

“Shrewd Stewards”

The Gratitude Campaign – part #4

Luke 16:1-15

[54] Welcome.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, divine Giver of Grace, come, work on our hearts this morning. Test our thoughts, and see if there is any anxiety within ourselves that we need to turn over to you. Renew our hearts and minds, as we discover the perfect plan you have for us in your Word. Lord Jesus, speak through me this morning, so that we all can be filled. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Have you ever been in charge of someone else’s possessions? Maybe you had to borrow your neighbor’s car. Or you took care of their pets or children for a short time. Has someone ever trusted you with something? Did you ever fail them?

[55] When I was 18 years old, I crashed my father’s Ford Bronco. Talk about failing in stewardship! I felt horrible, like I wanted to die. Of course, my parents, upon seeing the car in the ditch, thought that I had died, and they were grateful just to see me alive again.

I have been on the receiving end of failed stewardship as well. When our firstborn daughter, Emily, was one week old, my whole family went for a walk in the Huron National Forest. My brother offered to carry Emily, and they got a little bit ahead of us on the trail, and...they got lost. Of course, they weren’t so far ahead of us that we couldn’t hear Emily screaming her head off, but we had that moment of parental panic when we thought, “Is she going to die of starvation? Why did we ever give her over to them to carry?”

We live in a world where we are entrusted with others’ possessions all the time. Truthfully, we want to be good stewards, but sometimes, we mess up. Sometimes, we are tempted to misuse or squander the things entrusted to us.

[57] There is an important belief in the Christian church about wealth. God owns everything we possess. It all belongs to God; we are just the managers. Our money and possessions are ultimately not ours to keep. We are only stewards.

[58] We have spent the last three weeks talking about generosity and stewardship. We have learned the importance of saying “Thank you” to Jesus. We don’t want God to be surprised or disappointed by our lack of gratitude. We

heard the story of the rich young man who rejected Jesus, even though Jesus knew the one thing he lacked was a generous heart toward God. We talked last week about not letting our possessions own us; we want to be wise, not foolish with our wealth. Cultivating a generous heart takes time and effort, and God is helping us get there.

God trusts us with his possessions. We are God’s stewards, whether we realize it or not. Are we good stewards or bad stewards? Have we squandered the gifts God has given us? That’s not a thought we like to dwell on.

[59] There is an odd, unexpected story in Luke 16 that can help motivate us to be more faithful. It’s the story of the dishonest yet shrewd manager. I like that word, “shrewd”. It means sharp-witted, intelligent, clever. Make sure you enunciate the “d”, though, otherwise you’re talking about caring for someone’s mice.

Jesus says, a rich man had a bad manager. In modern terms, this personal accountant mismanaged the boss’s funds, and so he got canned. Fired. “You have until 5 o’clock to clean out your desk.” That’s a frightening prospect.

The manager lost what had been a cushy job. And so he thinks: “What am I going to do?” (v.3) He is too weak to dig and too proud to beg.

[60] The manager decides on a rather devious yet shrewd plan. He calls in each of the master’s debtors and cancels part of their debt. 50%. 20%. Significant amounts. At the last moment he decides, while he still has the authority, to use his position to win friends, so he’ll have a soft place to land out on the street.

Now, be honest for a moment. At this point in the story, where is the justice? Not only did this manager do a poor job, now he seems to be playing fast and loose with his master’s finances. This is where the boss should jump out from behind the corner and say, “Aha! Caught you red-handed!”

But instead, there is this weird twist. The boss commends the shrewd manager, not for dishonesty, but for finally using the possessions entrusted to him to help others. “He treats money as if it is of no intrinsic value and uses it to benefit others in the present and himself in the future.”¹

¹ Wesley Study Bible.

Are you surprised? I am. This story is another example of the squandering away another’s possessions, like the famous story of the prodigal son (which, by the way, appears in the chapter preceding this story). It seems like the one who least deserves it still finds grace. That’s how God works.

[61] Clearly the point of this parable is not that we are supposed to waste all God has given us. We are not supposed to squander wealth and expect to be rewarded. Rather, we are expected to use God’s gifts wisely! And yet it seems that many times we Christians do not. Jesus has some rather harsh words here (verse 8): “The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.” Ouch. That’s rather convicting.

At no point does this scripture say that the manager was acting outside of his authority. It does not say that he was NOT allowed to forgive these debts. Before he was fired, this man could have been helping people all along.

[62] We all have the authority to use God’s gifts to benefit others in this life and in eternal life. It doesn’t matter what your annual salary is. “Being a good steward is not determined by the amount entrusted but by the character of the person who uses it.”² Jesus goes on to say, if you can be trusted with a little, you can be trusted with a lot. (v. 10-12) God has entrusted us with so much! Until we realize everything belongs to God, we will not begin using our wealth for eternal benefits.

Jesus says, you cannot serve two masters (v. 13). You cannot serve both God and Money. Only one can possess your heart, loyalty, and passion.

[63] What do you do with your money? How do others benefit from the gifts you have been given?

Here at Grace UMC, we believe it is our privilege and responsibility to help others by supporting the church. It is an important way to show that we love God. Everything we do, from paying the heating bill to buying bibles, is to fulfill our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world. One hundred sixty-seven years ago, some people in Houghton gave of themselves because they believed that God could do amazing things in this community if they

² NIV Study Bible.

built a house of worship. We are here because of their legacy. Their vision continues with us today.

My question for you is, do you want to continue to support that vision? Do things like Youth Ministry, Vacation Bible School, and food pantries excite you? Does transforming the entire world excite you? For example, when we pay our conference ministry shares, we support global missions. Those are just a few of the ways that God uses God's wealth to advance the kingdom of heaven.

[64] “Faithfulness is not determined by the amount entrusted but by the character of the person who uses it.”³ Think of all the things God has entrusted you with. Your family. Your car. Your home. Your smart phone. Your bank account. Each of them is a tool that can do great things when truly surrender to God.

Jesus calls us to reach out. The truth is, sometimes we forget. We get wrapped up in conversations with a lot of “what about me?” questions. We start to think we are the favorite managers, we are privileged, somebody owes it to us. None of that is true. The truth is, we need grace. We need to have our eyes opened and our hearts softened. We don't want to miss what God can do in this place because we got caught up in our own little world of possessions.

[65] Do you know what it means to use your wealth to make friends for eternity? Everything we do should point to Christ. God isn't calling us to meet a budget, to have a certain cash flow or get a nice return on our investments. God is calling us to seek the lost, the broken-hearted, and the literal poor. We can do all of this, with the help of the Holy Spirit. This parable commands us to use every available resource God has given us, including our money, to introduce people to Jesus Christ and help them follow him.

[66] In the last few weeks, our focus has been on encouraging everyone to get on board the Gratitude Campaign. You've patiently listened to the sermons. You've heard God's word concerning our wealth. Next week is your chance to put it all together. You can fill out a Gratitude Card and lay it at the foot of the cross, telling God what you will do to support the kingdom of heaven here at Grace UMC.

³ NIV Study Bible.

[67] We simply ask every person to do four things. #1 - Pray for our church. #2 - Use your relationships to invite new people to our church. #3 - Be open to serving the church with your talents and leadership. And #4 - Make a financial commitment to support the Lord’s work among us. God has always provided exactly what we need when we needed it. Our vision is to have a congregation ready to give themselves away so that all people would encounter and develop a relationship with Jesus Christ for the glory of God. If that’s your vision, too, then write it down and commit to it.

[68] Let’s pray.

[69] – Spiritual Relief – UMC video.

Memory Verse:

2 Corinthians 8:7 (NRSV) - “Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

Reflection questions:

1. Have you ever “cancelled” someone’s debt to you? Why? How much did they owe you, or what had they done?
2. Have you ever felt God was calling you to give away your possessions to help someone else? Did you do it?
3. Would you call yourself a wise steward or a careless one? Why?
4. How have you used your wealth to share the gospel?
5. What is one way you could change your attitude towards money in order to be part of God’s plan to save the world?