

APRIL 13, 2025

Marion weekly update

SERMON April 6- "Using What You Got" Luke 16:1-14

This week our parable is often seen as a confusing one. On the surface or at first reading it almost seems like Jesus is condoning, even praising, dishonesty. Let's look at the story.

A man has a master and his task as an employee has been to oversee various accounts. The amounts of the accounts in the parable are huge. For example it's estimated that the amount of olive oil would have been around 900 gallons. So any savings would be substantial.

The servant finds out he's being fired after being accused of "squandering" his master's resources. He hatches on a scheme. He'll run out to a bunch of people who owe the master and slash what they owe substantially. This way when he's out of work they will treat him favorably. In fact, they would almost be honor bound to help him after he'd done them such a service.

The master would also be over a barrel. Certainly the ones whose accounts were discounted would be talking about how generous and wonderful the master was. The master couldn't then go back on the discounting. If he did it would cause him to lose good publicity, respect, and reputation.

The plan was perfect.

The master commends the servant for his shrewdness and sends him on his way. Jesus says to be shrewd like this servant. This is the beginning of where the confusion happens. Jesus instruction to be "shrewd" is mistaken for a loophole to be dishonest.

It isn't. It's to be "shrewd".

What follows helps us unpack it. The statement is that the people of the world are better at navigating circumstances than the "people of the light", or faithful people. This makes sense. Those trying to please God have a moral compass. There are lines not to be crossed. Intentionally defrauding and stealing would be on that list. So the person of faith wouldn't do what the shrewd manager did.

We are advised to be crafty with how we use our resources. Jesus says to use it to make friends for ourselves. Even here the intention is different than the servant in the parable. He wanted to make friends for the purposes of being uplifted and favored in his hour of need. Jesus' purpose is for us to build friendships with the intention of bringing them into the Kingdom of God. We are seeking far more the good of the other person than our own.

Here we are beginning to see the overlap of themes in the parables that we spoke of last week. The Kingdom of God isn't just about me and mine. It's about using what I have to share and spread the Kingdom. The rich young ruler was sad because Jesus told him that his heart needed to be more on helping those in need than on holding onto his wealth. The good Samaritan demonstrates it by caring for the man struck down on the side of the road.

In fact the Samaritan in this parable exemplifies the heart of what Jesus was getting at with the rich young ruler as well as the use of resources to bring the Kingdom to bear. In the story the Samaritan doesn't just care for the man as he lied on the road. He takes him to an inn, pays for his care and stay, and tells the innkeeper to keep track of the bill the man accrues so he can pay it when he passes back through.

Following this parable, Jesus has His famous verse when He tells the people they can't serve two masters. He then dials it in more specifically. "You can't serve both God and money".

The hearts of the religious leaders are revealed when we find that they were upset with Jesus because they loved their money more than they loved the people.

Something to really key in on this morning however is remembering that parables are material illustrations that speak beyond to the spiritual realities.

There is the well known expression that being faithful in a little will yield being given more with which to be faithful. Being unfaithful even what you have will be taken. And the punch is that if we can't be trusted with earthly riches why would we be given true riches?

This catapults the message from world to spirit.

Consider the reasons faith and the message of Jesus is used as it is. Look at what Jesus is getting at here. Help people. It's not about amassing for ourselves.

We see wonderful ministry done using the resources available by congregations both big and small. We also see travesties being done by ministries both big and small. In our own faith and in what we co-sign on in terms of ministries we need to look intently at what the message and ministry are truly getting at. Not just the trappings around it. Being focused on size, glitz, and how much material wealth a ministry represents is focusing wrongly.

I had two things come across my path over the last week or so that highlight this. Keep in mind that when we're talking shrewdness wording is everything. There are always loopholes present even when the intention is clear.

The first is a preacher telling the ushers of the church to shut the doors, essentially keeping people from leaving, until \$40,000 is raised that service. What progressed was problematic theology, spiritual guilting, and manipulation to get the congregation in the room and watching at home to put out the money. The leadership on the platform he said was going to shell out at least 100 per person because "leadership in his church costs".

Another was a plea for money in return for some "thank you" packages and tying faithfulness to receiving 7 special blessings during Passover. This particular plea was in the midst of wildly misusing scripture to bring about certain benefits for those who are "spiritually astute" enough to pay attention and receive them during God's "special times of year".

Both ministries are huge and by worldly standards successful. It also doesn't mean that these ministries don't also do some good in the world. However, when this kind of focus on money is a hallmark there is something very wrong.

Today you can see multiple documentaries of churches that have created an almost cult like following and one of the common roots of their misuse of scripture and their authority is money.

As Jesus also said, the LOVE of money is the root of all evil. Not money itself, but the love of it. The most dangerous evil is evil that is well dressed in spiritual Jesus language.

The point here isn't to degrade anyone or anything. It is to remember that in our time the issues facing Jesus haven't disappeared. Religion, shrewdness, and the allure of gain and control are still present. That they are still present is why there is such a powerful call to the people of faith who have heard the message of Jesus. His message was meaningful enough that He was willing to go to the cross for it. A moment in time that we honor today in communion and that we celebrate as we go into Holy Week very soon.

His message is life giving both here and eternally. While He may be clear that on the world's terms we are at a disadvantage when it comes to worldly things, He is also clear that there are true riches to be had.

We have the riches of a fulfilled life, lived well before God. This is a life that has peace of heart and mind no matter what our circumstances. Paul's famous "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" is in the context of being able to be CONTENT no matter if we're in a life of means and comfort or need and challenge. We can do this because the riches of Christ are those riches that reign in our heart because we've taken seriously his instruction to engage the world around us with love, compassion, and mercy. No matter what the world around us is doing itself.

The true riches of God aren't affected by the world. Yet the true riches of God are intended to change the world itself.

How do we use what we have? How are we like the shrewd manager?

All of us have time to invest. How do we invest it?

All of us have some means at our disposal. How do we use them?

All of us have talents and passions. Who do we use them to serve?

The more we use them to bring the love of God into this world, and to serve those in need around us, the greater the true riches build in our hearts. One of the greatest of these riches is the assurance that we genuinely belong to God and one day will make God's Kingdom our eternal home.

The dishonest manager was able to get by in the world because he made it happen. The shady things that got him what he wanted were on his own “say so”, deceiving whomever to get ahead. The boss knew about it but was powerless to correct him.

God is neither powerless nor fooled. When we use what we have for God’s true purposes we enter the Kingdom not on our say so but God’s. We can rest because we traffic in truth, and in truth there is peace and freedom. We may not be the richest in the world’s terms, but the riches of God’s mercies and assurance will grow and overflow.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 18

After so much drama over years time and buildup, the final confrontation occurs between David and Absalom. David appoints his leaders, splits his men into units and is ready for the fight. Ready to lead his men, David is denied. They know that David’s safety is paramount. They can risk the lives of soldiers but not the king himself. David relents and stays back, greeting the men as they leave the city gate.

Suddenly we see a shift in David’s concerns. Many of his problems seem to have arisen because he has taken the role of king over the role of father. For years, he split the difference by having Absalom back in Jerusalem, but never really reconciling. Even their reunion seemed brief and cold. “What would the people think to see Amnon’s murderer in my company?” Now the father’s concern comes to the surface.

Even though Absalom has rebelled. Even though Absalom has ran David out of Jerusalem and convinced Israel to follow him. Even though Absalom is seeking his life. Even with all of this, David asks them to spare Absalom’s life. A king would go straight for the head of his enemy. David will not seek the life of his own son.

Hushai’s planning, even though we don’t know just how stringently it was followed, has bought David time. He has picked the forest of Ephraim as the field of battle. Scripture tells us the forest took more men than his soldiers. Time to plan has given David’s forces strength and let him plot the fight on terrain familiar to him yet unfamiliar to Absalom. The ground does the work for him.

Keep in mind the differences in these two armies. David’s is seasoned, loyal to him and one another. They’ve fought together many times. Absalom’s is new. He’s drafted people from Israel who may never have really fought or been trained. Hushai’s plan wasn’t to beat David with skill. It was to overwhelm with numbers. This doesn’t work and Absalom’s force is soundly beaten.

Absalom himself is in a precarious position. The thick head of hair we’d heard about earlier is his undoing. It gets tangled in a branch and there he helplessly dangles.

A simple soldier seems to have learned something from David. David refused to kill Saul out of principle. In similar fashion, because David had asked Absalom to be protected, he refuses to kill the helpless rebel. Even when Joab presses him, he holds true and can not be bribed or coerced into doing what he believes to be wrong. The soldier’s additional reasoning is as prudent today as it was then.

He notes that if he had killed Absalom, Joab wouldn’t be nearly as supportive. If David had brought him up on the killing, Joab would be nowhere around, choosing to let this soldier likely be executed even though he delighted in Absalom’s death. Doing someone else’s dirty work rarely yields reward if we get caught in the act. The ugly lack of character that would cause a leader to push someone else to carry out underhanded and disobedient tasks is the same character that lets that person take the fall.

Joab in the moment takes the matter into his own hands, goes to Absalom and spears him. Notice that the others don’t strike Absalom at all until Joab has already done the job.

Once again, it’s important to note the haziness of all of this. Yes, Joab disobeyed David’s order. He also likely did what was the militarily and strategically smarter thing. To have your enemy easily at hand to take care of and let him live is often a grave error in those times. It is likely that Absalom would continue to try and try again to kill David and seize the throne. Killing him is the only way to

ensure stability moving forward. What grieves David the father protects David the king.

The way it's described in scripture makes it sound somewhat callous as to how Absalom was buried. In truth it was an honorable burial. Unlike many of the other dead he wasn't left in the open to be picked at by animals. He was covered. The stones would serve as a headstone of sorts to him.

Absalom had built his own monument to himself. It's here we see that he has no sons to carry on his name. Earlier we are told he has three sons. What gives? The simplest answer is also the most likely. Perhaps his sons had died before reaching adulthood.

The victory for at least some of the men is intoxicating. Ahimaaz is so thrilled he insists on sharing the news of victory with David. This also carries with it the news of Absalom's death. Joab refuses to allow this. He knows that David has a habit of killing messengers of bad news. He killed the messenger who brought news of Saul's death. He killed the messenger who brought the news of Ishbosheth's death. (of course the messengers also claimed to be the killer as well) Regardless, Ahimaaz is part of a family of note. Joab doesn't want to risk the boy's life.

He sends a Cushite instead. Ahimaaz is persistent and Joab lets him run. So excited is Ahimaaz that he overtakes and beats the Cushite to David. When he gets there he has a failure of nerve.

He shares the news of the victory, but lies about Absalom. He knows full well that Absalom is dead. When David asks him, he murmurs about some confusing conversation that he couldn't make out before he left. Perhaps he thought better of risking his neck after he saw that David's most passionate question wasn't about the battle but about his son.

The Cushite doesn't hold back. He delivers the full news. David doesn't go after him. Most likely he is too overwhelmed with grief.

The end scene is of a destroyed David. He's borne the loss of an infant son with strength and resolve. He's killed and lost many of his own. Samuel has died. Saul has been killed. Jonathan is dead. All of it he has dealt with and seemed to keep some semblance of composure. Here he is collapsing wishing that he were dead rather than his nemesis, his son.

This is an image for us to take in and beware. David is seen as a pillar of strength and a man after God's own heart. His life reveals an all too human person who has made grand mistakes. In this moment it is as if the weight of all of those failures crashes on him at once.

The blood on his hands is great. He has slaughtered innocents to protect himself from reports of his escapades. He has deceived. He has committed adultery and premeditated murder. He failed to act when Amnon raped Tamar. He refused time after time to reconcile with Absalom as Absalom's hatred and ambition grew. Even when Absalom was brought near, the heart distance was tremendous between them.

Now here he sits. His two oldest sons are dead and he is face to face with all that led him to this moment. This is the end result of too much violence, too much ignoring, and confusing what is important in the moment (for David and Absalom it was being a king or father). Right now David the king is gone, and it is David the father racked with grief and pain.

Soon Joab will have to set him straight, lest his overwhelming grief cause him to lose the throne he's just regained.