

The Parables of Jesus:
The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 13:1-13)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 11, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ We've been going through a summer series in the parables of Jesus out of the Gospel of Luke. This morning's parable reminds me of **the marshmallow test** that parents sometimes do with their toddlers. That's where parents offer their kid one marshmallow and tell him, "You can eat this marshmallow now but then that's all you're going to get. Or if you wait here until Mommy and Daddy come back, then you can have two marshmallows."
 - And then the parents will leave the room for like 5 to 10 minutes and wait and see if their toddler is forward-thinking. If he can delay immediate gratification. **Is he only going to focus on what's in front of him – on the *now*? Or will he think about the future and future rewards and plan accordingly?** How far into the future does your kid think? That's what the marshmallow test is supposed to reveal. Basically, if your kid is smart or not. Or as Jesus puts it, if he is shrewd.

- ❖ If I offered you a thousand dollars today to spend on whatever you wish – that would be a great offer. But what if I promised that if you decline the money today and wait a year, then I would return and give you ten thousand dollars – and another ten thousand every year in perpetuity. **The smart move – the shrewd move – would be to turn down the money now and plan for the future.** Only a fool would choose the thousand today. You'd be the kid who couldn't wait five minutes for a second marshmallow.
 - Friends, this morning's passage contains an important spiritual lesson that's similar to what's taught in a simple marshmallow test. **You can't just focus on the present. You've got to plan for the future.** Some Christians wonder if it's unspiritual to be saving up for the future or looking for a high return on investment. But that's not a problem in this parable. The problem, according to this parable, is that we're too short-sighted. The future we focus on is too short. We're planning for when our kids go to college, for retirement, for old age – when we should be planning for eternity.

- ❖ We all know that when it comes to financial investments, the future is never guaranteed. Nothing is inevitable. **But when it comes to life itself, there are inevitables.** It's inevitable that this life – as you know it – will come to an end. You will be removed from this momentary life, and you will enter a forever future that stretches into eternity.
 - In this morning's parable, Jesus confronts us with these inevitables and calls his disciples to be smart – to be shrewd – and to choose an investment strategy that factors a forever future into the equation. **Live your life with the mindset (and true belief) that you're going to live forever. And prepare right now for that forever future – making sure that it'll be free of suffering and shame and full of true riches and joy.** That's what the shrewd servant (or the dishonest manager) was trying to do in this parable.

- ❖ Now I realize our confusion with this parable lies in the fact that it seems like Jesus is condoning bad behavior. It seems like he's commending dishonest business practices and then telling Christians to go and do likewise. So we'll definitely have to address the interpretive difficulties in this text, but again, I think the main point is pretty straightforward.

- ❖ **If even non-Christians have the foresight to prepare for a financial future free of suffering and shame, then how much more should Christians have the foresight to prepare for an eternal future free of everlasting suffering and shame?**
 - That's Jesus's point. Let's dig deeper by considering three applications of this main idea from our text. (1) Plan your future shrewdly to prepare for your inevitable dismissal. (2) Spend your money wisely to make for yourself eternal friends. (3) Steward this life faithfully to receive greater treasures in the next.

Plan Your Future Shrewdly

- ❖ The first application is to **plan your future shrewdly to prepare for your inevitable dismissal**. Jesus begins chapter 16 with a parable about a manager or you could translate it as a steward. Stewards show up quite frequently in Jesus's parables because they're a wonderful way to illustrate our responsibility and relationship to God.
 - God is like the master of a Greco-Roman household and we're like stewards. A steward was one of the household servants who was chosen and given a lot of resources to manage the household on behalf of the master. **A steward could spend money, use resources, invest capital – it's all at his disposal – but it's all on behalf of his master.** A steward is in charge of a lot. But owns none of it.
- ❖ A steward stewards on behalf of the master. **So that means the actions of a steward reflect well or poorly on the master and his household.** In our parable, the steward's stewardship is reflecting poorly on the master. In v1, it says the steward was called to account by his master for "*wasting his possessions*". He was mismanaging his funds, misallocating his resources, mistreating his fellow servants. So he was getting fired. "*Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.*" (v2)
 - Now he's given time to get his affairs in order. For the meanwhile, he's still in charge of the books. So he devises a plan. Look at v3, "*And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'*"
- ❖ What's he doing? He's planning for the future. **The steward is forward-thinking.** He realizes that dismissal from his post is inevitable and that if he doesn't act now, then his future is going to be filled with pain and hard labor. **And so he prepares now for his inevitable dismissal.** He's securing for himself a financial future free of suffering and shame.
- ❖ **He does that by lowering the debt of his master's debtors.** Now there are different opinions as to what he's trying to accomplish. Some suggest that he's taking out the exorbitant commission that he normally would've tacked on for himself. Or maybe he was just cancelling the interest accrued or adjusting the debt based on a more fair market rate.
 - To one debtor, in v6, he lowers the debt from a hundred measures of olive oil (about 800 gallons) to half the amount. And then he takes a debt of a hundred measures of wheat (about 1000 bushels) and knocks off twenty percent.

- ❖ Do you see what he's doing? These are very large debts and very significant discounts. By lowering these debts, he's ingratiating himself with these debtors. **He's putting them in his debt, so that he can call on a favor after his inevitable dismissal.**

- ❖ Now the interpretive difficulty arises here in v8 when Jesus has the master commending "*the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.*" Why is the master praising the manager who is clearly doing something *dishonest*? That could be translated as unrighteous or unjust. When Jesus speaks of "*unrighteous wealth*" in v9, that's the same Greek word. So this steward is being dishonest and unrighteous – why then is he being commended?
 - Look at v8. Jesus was commending this dishonest manager – not for his dishonesty – but for his shrewdness in the way he prepared for his inevitable future. **To be shrewd means to have keen judgment.** To be sharp-minded. To be smart. That Greek word is more commonly translated in the NT as *wise*. When we looked at the faithful and *wise* manager in Luke 12:42, it's the same word – the faithful and *shrewd* manager.
 - Now what does shrewdness (wisdom) look like in our parable? **Shrewdness amounts to future-oriented thinking and investing.** This dishonest, unrighteous manager was shrewd enough to prepare for his inevitable dismissal from the household. He was wise enough to secure a future that would be free from suffering and shame – from manual labor and begging.

- ❖ Jesus goes on to explain in v8, "*For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.*" The Lord is pointing out how non-Christians (sons of this world) are often times shrewder and wiser than Christians (sons of light).
 - **If non-Christians are shrewd enough to do what it takes now to protect and secure their future *earthly* prospects – then why do Christians neglect to protect and secure their future *heavenly* prospects?** That's the question being raised. If non-Christians have the foresight to prepare for a *financial* future free of suffering and shame, then how much more should Christians have the foresight to prepare for an *eternal* future free of everlasting suffering and shame?

- ❖ For this manager, his future was very unpredictable. There were a lot of things up in the air, but the one thing for certain was his removal. **The one inevitable was his dismissal from the life and home that he has so comfortably enjoyed.** He accepted the inevitable and was shrewd enough to prepare for the future.

- ❖ Friends, in the same way, your future is unpredictable. **But the one thing for certain is your removal – your dismissal from this present life and home – to an endless eternity, to a forever future.** We spend so much money, time, and energy preparing for future possibilities – for where we *might* go to college, for what kind of job we *might* have, for who we *might* marry or how big of a family we *might* have, or for when we *might* be able to retire. We don't know what might or might not happen in the future.

- ❖ **But one thing is certain. We will all be dismissed from this life.** Either death arrives at our doorstep or Christ returns and comes knocking – either way, we will be dismissed and all of our earthly goods will remain behind.
- ❖ John D. Rockefeller was arguably the wealthiest men who ever lived, but after he died someone asked his accountant, “*How much money did John D. leave?*” The reply was classic: “*He left...all of it.*”
 - **Psalm 49:17**, says “*When [the rich man] dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him.*” **So enjoy your treasures now but just realize that you can’t take them with you.** You’ll have to leave it all behind once you’re dismissed. If that’s so, then what’s the smart move? What does shrewdness call for?
 - **The shrewd move is to do what it takes now – to invest your treasures in such a way now – that you’re prepared for that inevitable dismissal.** The wise thing to do is to secure an eternal future free of suffering and shame and full of true riches and joy.
- ❖ **Now the most fundamental issue is whether or not you've prepared now, in such a way, that your forever future will be filled with everlasting joy in the New Creation.** If you're not prepared, then – due to the sinful guilt that we all share – your inevitable fate is to spend a bleak, hopeless, dismal eternity in everlasting damnation.
 - **Only the fool spends all his time now preparing for a secure retirement in a few decades – all while neglecting to secure his forever future.** “*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*” (Mt 16:26)
- ❖ So if you don’t know what your forever future holds – if you don’t feel prepared for your inevitable dismissal – the good news of the gospel is that to be prepared doesn’t require you to know a lot of things or do a lot of things. **To be prepared to spend a forever future with the God who made you only requires knowing one thing and doing one thing.** You need to know that you’re a sinner desperately in need of the salvation that only Jesus provides. And the thing you need to do is to repent and believe in Jesus’s gracious promise to save you.

Spend Your Money Wisely

- ❖ The shrewd steward is the one who accepts that death is inevitable and prepares now by receiving the gospel by grace through faith. That’s the first application in this parable. The second is like it but focused more specifically on how we invest the money that God gives us to steward on his behalf – **spend your money wisely to make for yourself eternal friends.**
 - This is how Jesus applies his parable in v9, “*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*”

- ❖ That explains what this steward was trying to do. He may have been dishonest and unrighteous, but at least he understood the limitations of money. Now by calling it "*unrighteous wealth*", Jesus wasn't necessarily suggesting that it was obtained dishonestly or illegally. It's just like saying worldly wealth. It's money.
 - **This dishonest manager knew that money will fail him.** It's not a question of *if* but "*when it fails*". When money fails him, he hopes he will have ingratiated himself with enough people that they'll take him in and maybe make him their steward.

- ❖ Now, of course, the question is: What is the takeaway for Jesus's disciples? What is he expecting us to do with our money? To buy yourself some friends? To put people in your debt so that they'll owe you a favor later? No, of course not.
 - **Jesus just wants us to think about what's going to last forever.** It's not money. Money will fail. Moth and rust will destroy. Thieves will break in and steal. And even if you manage to keep it safe, death will inevitably come and rip it out of your hands.

- ❖ **But Scripture identifies three things that will last forever: God, God's Word, and people created in God's image.** So the shrewd move would be to invest in these things – things that will remain in your forever future.
 - The smartest thing you can do with your time and energy today is to channel them towards your relationship with God and your knowledge of his Word. If your forever future is all about the enjoyment of a perfect communion with God, then **the shrewdest, smartest, most sensible way to invest your time is to spend time with God, in his Word, preparing for an even greater experience of that communion in the age to come.**

- ❖ And the same goes for your relationships with others. **If you're going to share eternity with the people of God, then investing in those relationships right now makes complete sense.** Investing in the lives of your fellow church members has eternal value. Keep that in mind the next time you feel too tired to go to community group. Or you feel too busy to give up an evening or a lunch hour to spend time with another church member.
 - I know you feel like that paper you have to write; or that exam you have to take; or that deadline you have to meet; or that boss you have to please – I know you feel like that's the most important thing in your life right now. But in reality, it's fleeting and will soon pass away. It makes no sense to neglect eternal relationships for temporal ambitions. **The shrewdest, smartest, most sensible investment is in people – especially in eternal friends who will be there to welcome you into glory.**

- ❖ And if you're convinced that only those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior (only those who believe in the gospel) are going to be there in glory – then **the shrewdest, smartest, most sensible investment of your resources is to direct them towards gospel work.** Whether that's your own efforts to share the gospel or your financial investment to support the gospel work of others.

- That's what Jesus was saying in v9. **He's saying how shrewd and sensible it is to invest your money in the gospel work of gospel-centered churches like ours.** He's saying it's a wise investment of your money to donate to the gospel work of missionaries and organizations that are dedicated to bringing the good news to the unchurched and unreached peoples around the world.
- ❖ The fact is when you arrive in glory, you're not going to care what your GPA was or what your job title was. You're not going to be thinking about what kind of house you lived in or what kind of clothes you wore. **What you're going to care about are the faces of eternal friends who benefited from all the different ways you spent your time and money in this life.** Many of those faces will be very familiar and dear to you. But some of those faces will be unfamiliar – but it will be revealed to you that this person is here in glory partly through your financial investment in the good gospel work of others.
 - That's why I'm excited that next month we're going to introduce a campaign designed to raise funds to translate a book of the NT for a people group who don't have a Bible in their heart language. It's called **the Adopt-A-Verse campaign.** We're going to challenge all of us to get the book of Colossians translated for people group in a large island nation in Southeast Asia.
 - Just imagine what it'll be like to enter glory and have a group of strangers – dressed strangely, speaking a strange language – come running up to you, grasping your hand, thanking you profusely for giving them the Word of God in their own heart language. Imagine them receiving you into the eternal dwellings. That's the picture Jesus paints for us.
- ❖ **Friends, what are you investing your money in?** We're all investors. And we're all investing our money, our time, our energy, our resources into something. Are you making shrewd decisions? Are you investing in what's going to last for eternity? Are you willing to deny yourself the one marshmallow and focus on the future – to focus on future rewards.

Steward This Life Faithfully

- ❖ That leads us to our third application – **to steward this life faithfully to receive greater treasures in the next.** The Bible talks about future rewards. It teaches that there is a second marshmallow, of sorts, awaiting the faithful when they enter into glory. We see that in vv10-12. *"¹⁰One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?"*
- ❖ **That's a basic biblical principle and it's just common sense – how you handle little responsibilities now will reveal how you're going to handle bigger ones later.** How you approach the little tasks in this life will determine how you'll approach bigger ones in the life to come. It's common sense.

- ❖ That's why parents don't give their teenagers a brand new, luxury vehicle as their first car. You give them a hand-me-down. One that still drives and is safe but needs care and maintenance. If your teenager is neglectful and accident-prone and is essentially unfaithful in taking care of a hand-me-down, then you, as a parent, would be foolish to go out and buy them a brand new, luxury car. **You have to be faithful first with what you have now.**
 - I think a lot of us complain about not having enough. There are things we want in life that God has yet to provide. We're dissatisfied. Always thinking about what we don't have. We have to take v10 to heart. Why spend your time fretting over what you don't have? **If you're so focused on what's *not* in your life – that you neglect the people and things God has put in your life – what makes you think he'll give you more?**
 - God wants to see how faithful you are with the responsibilities and relationships he's given you now. So focus on what's already in your life. **Be faithful where you are and with what you have.** And trust him when he promises to entrust you with "*true riches*" in the future.

- ❖ Now you're probably wondering, "What are these '*true riches*' in v11 referring to?" In other places, Jesus calls them "*treasures in heaven*". He never spell it out for us in detail. **But at least we can say with certainty these true riches (or heavenly treasures) are not referring to salvation itself.** The Gospels are clear in their teaching that salvation can't be earned. It doesn't depend on your faithfulness – on how well you've performed as a steward. No, the salvation that Jesus secured by his death and resurrection is freely given.
 - **We can also say that these "*true riches*" don't refer to material wealth.** No one gets their own mansions in heaven. There's only one mansion – Jesus called it his Father's house in John 14 – and he's prepared a room in there for every believer. Yes, in the NT there's talk of receiving a "*crown of righteousness*" (2 Tim 4:8) or a "*crown of life*" (Jas 1:12). But in the book of Revelation, it says we're going to receive those crowns, only to take them off again, and cast them at the feet of Jesus (Rev 4:10).
 - **So if you're faithfulness to God is motivated by the prospect of material gain (unrighteous wealth), then you've completely missed the point.** And you're likely going to miss heaven if you don't repent of that greed and trust in Christ as your true and greatest Treasure.

- ❖ So if "*true riches*" don't refer to salvation or to material wealth, then what are we talking about? **Well, in some of his other parables, Jesus says that faithful servants will be given more work – and therefore more honor – in the New Creation.** His parables teach there will be a distribution of heavenly authority and responsibility based on a Christian's earthly faithfulness (Lk 19:15-19; Mt 45-47). But it's still not exactly clear what that will look like.
 - But whatever these true riches will be and what they'll look like – **the one thing for sure is that they'll be substantial.** They'll be eternal and soul-satisfying because they're contrasted in Scripture to earthly treasures, which are corruptible and fleeting.

- ❖ **John Piper describes these "true riches" as “the pleasures of the age to come when we enjoy unbroken fellowship with Jesus.”** I like how that understanding of these heavenly treasures doesn't detract – but rather derives – from the True Treasure of Heaven – the Lord Jesus. Whatever these true riches are – they'll somehow increase our joy and experience of communion with Christ – in proportion to how faithful we are now to store them up there.
- ❖ The bottom line is that you shouldn't feel bad about spending and saving your money. Provided that you're ultimately spending it and saving it in the right place and not the wrong place – in heaven and not on earth.
 - **Spend your money wisely and steward your life faithfully so that when you arrive in glory – the people who benefited by it will be there to welcome you with open arms.** And again, that's not just the right thing to do. That's the smart thing – the shrewd thing – to do.
- ❖ Jesus concludes this section in v13 by reminding us that, "*No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*"
 - Notice how he didn't say that you *shouldn't* serve God and money. He said you *can't*. You can't even if you tried. You can serve two employers. You can have two jobs. But it's entirely different with masters. **Your service and allegiance to a master is all-encompassing.** So there's no way you can serve two at a time. That's why Jesus says you cannot serve God and money. **You're going to end up using one as a tool to serve the other.**
- ❖ There are a lot of people who try to use God to serve their true master, money. They worship God – they serve and give to his church – with the hope that he'll bless them in return with greater health, wealth, and prosperity. But the Lord sees right through their false devotion. God's no tool. And he knows when we're treating him like one.
 - Money is supposed to be the tool. Money was never meant to be a master. It was meant to be a servant. **Our True Master gave us money as a tool that we can wield in service of heavenly aims and heavenly joy.**
- ❖ Friends, between God and money, ask yourself: Who is *my* master and who is *my* tool? **I want to encourage those of you who aren't giving regularly to the Lord and to his church – to make a change. To form a new habit of giving a regular offering to the church.** Do it to demonstrate that God is your Master and money is the tool you use to serve the Lord. It's what you use to invest in your forever future that you plan to enjoy forever with him and with his people.