

USE WORLDLY WEALTH TO GAIN FRIENDS

Luke 16:1-13

Key Verse: 16:9

“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

Let me start with a true story. An owner of a company built up a very prosperous business by dealing honestly and kindly with his customers and his employees. He was especially mindful of good workers who committed themselves to his business. He was appreciative and generous and made a good pension plan for them. So many good men worked happily for him for a long time—one 43 years, another 37 years (my dad), and so on. But one day this owner died and the business was passed on to his son. One of the first things the son did was to dismiss the longtime workers in order avoid paying their pensions. He saved a lot of money, but he lost his credibility and the trust of his workers and customers. A few years later, his business disappeared, as well as his money. This kind of thing happens all over the United States, especially in the finance industry, as we could see in the mortgage crisis of 2008. What is the problem? We are living in a capitalistic society which promotes greed. A successful Wall Street trader had a motto, “Greed is good. Greed drives business. Greed produces jobs. Be greedy!” Influenced by greed, people are educated to make money shrewdly without regard to moral implications. As a consequence, unrighteousness and injustice flourish. Trust breaks down, value systems and relationships become based on money. Those who can earn a lot of money are valued highly, regardless of their moral character. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are influenced by this social environment. We unconsciously become a little stingy and lose the joy of giving. Let’s learn from Jesus how to see money and how to use money. God will bless us more than we imagine.

First, the parable of the shrewd, dishonest manager (1-8a). After telling three parables to the religious leaders, Jesus now turns his attention to his disciples and tells them a parable about a manager. This is the second time Jesus has told a parable about a manager. In some way, we are all managers of something: time, talents, relationships, children, money and more. Jesus wants his disciples to be good managers. The first parable was about a faithful and wise manager who dealt with people (12:42-48). But the manager in today’s parable is dishonest and shrewd and deals with money. In some ways

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this manager is not exemplary. But Jesus draws one good lesson from a bad example. It is how to use money. We Christians should take Jesus' teaching seriously. It is easy to be dismissive of worldly wealth, fearing that we will be tempted by it. However, there is also a danger in ignoring money management. Poor management of money can bring problems that shame our Christian witness and damage family relationships. Jesus wants us all to be good managers of worldly wealth.

Let's take a look at the parable. There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. In those days, rich people hired managers like financial planners in our times. Their job is to increase the wealth of their master by any means. They have a privilege of using his wealth to make a profit for him. They should be loyal, faithful, diligent, creative and prosperous like the manager of Judah Ben-Hur's household. But this manager seems to be lazy, unfaithful and self-indulgent. Instead of increasing his master's wealth, he was wasting his possessions. He thought he could cover up his wrongdoing and make a profit before his master noticed. But he could not hide his misdeeds. Rumors spread and the master came to know about it. So the master called him in and said, **"What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer"** (2). We know that there is a time for everyone to give an account. We experience this in part through annual reviews at work, school report cards, and the comments of family members. And someday, we must all give an account to God. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."**

What did the manager do? What he thinks and does at this critical moment determines his future. Firstly, he assessed his situation correctly. He thought to himself, **"What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg..."** (3). He admitted that his indulgent, comfortable lifestyle had sapped his physical strength, so he could not do manual labor. Begging may have been an alternative. But when he thought how others would ridicule and mock him, he realized he could not bear the shame. At that moment, he thought and struggled and finally had an inspiration: **"I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses"** (4). We can learn something from him. Many people overestimate their abilities and do

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something foolish or useless. Others underestimate their abilities, fall into despair and do nothing. But this manager understood his situation and limitations precisely, and this drove him to find a creative solution. There is a saying, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Honestly assessing our situation and limits is a vital step in finding a creative solution.

Secondly, he made a decision. In desperate situations, people can be overwhelmed by their feelings. He could have fallen into depression and become mentally ill. Or, overwhelmed by shame, he could have committed suicide. Instead, he made the best decision he could and immediately began to act. He called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, **“How much do you owe my master?”** He was not harsh, as he had been in the past, but gentle. The debtor replied, **“Nine hundred gallons of olive oil.”** This would be worth about \$18,000 in our time. The manager told him, **“Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty”** (6). Wow! Half the debt was cancelled just like that! The debtor saved \$9,000. No doubt he would be grateful to the manager. The manager asked another debtor, **“How much do you owe?”** **“A thousand bushels of wheat,” he replied.** This would be worth about \$8,000 today. The manager reduced his bill to eight hundred bushels, a savings of \$1,600. Again, the debtor would be most grateful to the manager. In this way, the manager earned favor from many debtors.

How did the master respond? He actually commended the dishonest manager. It was because he had acted shrewdly (8a). Here, the Greek word translated “shrewdly” has no negative connotation. Rather, it implies foresight and wisdom. He used something he could not keep to gain future benefits. In a time of crisis, he was courageous, creative and decisive. He turned his adversity into opportunity. Jesus commented, **“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light”** (8b). People of this world are hardworking, bold, and clever in making money, though they may be dishonest. Jesus wants his disciples to learn something from them instead of judging them. Seeing such people should lead us to repent our laziness and work harder for the Lord.

Second, applications from the parable (8b-13). When we learn something from worldly people, there is a danger. It is possible to misunderstand that the ends justify the means. Since we all have a sinful nature, we are vulnerable to

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greed, dishonesty and unfaithfulness. So Jesus applies the parable for us in three ways: how to use money (9), the importance of faithfulness (10-12), and we cannot serve both God and money (13).

The first application is how to use money. Let's read verse 9 together. **"I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."** Here "worldly wealth" refers to more than just money. It also includes time, talents, and other resources that are entrusted to us. The word "worldly" does not have a negative connotation. Rather, in contrast to "eternal" it underscores the transitory nature of things in the world. Worldly things do not last long. We cannot hold on to them forever. Paul said, **"For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it"** (1Ti 6:6-7). Even though we know this, it is not easy to let it go. One father trained his young son to hold on to money. He had him climb a tall tree and hang onto a branch with both hands, his body dangling high above the ground. After his arms got tired, the son wanted to let go, but the father told him, "Hang on. It is a matter of life and death!" The son cried and persevered as a matter of survival. Finally, the father helped his exhausted son down from the tree. When they reached the ground, the father said, "Hold on to money like that and you will never have a financial problem." But no matter how tightly we hold money, sooner or later, it will be gone. Then all that will matter is how we used it.

Learning how to use money properly is not a skill. It results from having a spiritual value system. Let's suppose that suddenly one million dollars was transferred to your bank account on the condition that you must decide immediately how to use it. What would you decide? Your decision would reflect your value system. When we value people more than money, we can use money to gain friends. But if we love money most, we will keep it by any means. If we are slaves to a sinful habit, we will use our money to indulge in it. To use money properly, our hearts may need to be set free by the gospel. What is more, Jesus teaches us the eternal nature of God's reward. Jesus said we will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. It is amazing that if we invest temporary wealth we can gain eternal blessing. This is the best investment strategy. Every time we do something for others in Jesus' name, no matter how small—even giving a cup of cold water—Jesus notices and will remember it (Mt 10:42). When he comes again, he will reward us, even if we have forgotten about it. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus will say,

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“Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Mt 25:34-40). Paul encourages us to use worldly wealth to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way we can lay up treasure for ourselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that we can take hold of the life that is truly life (1Ti 6:18-19).

What does it mean to “gain friends”? Jesus is the best example. In order to gain us as his friends, Jesus came to this world, giving up treasures that we can only imagine. St. Paul said, **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”** (2Co 8:9). Jesus gave up his position of power and glory, and his heavenly palace, and came into this world as a man. He was born into a poor and ordinary family and laid in a manger. He experienced life as we do, with all of its stress and pain, and was even tempted just as we are, and yet did not sin. By sharing in our humanity, he came to understand us fully. Finally, he went to the cross, shed his precious blood to cleanse us from all sin, and died. On the third day, he rose again and won everlasting victory for all mankind. Now everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins, eternal life and an inheritance in the kingdom of God. In this way, Jesus won us as his eternal friends. Now Jesus wants to use us to make friends for him. This includes using our worldly wealth to gain lost souls for Christ, in fulfillment of his world mission purpose. As the hymn says, *“Give of your young to bear the message glorious; Give of your wealth to speed them on their way. Pour out your soul for them in prayer victorious, And all your spending Jesus will repay.”* Those whom Jesus saves will be grateful not only to Jesus, but also to those who sacrificially served them in his name. With deep gratitude, they will welcome us into heavenly mansions to rejoice together forever with them. So let’s use our worldly wealth, in the short time we have it, to win friends for Jesus.

The second application is the importance of faithfulness. After teaching us a good lesson from the dishonest manager, Jesus now deals with elements we should not learn, that is, dishonesty and unfaithfulness. Jesus said, **“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much”** (10). Trustworthiness and honesty are elements of a person’s character that will be manifest no matter what size the trust they are given.

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Some people are waiting to be entrusted with something big in order to prove that they are trustworthy and honest. So they are careless in handling small things. They say, “Trust me with something big and you will see how faithful I am.” But those who are not trustworthy with very little will not be trustworthy with much. Such a person is irresponsible and unfaithful. So we should learn the importance of being faithful in small things. Then we can be trusted with much bigger things. Joseph in Genesis is a good example. When his father sent him on an errand to find out how his brothers were, the brothers were not where they should have been. Most people would have given up and gone back and reported. But Joseph searched for them until he found them. As a result, they sold him as a slave, and he ended up in Egypt. For anyone, to overcome the bitterness of such a betrayal would not be easy. Moreover, as a slave, he was treated harshly and given the most dirty, menial jobs to do. It was not easy to overcome such a crushing experience. But Joseph proved faithful and honest, even when he was tempted by his master’s wife. It was because he walked with God. Because of this, he was put in prison on a false charge. It seemed futile to continue to be faithful and honest. Yet he continued to do so. Then, in due time, God lifted him up as the steward of the entire nation. No matter what our situation or circumstance, God sees our hearts. When we are faithful and honest in small things, he will lift us up in due time.

In verse 11 Jesus contrasts “**worldly wealth**” with “**true riches**,” and in verse 12 “**someone else’s property**” with “**property of your own**.” “**True riches**” refer to heavenly reward which is eternal—where no thief comes near and no moth destroys (Lk 12:33). Everything we have in this world is someone else’s property; it is only in our possession temporarily. Heavenly reward will be property of our own forever. Jesus warns that those who are not faithful and honest with worldly wealth, will not be entrusted with heavenly reward. In other words, if we are not trustworthy with the things that are given to us in this world—such as time, energy, talents, money and even life itself—we will not be entrusted with heavenly reward. On the other hand, those who are trustworthy with the things of this world will be given heavenly reward. Jesus taught in the parable of the ten minas that each person has one mina. Those who are faithful, honest and diligent earn ten more or five more. They are rewarded with a great compliment from their master and given ten cities or five cities. But those who are not faithful will be judged by the master and have their mina taken away (Lk 19:11-27).

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Jesus' third application is that a person cannot serve both God and money. Jesus said, **“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”** (13). Money has magic power to steal a person's heart and enslave them. Once a person is enslaved by the power of money they cannot break free by themselves. Money gives people false hope. They think they can do everything with money. But they cannot buy happiness with money. They can buy a good mattress, but not sound sleep. They can be treated by good doctors, but not be healthy. They cannot buy righteousness, love, peace, holiness, a godly wife and children, or friendship. Some people know that money is not enough. So they try to serve both God and money. They say, “I can handle it. Don't worry.” But no one can serve both, because they are mutually exclusive. Love for money will drive one away from God. Conversely, loving God will liberate one from the love of money. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, **“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and have pierced themselves with many griefs.”** If we love money, we will suffer from all kinds of pain and grief and eventually abandon God. But when we love God only, we are free to use money for the kingdom's work. Truly wise people will use money to serve God and make friends for the kingdom of God. Let's use our worldly wealth to gain many friends for Jesus.