blood-bought people.

Jesus is saying in this story how incongruous it is that those who belong to the fallen world give more thought to worldly investments and financial planning than do we who are entrusted with kingdom of God riches. We are given everything we need to grow in true godliness that will reap everlasting reward in heaven (2 Peter 1:3). We

have opportunity after opportunity to give to the cause and world missions, right here in IBC. And we always have occasions to give to those in need, those with immediate and practical needs, and in our giving we encourage them and through our giving we give to Christ himself, who will not forget our gift when we meet him in heaven.

As Church Father Augustine said, the fired manager was commended “because he exercised forethought for the future” and thereby he was insuring himself for a life that would end. Yet we fail to insure ourselves for eternal life (page 255, NT vol. III, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*).

Trusting in the mercy and care of God

The fired manager, as we have noted, took a risk and trusted that the master would be merciful to him and make good on the presumptuous promises he made to the renters to reduce their payments to the master/owner. And when we act as God’s managers of his property entrusted to us we too must trust in his goodness, mercy and faithfulness to make good on his promises. Just as with the master/owner in the story, so God’s reputation is at stake. Already the entire community was announcing and celebrating the owner’s generosity. To rescind the fired manager’s offer would have made the owner to appear as miserly.

So we too can and must trust in the mercy of God toward us, to make good on his promises of our eternal salvation and of his rewarding everlastingly our faithful and generous giving to his people and his kingdom causes. But we can also trust him to take care of us in the present, making sure that we have all we need to live for him and to serve him with our lives and resources. In fact, as Paul makes quite clear, the reason why he allows us to earn is to meet our needs but also to be able to share with others who are in need (2 Corinthians 9:11).

Just as the fired manager saw to it that he would be taken care of, God promises to take care of his faithful managers. This is an Old Covenant promise (Psalm 37:25; Malachi 3:10) and also a New Covenant promise from Jesus himself (Matthew 6:33; Luke 6:38). God delights to take care of his children and those of us who have been particularly blessed need to realize our responsibility in being God’s instruments in behalf of the needy.

Managing the material also demands, for us as with the fired manager in Jesus’ story...

Giving accountability

When the owner fired the manager he demanded that he give an account of all his management activity (verse 2). All the books would be audited and his work performance reviewed. As *The Message* says, “So he called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? You’re fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.’” We too must give an accounting for our lives and for what we have done with our kingdom of God opportunities and responsibilities, which Paul

describes as God's judgment seat (Romans 14:10) and the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). For the fired manager and for us there is accountability given...

For our trustworthiness

In verses 10-13 Jesus speaks about trustworthiness required of every manager. Paul uses this same language when he defends his apostleship to his critics. He says that as a servant manager of Christ entrusted with his stewardship/management responsibility, he must prove himself to be faithful. His and our accountability, he says, is to Christ, who is the only judge who matters (1 Corinthians 4:1-3).

In these verses Jesus is pointing to the management opportunities given us in this brief mortal life and our accountability to use them for the good of his eternal kingdom and glory. Along the way in our pilgrimage, we are entrusted with opportunities and as we prove faithful with small ones we are entrusted with greater ones. And Jesus indicates that our trustworthiness as stewards of material and financial assets will in some way determine our true riches in the kingdom of God.

Through the years I have noticed a direct link between the faithful financial stewardship of God's people and their overall spiritual character. Apart from extenuating financial circumstances, most truly godly and fruitful Christians I have known who are a faithful servant leaders in the church are also faithful and generous givers to the causes of the kingdom of God and good managers of their personal finances. Jesus is saying that if we're faithful with our money we'll be faithful in our leadership and ministry and the result will be the true lasting riches that will be ours forever—godly, Christ-like character. Perhaps this is the "property of your own" that Jesus is referring to. I don't think Jesus is motivating our stewardship by a promise of material wealth, now or in the new heaven and earth.

Our giving has more to do with our overall spiritual blessing and godly character than we perhaps realize. And if we think that perhaps our spiritual lives and relationship with Christ is at a standstill, perhaps it's because we have not been faithful and obedient in our financial stewardship. We all need to examine ourselves and ask if we are being faithful with what has been entrusted to us and if by our degree of faithfulness or unfaithfulness we are limited what God would do for us, with us and through us.

Eugene Peterson looks at the life of Abraham as an example of a giant in faith who grew to greatness in faith through a lifetime of tests, some which he passed and others which he failed (See *The Jesus Way: A Conversation in Following Jesus*, pages 42-58). One which he passed was in the realm of his giving. Following his rescue of his nephew Lot from the alliance of pagan kings, Abraham (then called Abram) was blessed by Melchizedek, king of Salem. Abraham's instinctive reaction to this blessing was to give this priest/king a tenth of all the spoils taken in battle (Genesis 14:17-24). Here Abraham passed another test that led next to God's covenant with him (Genesis 15).

We are accountable also...

For our devotion to the Master

Jesus concluded these words about the story of the fired manager with a warning to those of us who might think we can live a dual life of serving God and this force called “mammon,” the power of the material to control us. In our society a person can have several part-time jobs and satisfy the demands of more than one boss. But in this culture of first century Palestine, a servant could have only one master, who demanded absolute allegiance from his servant who was always on duty.

Again, this is the reason Jesus had so much to say about money. He knows its power and potential to become Mammon, this god who will demand first place and wrest our loyalty away from Jesus. This is such a subtle process that can happen to good, responsible church-attending, honest tax-paying people. As Warren Wiersbe says, money is a wonderful servant but is a terrible master (See *Be Courageous: Luke 14-24*, page 35). Unless we commit our financial and material resources to the lordship of Christ we will easily and subtly drift into self-centered greed and acquisitive, selfish living. Particularly in our materialistic society are we vulnerable to this shift in loyalty from Christ to consumption and greed.

Again Jesus in verse 13 uses the word “hate” as a word of contrast and comparison (as in 14:25-27; Matthew 10:37). When we are unfaithful in managing the material we may not think of ourselves as God-haters, but rather as respectful and respectable church-goers, who even give a somewhat sizable offering from time to time. But God knows our hearts and he is a jealous God, jealous even of Mammon taking first place in our hearts. As Helmut Thielicke says, our pocketbooks may have more to do with our eternal destiny than our hymnbooks (See above citation).

Conclusion:

The fired manager was not faithful with his master’s money and had to give an account, having lost his job. He failed the test. Perhaps we too have failed in the opportunities God has given us. Maybe we have failed in our managing the material, even in our spending habits that do not have the future interests of our family in mind. Maybe we have failed to obey and trust God in our giving his tithe and our offerings to the work of his kingdom and to the material needs of the poor and needy. But in the meantime, the fired manager did something about his situation. And he acted decisively, trusting that his boss would be merciful, which he was.

We too have been unfaithful before God and without his mercy and grace we could not stand before his judgment seat and would not be prepared to give an account. But our master/owner is also our loving, merciful and gracious heavenly Father. He is ready to fully receive us and embrace us with his love, just as the father did the returning prodigal son (Luke 15:20-24).

The fired manager did what he needed to do to prepare for his future. What are you and I doing to prepare for our eternity? Let’s take a look at our bank statements and credit card payments and ask ourselves what have been our priorities. How much are we investing in the kingdom of God, in terms of time, spiritual formation through a prayerful life and service to God through his church? And what about our

management of the material, the financial? Are we going along with the drift of consuming for self and the immediate or are we investing in the eternal?

Here at IBC we have ample opportunity to invest in the Kingdom through giving our tithes to the storehouse (Malachi 3:10), the local church and its ministries in Brussels and beyond, and with our special offerings to support brothers and sisters in need as well as other projects that support kingdom work (like Project Restore). And in your daily life, God will give you opportunities to invest in the lives of others, including those you might meet in unsuspected places.

I once baptized a man who forgot to take his wallet out of his back pocket. And I subsequently thought that perhaps that would not be a bad practice, to baptize everyone's wallet and purse, with cash, checks and credit cards. All of life needs to be under the lordship and master-ship of Christ.

Jesus doesn't say that the owner, who commended the fired manager, restored him to his job. But he was merciful. And we can be sure that God, who has given us material goods to manage, will be just and merciful. He will be just in his judgments but is always merciful to us when we fail. If we have been unfaithful he will quickly restore us as his managers. And we must be quick to invest in things and people that will last forever.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think Jesus said so much about money and our stewardship of the material?
2. How would you summarize the responsibility we have as followers of Christ for our material possessions and our money?
3. What are the opportunities we have to invest in eternal blessings, rewards and results? What part does our giving have to do with these investments?
4. When we give faithfully to the work of God's kingdom, what assurance do we have about how God will care for our personal needs?
5. What evidence do we have that we are accountable for how we give and how much we give to the kingdom of God?
6. Do you agree with the statement that money is a great servant but a terrible master? If so, in what way(s)?
7. What relationship do you think there is between our faithfulness in financial stewardship and in our effectiveness in other areas of our Christian life?

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