

A LESSON FROM THE WORLD

LUKE 16:1-14

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Late in His ministry, Jesus spent a lot of His time speaking in parables. On one of those occasions, some religious leaders came and asked Him why He ate dinner with sinners. Jesus answered them by emphasizing the fact that God considers a lost soul to be very important. He used the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son to emphasize this truth. Those parables are recorded in Luke 15.

Then, while the religious leaders were still standing around listening, Jesus turned to His disciples and directed a parable to them. It was the parable of the shrewd manager recorded in Luke 16:1-14.

For most of my life I did not understand the meaning of this parable. But after I began to discover the truth that it teaches, my attitude about using my money to help non-Christians began to change. Let me share with you what I discovered.

The parable starts off with a story of a very shrewd manager. What he did was wrong. He had no right to change those accounts. But he was very clever. He had been robbing his master and was about to be fired from his job. He decided to make himself safe by robbing his master again. He was a crook through and through. He said he didn't have the strength to dig. More likely, he wasn't willing to dig. He said he was too ashamed to beg. And perhaps that is the only decent thing recorded about him, and yet even that was evidence of pride.

Jesus ends the story by saying the master commended him. At first glance, this seems like a very strange story for Jesus to tell. It seems as if our Lord was condoning bad behavior, encouraging His disciples to disobey the eighth commandment. But to come to that conclusion would be to deny everything else that Jesus taught and did. There must be another lesson that Jesus was trying to teach. And there is a good chance that the lesson relates to the importance of reaching those who are lost, because that is what Jesus just finished talking about in Luke 15.

The key to understanding the meaning of the story is found in the second half of verse 8. "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their

own kind (or their own generation) than are the people of the light."

Notice that Jesus was not praising the manager for what he did. He was being commended for his shrewdness and perception, not for his actions. Notice, too, that Jesus was not saying, "The sons of this age are wiser than the sons of light." Instead, He was saying that the sons of this age are wiser or shrewder in dealing with their own kind or their own generation than the sons of light.

Do you get the picture? The religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Scribes, were standing around Jesus. They were lovers of money. Verse 14 says that the Pharisees were those who loved money. Therefore, they represented the sons of this age. They were materialistic people. The disciples of Jesus were also present. But materialism was not the most important thing to them. They were the sons of light.

Here is Jesus saying to His disciples, "These guys are more shrewd and perceptive and dedicated in attaining their material wealth than you are in making your witness count. They are more clever in carrying out their goals than you are in carrying out your goals. This parable was a kind of rebuke directed toward the disciples.

Is it possible for Christians to learn lessons from the world? Well, in this case, it seems to be.

I am impressed whenever I think about all the discipline and sacrifice that athletes must have in order to compete in the Olympics. Each one will spend thousands of dollars and countless hours to receive top-quality training.

Thinking about these things sometimes makes me feel ashamed. What is my goal in life? Am I willing to be a dedicated in reaching it as those who compete in the Olympics are at reaching their goal of winning a medal?

Christ's parable had a lesson to it. You can find the lesson beginning in verse 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."

Here Christ is declaring that money or material possessions are neither good nor bad. Some people say that money is the root of all evil. But that is wrong. "The love of money is the root of all evil" is the proper translation. Jesus does not forbid us to have worldly wealth, but He wants us to use it for the right reasons.

Jesus says that we are to use our worldly wealth to make friends so that they may some day be able to have eternal life. And how do we do that? We do it in just the opposite way that the dishonest manager did it. He loved money and robbed for it. We must love people and give money to win them. The main difference is in the motivation.

Our love for the lost should be so great that we would want to give our wealth to win them. The world places a great deal of pressure on us to own homes and cars and to have a great amount of money saved up for the education of our children and for retirement. Now, it's not morally wrong to own these things and build for ourselves these securities. But just to do these things keeps many people working so much that they have no time to make friends and spend time witnessing the love of God to them. If we really want to win the lost, we must break away from the world's' standards. Some of us need to be willing to live at a lower standard so that we can invest our time and money in helping people know God.

But for me to just say this will never bring about revival in our midst. The only way revival will happen is for a few people or a few families to actually lower their standard of living so that they can reach out to their non-Christian neighbors. Most of us have or will have a retirement fund and a fund to provide for the future education of our children. But how many of us have a fund set aside for reaching our non-Christian neighbors. To start such a fund would mean putting less money in another fund, wouldn't it? And it would mean taking some precious time planning on how to use the money to invite our non-Christian neighbors over to our homes or do other practical things for them that could help them understand the love of God. Sometimes I think finding the time to use the money to reach out to our non-Christian friends is even more difficult than giving up the money.

But it seems to me that this is exactly what Jesus is encouraging us to do in the parable of the shrewd servant. And for most of us, it presents us with a huge challenge. It is such a huge challenge, that probably very few people will accept it and change their present lifestyle. But there may be one person who will hear this message and decide to change. For that person, I have a word of caution. When you choose to be aggressive at reaching the lost for Jesus Christ, beware of the temptation to draw attention to yourself. I once met a preacher who sold his home and most of his possessions in order to win the lost, but everywhere he went he made it a point to tell others what he had done.

In contrast, when I was a child, I was greatly impacted by a man from my home church sold his home and possessions to give to the poor without bragging about what he had done.

The reward that must drive us to spend our money to save the lost must not be the recognition that people will give us in this life. We must not allow that kind of reward to drive us.

According to the words of Christ in this parable, the only kind of reward we should look forward to receiving is the reward that we will receive when we leave this earth and enter heaven. At that time there will be people to greet us saying, "Thank you, because you were willing to give, I am here. Thank you, because you were willing to pray, I am here. Thank you, because you were willing to spend time with me instead of earning money, I can now dwell in heaven forever with my Lord." Jesus said, "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

The rewards we receive on this earth are only for a short time. During one winter Olympics, a young woman was interviewed by the media. She had come, not to participate, but to watch. As a spectator, no one paid her any attention. All the attention and glory went to those who were winning the events. No one knew who she was, and probably no one cared. However, four years earlier, she had won a gold medal in a skiing event. But four years is a long time. All the years of practice and dedication had brought her fame, but only for a short while.

Money can either be used as a blessing or a curse. In any case, it will fail. It will be gone. Sixty seconds after a man is dead, he cannot sign a check. The sons of this age are more clever in their own generation, but that's where it ends. They cannot take their money or their fame or their material wealth with them.

Listen carefully, it all boils down to this: we cannot serve two masters. We will either hate the one and love the other, or hold on to one and despise the other. We cannot serve God and money.

In verse 13, Jesus used the word "master". A master owns his servants and demands their total time. And for those who have been slaves to materialism, they know how difficult it is to become free. In fact, without Christ it's impossible to free ourselves from our own selfish ambitions that cause us to use people for our own personal gain. But Jesus can free us from the master of materialism and fill our hearts full of love for the lost.

Some of you have not yet enslaved yourselves to the master of materialism that rules the lives of so many people. Some of you are not worried about losing your jobs, because you have no jobs to lose. You are still young, and you have begun to learn how to allow God to be your master. That is good.

By God's grace, you are on the right track. You have chosen the right master. But in the years to come, I can guarantee you that the world will force you to think hard about changing masters. A time will come when you will realize that the only way to spend adequate time making friendships that will result in people receiving eternal life is for you to give up something that the world doesn't want you to give up. The time will come when you will realize that if you decide to give up owning your own house or your own business or your own car—or if you decide not to have a large bank account or a high paying job, or a large retirement, then you will be considered a foolish person by both friends and relatives. At that time, it will not be so easy to decide which master to serve.

As children of the light, our determination to use our wealth and time to love the lost should not be less than the determination of those who belong to this world to use people to gain wealth and fame. That's what the parable of the shrewd manager teaches us. Look at how determined the people of the world are in reaching their goals. We should not be less determined than they are.

In what ways can you as an individual use your money to be a witness to a non-Christian neighbor or friend? In what ways can your group pool their money together to help others know the love of God? Be as practical as possible when making your plans. Be bold and aggressive at carrying out your plans.