

ENGAGE

This week we are looking at three parables this Sunday found in Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-9; and 19:11-27.

- The texts cover The Rich Fool, The Shrewd Manager and the 10 Minas
- I will be emphasizing the call to be a actively generous person to show what kingdom living is about and that we are called to battle greed.
- I have given questions for each of the parables. Please choose which you will use to guide the conversation toward removing greed and self-gain and moving toward godly generosity.

EXAMINE**Luke 12:13-21**

The parable of the rich fool (or “barn guy,” as I always think of him) at the heart of this week’s text illustrates simply and memorably the futility of choices made in isolation from the love of God and neighbor.

It reflects a central theme in Luke and in Jesus’ preaching, the problem of wealth in the context of the holy kingdom where closeness to God is life and attachment to things reflects soul-stifling anxiety and fear.

The parable emerges from Jesus’ response to a request from someone in the immense crowd of Luke 12:1 that Jesus arbitrate between him and his brother in the matter of an inheritance. Jesus not only denies the request but makes it the basis for a warning against greed and a reliance on wealth for security of the soul (Psalm 49, another lectionary passage for this Sunday, has a similar message; see also Colossians 3:2, 5). Inheritance, greed, and accumulation of wealth all figure in the parable and in its interpretation in the verses that follow the lectionary text (Luke 12:22-34); these verses are linked to 12:13-21 by the word “therefore” and by the focus on what makes for life (the word translated “life” there and in 12:20 is translated “soul” in the inner dialogue of the rich fool in 12:19), a connection reinforced by references to barns, treasure, possessions, and eating and drinking. Luke 12:22-34 never appears in the lectionary, so it is worth including it in this Sunday’s worship, if possible, but even if it isn’t read, it should be taken into account as part of Jesus’ response to the problem raised by the brother in the crowd and as the antidote to the predicament of the greedy fool.

At the heart of the parable is an abundant harvest, which might be a good thing, but we suspect from the start that this is unlikely because we know from Jesus’ introduction of the landowner

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that he is rich. The best hope Luke offers the rich in this Gospel comes in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), who seeks out Jesus and then welcomes him enthusiastically when Jesus invites himself home with Zacchaeus for dinner. While everyone is grumbling that Jesus is off with sinners again, Zacchaeus promises to give half his possessions to the poor and to pay back anyone he has defrauded fourfold. Zacchaeus is a special case among the rich of Luke in that he is also a member of a marginalized group, tax collectors, who are portrayed sympathetically throughout and treated kindly by Jesus. Other references to the rich are almost uniformly negative and almost always contrasted with positive references to the poor: God sends the rich away empty in Mary's prophetic poetry (Luke 1:52-53); they have "a woe on them" (as a cousin of mine used to say) in the beatitudes (6:24), where the poor are given the kingdom of God; they are portrayed as beyond hope in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where in response to the rich man's request that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, Abraham says that if they haven't listened to Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced "even if someone rises from the dead" (16:31); and finally the very rich ruler seeking the way to eternal life lacks only one thing, that he sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, and that appears to be the one thing he cannot do. It is nearly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus concludes (18:24-25), but he ends the episode on a note of hope (18:27): "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

That is the situation for the rich of Luke's Gospel, so we are not hopeful about how the rich landowner will handle his abundance. Confronted with the happy problem of a bumper crop, he consults with himself, with no thought of God or neighbor, and concludes that the answer is to build bigger barns for his crops and his other goods. Then he looks forward to congratulating his soul on this decision, as he and his own soul with all that accumulated wealth spend many happy years eating, drinking, and making merry.

God, overhearing the rich man's conversation with himself, cuts short these dreams of merriment: "Fool," says God. The word occurs elsewhere in Luke only in Luke 11:40, with reference to the Pharisees; there too foolishness is associated with greed and with the neglect of justice and the love of God. In our text, there is no time for the rich fool of the parable to make amends because his soul/life is coming to an immediate end, which no amount of accumulated wealth can forestall. "And whose will it all be then?" God asks, returning to the notion of inheritance raised by the brother in the crowd but from another angle. Jesus concludes that this is how it always is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. The two notions, storing up treasure and being rich toward God, are verbal forms with the same roots as the noun "treasure" and adjective "rich." In other words, it isn't a question of something we happen to have or a characteristic among many. We actively

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choose to do one thing or the other, to be rich with barns or rich with God, to serve God or mammon (Luke 16:13).

Like the story of the rich ruler where God's grace has the last word, so here also Jesus' teaching ultimately transcends the greed and God-less treasure of the parable to move in a hopeful direction with Luke 12:22-34. With a shift in perspective, we lift our eyes up to the birds and out to the lilies of the field. We turn away from treasure that corrupts and is corruptible toward the kingdom and fullness of life, which we already know from Luke 10:25-37 is rooted in wholehearted love of God and neighbor. In this alternative message about God's faithfulness, Jesus recognizes that what underlies excessive accumulation is most often anxiety and fear. So Jesus offers the antidote to accumulation of too much empty treasure in the promise that it is the Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom itself to his little flock. And the way to collect treasure of the heart suitable for that kingdom isn't the earthbound, inward-looking way of the barn guy but the soaring, beautiful way of the one who lives and loves generously, lavishly, and with joy.

QUESTIONS

- Why do you think the man asked Jesus to settle his dispute over the inheritance?
- Why do you think Jesus used a parable to make his point about earthly possessions?
- Put into your own words what you think Jesus is trying to teach his followers about prioritizing earthly riches eternal life?
- How do you view the issue of material wealth? Do you struggle with trying to earn more money so you can buy more stuff, or strengthen your portfolio?
- What would you say is the central message in this passage and how can you apply it your life on a daily basis?
- Are there people in your life that struggle with material wealth for their own personal gain? How can you use this passage to help them through this issue?

Luke 16:1-9

The story itself sounds quite contemporary. A dishonest manager is about to lose his job because he has misspent his employer's assets. Because he doesn't want to do manual labor or receive charity, he goes around to all the people who owe his employer money and reduces their debts. He does this so that they will be hospitable to him after he loses his job. To our

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surprise, the employer commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Why is he commended? And, why does Luke include this story in his Gospel?

To begin to answer these questions, we can note that this parable serves as a bridge between the stories of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Like the prodigal in the preceding story, our dishonest manager has “squandered” what was entrusted to him (15:13; 16:1). And, like the story that follows, this parable begins with the phrase, “There was a rich man” (16:1, 19).

Although our dishonest manager does not repent (like the prodigal) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he nonetheless does something with the rich man’s wealth that reverses the existing order of things. In Luke, reversals of status are at the heart of what happens when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear. The proud are “scattered” (which translates the same word for “squandered”: *dieskorpisen*). The powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted; the hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty (1:51-53; see also 6:24; 16:25; 18:25).

But why does the employer commend the dishonest manager for being shrewd? Of course, his commendation could be ironic. But if it’s not ironic, then why is the manager being commended? Some commentators have suggested that the manager has reduced his own commission in the debts owed and that this is what is being commended. Yet others have suggested more generally that the employer is simply commending the manager for responding shrewdly to a difficult circumstance. The word for “shrewd” here (*phronimos*) can also be translated as “prudent” or “wise” (16:8).

The text itself provides four interpretations of the employer’s commendation. First, “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (16:8). In other words, Jesus’ disciples -- often referred to as “children of light” (see John 12:36) -- could learn something about acting prudently from the “children of this age.”

Second, what they could learn from the “children of this age” has to do with “making friends for themselves” by means of “dishonest wealth” so that those new friends might “welcome them into the eternal homes” (16:9). Instead of using “dishonest wealth” to exploit others (as the rich do), disciples are to use wealth to “make friends for themselves.” If friendships are based on reciprocal and egalitarian relationships, then releasing other people’s debts not only enriches them, but also establishes a new kind of reciprocity with them. The Filipino concept of *utang na loob*, which literally translated means an “inner debt” or a “debt of inner gratitude,” perhaps captures something of what is being established here -- a debt rooted in the shared reciprocity

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of friends.¹

As a broader context for this, we might note that Luke often depicts how Jesus' ministry and that of his followers is dependent on the hospitality of others (8:3; 10:7). Moreover, hospitality is often provided by those who are considered religious outsiders or lower down on social hierarchies (e.g., the Good Samaritan, 10:33; tax collectors, 5:27-39; 19:1-10; Cornelius, 10:48, etc.).

Third, there's a connection between being faithful (or dishonest) with "very little" and "very much." How one deals with "dishonest wealth" and "what belongs to another" says much about how one will deal with "true riches" and "what is your own" (16:10-12). How we use the resources at our disposal in this life -- especially in tight circumstances -- matters, even though our "true riches" can only be found in that place "where no thief can draw near and no moth destroys" (12:33-34).

Finally, the capstone to all this is that "no slave can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and wealth" (16:13). This reiterates a central theme in Luke. The kingdom of God entails giving up all other commitments, including the commitment to economic security (14:33; 18:18-25). As noted, Luke places great emphasis on how the reign of God reverses the status of the rich and the poor (1:51-53; 6:20). In Acts, the Christian community is one where disciples share "all things in common," distributing "to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). These texts cannot just be spiritualized. Luke is talking about a different way of using wealth. Our wealth belongs to God and is to be used for the purposes of God's reign among us and not simply for our own interests.

So why is our dishonest manager shrewd? Even though he is still sinner who is looking out for his own interests (6:32-34), he models behavior the disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others. By reducing other people's debts, he creates a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends.

What this dishonest manager sets in play has analogues with what happens when the reign of God emerges among us (17:21). Old hierarchies are overturned and new friendships are established. Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us -- not only in their homes in this life, but even in the "eternal homes" (6:20-26)!

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QUESTIONS

- The Parable of the Shrewd Manager is directed specifically to disciples. Does that change anything in how you read/receive it?
- Are we guilty of wasting our master's possessions?
- What can you do to be welcomed by others?
- Who are God's other debtors?
- What can you do to reduce their debt?
- Why are the people of this world more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light?
- How can you use your worldly wealth to gain friends who will specifically help you be welcomed into eternal dwellings?
- What is the little you have been trusted with?
- Have you been trustworthy?
- Why should God trust you with more?
- What master are you trying to serve, God or money?

Luke 19:11-27

The parable of the ten minas ("pounds" in the NRSV translation) is set in the workplace of high finance. A rich — and soon to be powerful — nobleman goes on an extended trip to be crowned king. Most of his people hate him and send word ahead that they oppose this coronation (Luke 19:14). In his absence, he assigns three of his servants to invest his money. Two of them take the risk of investing their master's money. They earn handsome returns. A third servant is afraid to take the risk, so he puts the money in a safe place. It earns no return. When the master returns, he has become king of the whole territory. He rewards the two servants who made money for him, promoting them to high positions of their own. He punishes the servant who kept the money safe but unproductive. Then he commands that all who opposed him be killed in his presence.

Jesus tells this parable immediately before going to Jerusalem, where he is to be crowned king ("Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," Luke 19:38) but soon is rejected by his people. This identifies Jesus with the nobleman in the parable, and the crowd shouting "Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21) with the people in the parable who oppose the nobleman's coronation. By this we know that the people have profoundly misjudged their soon-to-be king, except for the two servants who work diligently in his absence. The parable, in this context, warns us that we must decide if Jesus is indeed God's appointed king and be prepared to abide the consequences of our decision either to serve him or oppose him.[1]

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This parable makes explicit that citizens of God's kingdom are responsible to work toward God's goals and purposes. In this parable, the king tells his servants directly what he expects them to do, namely, to invest his money. This specific calling or command makes it clear that preaching, healing, and evangelism (the apostles' callings) are not the only things God calls people to do. Of course, not everyone in God's kingdom is called to be an investor, either. In this parable, only three of the country's residents are called to be investors. The point is that acknowledging Jesus as king requires working toward his purposes in whatever field of work you do.

Seen in this light, the parable suggests if we choose to accept Jesus as king, we must expect to lead risky lives. The servants who invested the master's money faced the risk of being attacked by those around them who rejected the master's authority. And they faced the risk of disappointing their master by making investments that might lose money. Even their success exposes them to risk. Now that they have tasted success and been promoted, they risk becoming greedy or power-mad. They face the risk that their next investments — which will involve much greater sums — will fail and expose them to much more severe consequences. In Anglo-American business (and sports) practice, CEOs (and head coaches) are routinely fired for mediocre results, whereas those in lower-level positions are fired only for exceptionally poor performance. Neither failure nor success is safe in this parable, or in today's workplace. It is tempting to duck for cover and search for a safe way of accommodating to the system while waiting for things to get better. But ducking for cover is the one action Jesus condemns in the parable. The servant who tries to avoid risk is singled out as unfaithful. We are not told what would have happened if the other two servants had lost money on their investments, but the implication is that all investments made in faithful service to God are pleasing to him, whether or not they achieve their intended payoff.

- Read verse 11. What were they listening to when Jesus went on to tell this parable? What did it mean to many people that they were near Jerusalem? What did it mean to Jesus? Why did he tell the parable?
- Read verses 12-14. In Jesus' parable, why did the man of noble birth go to a distant country? What did he give 10 of his servants and what instructions did he give? What did he mean by "Put this money to work?" What in this parable points to Jesus? What can be a mina to us?
- Read verses 14-15. What were his servants hoping when he left? (1) Why? What was the outcome of the journey? (15a) What did he do when he returned home as king? (15b)
- Read verses 16-19. What was the report of the first two servants? What did king say to each of them? How were these two servants rewarded?
- Read verses 20-23. What was the report of the third servant? What excuse did he give for his stewardship of the one mina he had received? What did he know about his master? Why did the master call him wicked?
- Read verses 24-27. What did the master do with the one mina of the third servant? Why? What was done to those who rejected the rule of the king? What does Jesus

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expect of his waiting disciples? What is Jesus' point in telling this parable? What should we learn?

QUESTIONS

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