

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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NOVEMBER 1, 2009



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Luke 16:1-31 "God Or Mammon?"

Jesus is in the midst of a long verbal battle with the Pharisees, who disapprove of him mixing with and especially eating with the "tax-collectors and sinners" who are repenting and entering Jesus' new community, "the kingdom of God." We left him at the end of the parable of "the lost son," wondering whether the "older brother" - the "good one" standing outside the banquet, the Pharisee - would relent and go in? Now Jesus tells two more parables directed at the Pharisees' disdain for "the poor;" and it must be admitted that these are two of the most difficult of Jesus' stories to interpret.

1) *The Shrewd Manager*

The manager who has been squandering his rich master's possessions is finally brought to account, and knows he is going to be fired. So he arranges to reduce the very large debts that some merchants owe his master, estimating that he will ingratiate himself with the debtors and have "friends" to fall back on when he loses his job. His master, a "man of the world," commends him, despite his dishonesty, for shrewdly making provision for himself. He fires him anyway.

What, people always ask, is "the moral of this story"? Jesus does not commend the manager's dishonesty; he merely uses a story of "the way the world works" to say that just as "worldly" people know how to use wealth

to gain friends: can the Pharisees not see that they should use their wealth and status to "make friends" with the poor, the sinners, the outcasts who are now "friends of Jesus"?

Picking up on these ideas, Jesus launches into cryptic sayings about the danger of "wealth." He sees being "rich" as a barrier to faith, knowing that it is "the poor," the outcast, the rejects, the unclean, the collaborators, the desperate beggars and prostitutes, who gladly hear Jesus' gospel of grace and respond to it. But the Pharisees' status as "rich people," insiders, socially accepted, pious, pure, sustained by their mutual admiration; is just what is keeping them from following Jesus, and makes them despise the poor who do.

So the Pharisees have mismanaged the gifts God has given them; have been dishonest and unreliable; and are not to be trusted with "heavenly wealth." They have become "servants of Mammon" and not of God, and they show it by their disdain for the poor and the unclean. Even their wives, they regard as disposable if they find them "displeasing" in any way! Yet they still imagine that their piety and status entitle them to enter the kingdom of God on their own terms at whatever moment they choose. After all, God owes them much for being so obedient! They are the classic "older brothers," who despise the returning

“Prodigals,” and even criticize the Father who welcomes them back!

They do not even realize that in criticizing Jesus as a “law-breaker” for eating with “unclean sinners,” they are themselves disregarding the law that so clearly teaches them to “love their neighbor as themselves.”

2) *The Rich Man and Lazarus*

So Jesus tells another story: the rich man and the beggar who sat at his gate. This too has proved difficult to interpret; indeed some people do not even consider it a parable, but take it as a definitive description of the after-life. That is probably a mistake: the exaggerated language points to it being a parable, and taking it literally yields the meaning that beggars go to heaven and rich men go to hell - which is not quite the gospel.

The rich man is very rich - he dresses in purple wool and fine linen, the most desirable and costly items of daily clothing, which mark out the elite even among the wealthy. He “banquets” every day and lives “in luxury.” Lazarus, the beggar who is laid daily at his gate, has a name but nothing else. His clothes do not deserve mention; he is “clothed” in running sores and rags. He begs and he competes with scavenging dogs for food scraps thrown out after the rich man’s daily feasts. The dogs of course are not family pets! These are street-living packs of scavengers that cause Jews to use the term “dogs” for Gentiles! The point of these great contrasts is of course to say that over a long period, this very rich man does absolutely nothing to help this very poor man.

So in an imagined shadowy after-life - in *Hades*, equivalent to the Hebrew *Sheol* - their roles are reversed. Lazarus is comforted as Abraham’s guest; the rich man is on the dark side of Hades and suffers. But even here he is not humbled: he thinks to use Lazarus as his

servant or his messenger. He is astonished that his requests are not granted! What are the poor for if not to serve the rich? And as for bringing a warning to the rich man’s family, they have the law to guide them, and they would not listen to a Lazarus or anyone else who came to them from the dead.

What is all this about? Not ultimate heaven and hell for the poor and rich. Rather, the gate at which Lazarus sat, which the rich man never opened to him, has now become a locked barrier, a deep chasm, and it is too late now for the rich man to help or make amends to Lazarus - not that he shows any inclination to do so. The Pharisees are once again in danger of “locking themselves out” of the kingdom of God by their indifference to and their despising the “poor” who follow Jesus. Once again *the “lost” are inside the kingdom, and the self-righteous are outside.*

And once again, it is attitudes to material possessions, status, power, purity, piety, that show up as opposition to God rather than “good standing with God,” which the Pharisees imagined they had. “*You cannot serve God and Mammon.*” You cannot be idolatrous over wealth and all that goes with it, and still in your heart love God!

3) *Charity Required*

So Jesus castigates the status-loving Pharisees. What does he say to us? Beware the love of wealth; it is (as Paul warns Timothy) a root of all kinds of evil. Recognize humbly, at a deep level, that the hierarchies of the kingdom of God are vastly different from the ones in this fallen world, and in many cases the opposite!

In the kingdom of God, and in the age to come, wealth is not a sign of God’s favor but often a dangerous idol. Many people who wanted to follow Jesus have been, and still are, diverted by it. In the Bible, wealth is

personalized as the god "Mammon," to make the point that it is powerful, seductive, misleading; not trustworthy, often dishonest, and often undermines our ability to obey the commands to love God and love other people.

And as we have seen over many weeks in hearing Jesus in Luke's Gospel, *we* must be counted among "the rich," we are those "to whom much is given and from whom much is required," and we are therefore among those who are tempted to serve "Mammon" and not God. And according to Jesus, one sign of that would be if we cared nothing about the beggars at our gate, as long as we could continue to feast daily and wear fine clothes. But God knows all hearts, and where our true affections lie. If our deepest desires are for comfort, or for peace and quiet, or for control, then we may be worshipping at strange altars, and we may show it by our indifference to the needs of other people - even the people closest to us.

We dare not allow ourselves to drift into modern-day Pharisaism, where *our piety* and *our status* make us believe that we are in right relation to God. If the words of Jesus and the gospel make anything clear, it is that only by the grace of God and his love and mercy can we be counted as citizens of his kingdom, become adopted children in his family, be welcomed as members of his new community.

Jesus' words, and the law of Moses that stands behind them, make it abundantly clear that we are called to love God and to love other people - to be people who *show God their gratitude* for his grace and mercy, and people who *show others generosity* as a recognition of how good God has been to us.

The law and the grace of God both demand that we be charitable to other people - the "bad ones" as well as the "good ones," the

"poor" as well as the "rich," the "undeserving" as well as the "deserving," the "aliens" as well as "our family." Through our attitudes and actions we will prove whether we have ever been touched by the grace of God, or whether we still think that God owes us something.

Grace or merit? Humble faith or pious presumption? Repentant younger brother or angry older brother? Beggar or Rich Man? Forgiven or self-righteous? Poor sinner or Pharisee? God or Mammon? Which shall we choose?

Let us pray...