

## Proper 20

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-8

“...for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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 ... for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.”

This is a tough parable to figure out, isn't it? The manager cheated the rich man out of his money so that he would be taken care of once he had lost his job and had run out of his own money. Maybe like a 401K plan of the first century. And the rich man commended his manager for being so shrewd to take care of himself – even as the manager used the rich man's money to pave the way for himself in the future. And it sure sounds like Jesus thinks this is smarter than the people he calls the children of light. Why, he even tells his disciples to “make friends by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

How could Jesus say this? Aren't his parables really about us? Is God the rich man and we the manager? And we're told to make decisions on dishonest means? How can this be?

Maybe it really isn't. Maybe Jesus is being sarcastic. Maybe Jesus is being ironic.

Verbal, dramatic, and situational irony are often used for emphasis in the assertion of a truth. The ironic form of simile, used in sarcasm ... can emphasize one's meaning by the deliberate use of language which states the opposite of the truth, denies the contrary of the truth ...<sup>1</sup>

Jesus says “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Huh. When your dishonest wealth is gone, your friends will welcome you into their eternal homes. Isn't it more important to insure our future here on earth? That's certainly more practical. We have to live here, after all, and we have families to care for. Isn't God the manager in this parable?

Let's take another look at what Jesus says. Eternal homes – that's plural. Welcomed by your friends... Aren't we supposed to be welcomed into our *one eternal home by God*? Friends don't have eternal homes. And friends certainly don't welcome us into eternity. If your wealth comes by means of dishonesty – even if your means, your shrewdness are praised by your boss, where does a home with God fit?

I suspect that if we don't hear closely the words of Jesus at the end of this parable, then it becomes pretty confusing. It almost sounds like he's pushing dishonesty. But he's not. He says very clearly that we have to choose between God and wealth – between God and mammon. If we choose mammon, we may very well have our future in this world insured – no matter what the means. If we choose God, we have our future after this world pretty much assured.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikidpedia, *Irony*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony>

Jesus is being sarcastic; Jesus is being ironic. He finally tells us the moral of the parable: "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God."

What are our priorities? Do we really have to choose one or the other? Does choosing one exclude the other?

Perhaps Jeremiah and the letter to Timothy might give us some insight. Paul says to Timothy: Pray your little heart out. Don't pray for yourself but pray for others so that own life is full of peace, of godliness, of quiet, of dignity. Pray for others – for everyone – especially those in high positions. God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth. So pray, pray, pray. But don't start out by praying for yourselves, but pray for others.

Now here's the thing about prayer. It's intentional and it's focused on God. That's different than having a conversation with God while we're driving. Intentional and focused means we're not multi-tasking. It means we make some time during the day – those 17 to 20 hours when we're awake to focus only on God. It might even be just 5 minutes. But we stop what we're doing and pray. We pray for all people; we pray for wisdom in our leaders; we pray for those who are in any kind of need; we pray for the world; we pray for justice; we pray for those who are oppressed. We even pray for the unity of the church, that our brokenness is healed. We pray for our families, friends, and neighbors and for those who are alone. We give thanks. We pray for those who have died, that they may indeed be welcomed by Christ into God's eternal home.

Sounds like the prayers of the people to me. We pray for others, we pray for this community, we give thanks, and finally – finally – we pray for ourselves as we ask forgiveness for our sins – things known and unknown, things done and left undone.

We pray. Even if we pray directly out of the prayer book. Do not pray out of the prayer book while you're driving. It's not only unfocused but it's dangerous. We need to stop intentionally, give all of our attention to God, and pray.

On page 856, our catechism says there are seven kinds of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. (You might notice that petition – praying for ourselves – is the last form of prayer in the list. I don't know if this was intentional by the writers of the catechism, but it certainly serves the purposes of this sermon. ) Of course, we always have the Lord's Prayer – that's a good way to start our time of prayer. It helps us focus and redirect all of our senses. And then we pray more specifically. Let's look at the specific types of prayer....

So we pray. We pray like Jeremiah did for his people, like he interceded for others. He offered himself to God for the purposes of God – he offered himself in full oblation. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, you'll see that he used every one of these types of prayers as he tried to convince his people to turn back to God. They didn't have to give everything up; but they need to turn back to God and make sure their eyes first were on God and then their earthly prizes. By doing that, they would be able to worship God and not the things of the earth. By making sure their eyes were on God first, they had some perspective, they had a context in which to live in this world.

Paul says to Timothy: make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for everyone. Not for yourself, Tim, but for others – for everyone else. Get your priorities in order, Paul says. This is the truth and this is the way to God.

And this brings us back to the parable that Jesus told his disciples. Get your priorities straight and remember who created you, who will judge you, and who can provide an eternal life after your time in this world is over. Not your friends – they will even praise your dishonesty. Your friends can't offer you eternal life or even eternal homes – but God can do all of those things and even more. "What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. ... You cannot serve God and serve the things of this world." One has to come first. Do we put our faith in an earthly 401K plan that can decrease in value, that has penalties for early withdrawal, and that has hidden fees and charges? Or do we put our faith in a plan that assures us that this life on earth is not all there is and that the plan God offers is indeed eternal. One is short term; the other long term. God or wealth? Wealth or God? Which comes first and provides us the context in which to see the other? The choice is ours. Maybe we should pray about it....

Amen.

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