

Introduction.

In contrast to last week's Gospel-about God searching for those who are lost- a most comforting truth; today's passage is deeply challenging. Jesus takes aim at money and material things; he warns that we need to be on guard against these things because of their power - power to control and even misdirect our lives. Jesus cuts to the chase by asking, **'you are my disciples, so how does your following me affect what you do with money and your longing after material things?'**

Often, when people first read this story, their reactions are embarrassment and confusion. I want to read it from "*The Message*" to hear it in a fresh way. Peterson calls it "***The Story of the Crooked Manager***". Opponents of Christianity going all the way back to Jullian the Apostate (380-455) have used this parable to attack the character of Jesus. Jesus' parables include a surprising list of unsavoury characters. In addition to the **Dishonest Steward** we have the **Corrupt Judge** (who had no interest in justice); the **Uncaring Neighbour** -couldn't to be bothered to help when his friend was in need and **The Cheat**- who finagled to get someone else's treasure.

Jesus told parables to grab his hearers attention. One effective way of doing this was to shock people. The details of the story were not important - rather it was the lesson or lessons that he intended the parable to hammer home. If I was to update the Parable of the Good Samaritan and call it "***The Parable of the Good Muslim Fundamentalist***" that would shock you and get your attention. In this present story Jesus uses humour and reluctant admiration for a streetwise manager for achieving his purpose. If we try to read significance into all the details of parables we will be led up a blind alley.

So what is the real message here?

First, the steward here is **not** the main character - the theme is "**Money**" and the main character is the power Jesus called "**Mammon**". If this is not checked it will grip us with a desire for wealth at any cost. Jesus understood the potential of money to distract us and prevent us from living a life of obedience to God. Jesus is deeply concerned how we live in this world; of necessity this involves how we handle money and possessions. He realized that our pocket books and check- books are a much better indicator of the importance and priority of God in our lives than our hymn books, prayer books or even Bibles!

We can't avoid it. The words of Jesus, the New Testament writers and the Old Testament writers: all emphasize the themes of riches, stewardship, generous care for the poor. We want to compartmentalize, to set material stuff over here as earthly, as money stuff..... and put the spiritual way over here.....but the bible doesn't do that. In Scripture they are bound, braided even together. Scripture baldly states how we handle our money and possessions the choices we make with what we have is the best

indicator, of or our spiritual health. **"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"** says Jesus.

It is for this reason that Jesus spoke much more about money and its dangers to our souls than the he spoke about sin, Heaven and Hell and judgment combined. 16 of his 38 parables are concerned with how to handle money and possessions. One out of every ten verses of the Gospels deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible has less than 500 verses about faith but more than 2000 verses about money and possessions. God knows that money and material things are the most serious rivals to God for our affection and even our worship. It is not sex, power or ego but money, which vies with God for first place in our lives.

In Scripture money is **not** viewed as a neutral substance, which can be good or bad, depending on how we use it. Money is seen as a spiritual power, which, unless radical steps are taken, will **inevitably** enslave us, distort our vision of reality and control our lives and choices.

At the end of this Gospel passage Jesus flatly says, **"No slave can serve two masters"** i.e. you cannot simultaneously please or follow the incompatible instructions of two bosses- **"You cannot serve God and wealth"**

So what is this parable really saying? Two words sum it all up; Shrewdness, and Squandering The question for us in our use of money and other material goods is **'do we squander or act shrewdly?'** Most of us would answer **"Oh we definitely act shrewdly. We are careful and wise in our use of money. We save; we search out the best deals"**. But hang on, not so fast. We may not spend our money on the lottery, constantly be buying stuff at the Mall or live beyond our means with credit cards. We may wisely invest in Mutual Funds, 401(k) s and a bewildering array of other financial instruments. Yet we can still be guilty of squandering as far as Jesus is concerned!

The Manager of this parable was judged to be **shrewd** not because of his timing of the market or ability to pick the right stocks or mutual funds but because, in the short amount of time he had control of his master's goods, he used them to prepare for the time when he would be separated from them. Jesus is saying we are **shrewd** if we recognize that the time will come when we will be separated from the money and possessions that we temporarily have the use of. In truth many of us fail that test. We do not use what we temporarily have, to prepare for the coming time when we will no longer have it. Rather we buy in to the message of our society to use money and wealth **now** for our short- term comfort and pleasure or to give us a spurious sense of permanent security (the parable of the Rich Fool).

So how can we be shrewd? According to Jesus by being **"rich towards God"**. Generously sharing what we have with others, sacrificially giving to support the work of God in this world. Actions, not words or even beliefs, are what distinguishes a shrewd person. Living in this way runs totally counter to our culture and therefore is a very difficult truth for all of us to hear.

But it was difficult for Jesus contemporaries to hear also. The Gospel tells us (v 14) that when *“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard this, they ridiculed (Jesus).”* So finally a word of warning, If we find ourselves *“blowing off”* this teaching about money and true shrewdness and being rich towards God as being totally impractical then **BEWARE.**

Let us pray.