

The Double Lord Dilemma

Text: Luke 16:1-13

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This morning Jesus asks us a question- Who or what is your master? That's a pretty rough question to start a sermon, but today's passage is a doozy. By the end of this morning I hope that one of the most difficult parables that Jesus told is understandable, meaningful, and applicable to you today. To explore it, let's hear a section at a time. Trust me, you're going to want to digest this.

From Luke 16, we read: 16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

The parables of Jesus give us a snapshot of God's Kingdom. So, what happens when we're presented with the Kingdom of God? Jesus' parables have an underlying desired response. It's crisis. That might sound bad, really bad. Crisis is not a word we like and for good reason. But not all crisis is bad. The crisis that comes with the Kingdom is one of great opportunity. Jesus uses another parable to say that the Kingdom is like the biggest, gaudiest, most expensive pearl on earth, but you have to sell all of your possessions to get it. Do you do it? It is a crisis of decision. Do you want the Kingdom or not? If you want the Kingdom then you must consider what the Kingdom is all about. And if you think that the King is trustworthy, then you're invited to live into the way of the Kingdom now. Parables are not ethical teachings as we'll see today, but every parable has real world, real life consequences for how we live. If the Kingdom is real and we believe it, are we willing to live the way of the Kingdom now? That's the opportunity crisis of decision. So what does the manager do in light of his firing? Let's pick back up at verse four.

"4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'"

This looks pretty scandalous. Is the manager hurting his boss further by cheating him out of money? No. Here's why. Commentators for centuries with a keen eye for first century culture have noted that the manager would have received a cut on every debt collected. So, when someone owed 100 jugs of oil, only 80 jugs went to the master. 20 would go to the manager as

a service fee of sorts. The same is true of the wheat. Only this time it seems that the manager had increased his fee and so he deducts 50 containers of wheat from that bill. Basically, the fired man is telling people they no longer need to give him his fee. All they owe is the amount to the master. Why does he do that? Faced with a crisis, the loss of a job and his security, the manager chooses to make friends. He reduces the debts of others so that he'll have a couch to crash on when he's unemployed. Okay, that's not quite the situation, but I hope you get the picture. He's trying to buy himself some unemployment insurance. The money he would get from collecting is not near as valuable as the friendships he makes by helping people out. That money would soon run out. Not so with friendships. The manager is hoping that the people he helps will help him back. So, when the master finds out, what does he say to the manager? In verse 9, Jesus goes on,

"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Okay, did you catch that? And I tell you, Jesus says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." What is Jesus saying? Is he saying to lie and cheat and to use the proceeds of dishonesty to build connections for yourself so you'll be set if something bad happens to you? Is he saying that you can buy your way into heaven? What is going on here? The difficulty comes in the translation. The English word "dishonest" in this passage actually means "unrighteous" in Greek. Translators have seen this word "unrighteous" and thought that the manager was defrauding his master by changing the amounts owed. And so the word "unrighteous" became "dishonest". The Greek word doesn't necessarily mean though that someone has been dishonest. It could mean any number of unrighteous things.

To understand this, let's set aside the word dishonest and take a deeper look at the word unrighteous. I bet I could ask some kids what the words righteous and unrighteous mean, I would get an answer like righteous is good and unrighteous is bad. Yes! You're on the right track. I could ask someone who's a bit older to answer and they'd say righteous is an adjective that describes something in line with God and God's character. To do a righteous act would mean to do something that God would do, like love. To do an unrighteous act would be to do something God wouldn't do, like lie, cheat or steal. Makes sense? The word unrighteous does mean doing bad things but there is another meaning to it. It also refers to the status of your relationship with God. The righteous are in a right relationship with God. They are connected to God. The unrighteous are in an unrighteous relationship with God. In other words, they are disconnected from God.

Here's the interesting thing. Righteous people in the Bible don't always do the right thing. Think of righteous Abraham lying to Pharaoh and saying that his wife was his sister. He is

chided for it because it's plain wrong. He did an unrighteous act. Or think of how he and his wife used their slave Hagar to have a baby and then sent her and the child away when they gave birth to a child of their own. That's not so righteous behavior. Similarly, the unrighteous don't always do the wrong thing. Take Balaam. He's asked to curse the people of Israel in the book of Numbers, but God uses a donkey to prevent him. Balaam blesses Israel rather than curses them. Balaam is not righteous, but he does the right thing.

And this is where we start to understand this parable. The righteous are made right with God through faith alone. God makes us right with God, our right deeds do not make us right with God. That happens when we believe, when we have faith. When we are faithful, then we are made righteous. The unrighteous are not unrighteous because they do unrighteous things, even a righteous person does unrighteous things. No, they are unrighteous because they put their trust for their lives in something other than God. Let me put it even more simply. The unrighteous manager in this parable is Jesus' way of saying that he is someone who is not a member of God's family. Even people who are not part of God's family through faith, when they are faced with a crisis, would use their wealth to help others because it might help them. So, how much more then should the ones who are part of God's family? How much more the ones who are full of faith? And not only that, how much more are we called to give without expectation of return unlike the unrighteous manager. How much more do we use our wealth to serve the poor and the oppressed not because it's a way to get something back from them, but because it's the way of God's Kingdom.

And so, Jesus leaves us with a few parting thoughts. For the sake of what we've learned about the word "unrighteous" and "faithful" I'm going to translate those words differently to help you see the meaning. Let's look at the end of Jesus parable, starting at verse 10,

10 "Whoever [acts like a member of God's family] in a very little will [act like a member of God's family] also in much; and whoever [doesn't act like a member of God's family] in a very little [doesn't act like a member of God's family] also in much. 11 If then you have not [acted like a member of God's family] with [wealth that doesn't belong in the Kingdom of God], who will entrust to you [wealth that does belong in the Kingdom of God]? 12 And if you have not [acted like a member of God's family] with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

We cannot serve two Lords. It is our dilemma. By serving myself with my wealth, by making wealth about my enjoyment, comfort, prestige or power, I've acted even worse than someone who is outside of God's family, worse than someone who doesn't put their faith on our good God. In God's eternal dwelling, the rules of life are flipped on their head. True riches are gained when we release our grip on money and money's grip on us. And because of this we're

forced into a crisis of decision. How will we use our wealth? For our happiness or for hope and healing for others. How will we use our wealth? If we're not careful our wealth will use us.

What might this mean for us? It might mean not using money as a bargaining chip to get what I want. It might mean giving to folks who will never repay me. The only repayment I might get is that these folks will be the first to welcome me into God's eternal dwelling when I get there. It might mean living more frugally so that more can be used to serve the poor and oppressed. It might mean I work less, earn less and give more of my time away. As Walter Bruggemann once wrote, "Letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose."

I know I haven't told any stories today because Jesus told a pretty good one, but I figure one story might be helpful. The other day I came across my daughter's letter to Santa from years ago. At the top it read this: "Santa, here are the eight things I want for Christmas. I want to give four of them to other kids who don't have toys. If this doesn't work out for you to give them away, I can do it for you. Thank you, Kate Romberg." What if we lived everyday with the spirit of a child who gives half of her Christmas presents away? What if we used our wealth to bless others even if it meant we gave away more than 10 percent? I know many of you cannot do this. Your finances wouldn't allow it, I get it. So, what if you were able to give the wealth of your time and energy to someone else who's not in your family or won't give you any advantage in this world in any way?

What if even those of you who give away money also give yourself, your time, your support, your energy to others? Gave it away without complaint or expectation of payback, but in trust, in faith, that the Kingdom of God is true and so is its King. Amen.