

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 18 September 2022

He rama tau kupu ki oku waewae, he marama ki toku ara. (Psalm 119:105)
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

The Dishonest Manager

The parable of the dishonest manager appears in between two other money parables - *the Parable of the Prodigal Son*¹ and *the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*.² In each parable, money is a crucial factor in defining the nature of relationships between people. For instance, the prodigal son gets into trouble after spending money foolishly.³ Like the prodigal, the dishonest manager has ‘squandered’ what was entrusted to him.⁴ The Prodigal was forgiven by his father despite his foolishness. The dishonest manager was commended by his employer because of his shrewdness. In the case of the rich man, he didn’t seem to ‘squander’ the money but kept him for himself, and the outcome was totally different from the previous two.

When it comes to the dishonest manager, he does not repent like the prodigal. But, his dishonest deeds with the rich man’s wealth bring unexpected outcomes by reversing the existing order of things. He was not punished but commended by the master because of his shrewdness. In Luke, when the kingdom of God appears, reversals of status happen. In Mary’s song of praise, the proud are ‘scattered’ – the same word for ‘squandered’ (*dieskorpisen*). The powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted; the hungry are filled, and the rich are sent away empty.⁵ Even so, we are not entirely satisfied with what happened to the dishonest manager. To this we hear clues from Jesus.

Jesus also commends the dishonest manager: first, ‘the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.’⁶ Jesus’ disciples as children of light,⁷ could learn something about acting prudently from them. Second, the learning from ‘the children of this age’ has to do with ‘making friends for themselves’ by means of ‘dishonest

¹ Luke 15:11-32

² Luke 16:19-31

³ Luke 15:11-24

⁴ Luke 15:13; 16:1

⁵ Luke 1:51-53; 6:24; 16:25; 18:25

⁶ Luke 16:8

⁷ John 12:36

wealth.’ Those new friends might “welcome them into the eternal homes.”⁸ Indeed, the wealth that the dishonest manager used to make friends was dishonest as it wasn’t his but the rich man’s. But what about other wealth?

The translation of ‘the dishonest wealth’⁹ varies: in NIV, it is ‘worldly wealth,’ in KJV, ‘the mammon of unrighteousness,’ to name a few. Here Jesus encourages his followers to be generous with their wealth in this life so that in the life to come, their new friends will receive them ‘into eternal dwellings.’ In referring to ‘dishonest wealth’/‘worldly wealth,’ Jesus does not say believers should gain wealth dishonestly and be generous with it. Rather, it means ‘having to do with life on earth.’ In your earthly life, ‘make friends’; that is, bless others. Use the monetary resources you have to reach out to others. Based on reciprocal relationships in the world, the one who is released from debts enables them to establish new reciprocity with them. The result will be friendships that endure into eternity: those whom we reach in this world will welcome us into ‘eternal dwellings’. In Jesus’ ministry, Jesus and the disciples are dependent on the hospitality of others.¹⁰ Moreover, hospitality is often provided by those who are considered religious outsiders or lower down in social hierarchies, such as in the Good Samaritan.¹¹ But whoever practices hospitality to others is like storing up treasures in heaven. They are making friends using worldly wealth. This corresponds to Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven.¹²

The principle Jesus teaches in Luke 16:9 is that everything we own should be used to further God’s kingdom as we are God’s stewards. Just as the unjust manager in the parable was ‘shrewd’ in benefitting himself materially, so we should be ‘shrewd’ in benefitting ourselves (and others) spiritually. We are to use the master’s resources to further the master’s goals. We have been entrusted with material possessions, and we are to use them for the eternal benefit of others. Likewise, when we read the prophecy of Jeremiah through the lenses of the dishonest manager, we see the prophet’s words bring the similar effect of what the dishonest manager’s deeds have brought to him.

⁸ Luke 16:9 -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.

⁹ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας – literally ‘dishonest money/wealth’

¹⁰ Luke 8:3; 10:7

¹¹ Luke 10:33

¹² Matthew 6:19-21

In today's reading in Jeremiah, the passage is full of dismay over the people's current status and the impending doom that awaits Judah and Jerusalem. The prophet's overwhelming sadness and the LORD's grief converge on Israel. Jeremiah is in anguish as his people are destined for catastrophic judgment by God. Unlike the dishonest manager, Jeremiah doesn't seem to have anything to offer but lamenting over his people's fate. His fate is tied to the people's, and he is hurt because of the hurt of his poor people.¹³ Yet there is still a latent hope. As long as there is a balm in Gilead, and as long as there are physicians who can restore health, the human community can receive God's healing and transformation. As if the dishonest manager finds hope by making friends using his master's money, Jeremiah directs Israel to repentance and reconciliation with God. Therefore those questions in v 22 – "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" turn into a declaration of hope, which proclaims, 'There is a balm in Gilead to restore the wounded whole.' Still being a sinner, the dishonest manager is shrewd in looking out for his own interest. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others. Likewise, Jeremiah perceives exactly what God intends to do to his people because of their unfaithful relationship with God. But Jeremiah is endeavouring to bring the words of God to his people that will turn the situation from destruction to life.

The two readings tell us something significant today. If God is our master, then our wealth is at God's disposal. For the church community, the wealth includes our time, money, church buildings and so forth. Jesus himself tells us to learn from the dishonest manager with his shrewdness. For any faithful manager, executing the master's intention rightly would be the foremost interest. For us, whose master is God, the prime task is to employ the wealth entrusted to us in building up the kingdom of God. May God help us be faithful till the kingdom of God comes here on earth as well as in heaven. Amen.

¹³ Jeremiah 8:21