

On one of Henry Ford's frequent visits to Ireland, some trustees of a local hospital managed to meet with him, and they asked for a donation toward a new hospital wing... and so he wrote out a check for \$5,000. The following day, the headline in the newspaper read, "A New Hospital: Henry Ford Contributes \$50,000". When an irate Henry Ford called the trustees to complain, they rushed over to his hotel room to apologize, and promised to have the newspaper print a retraction the next day... "Ford's Contribution \$45,000 Less Than Reported." Recognizing that he had an awkward public relations problem, Ford went ahead and wrote a check for another \$45,000, but insisted they build a marble arch at the entrance with an inscription that had a double meaning, "Matthew 25:35, I was a stranger, and you took me in."

The story that Jesus tells in Luke 16 is about a wealthy land owner, who leased his farmland to several tenant farmers, and hired a manager to oversee his property and leases. But as Luke explains, vs. 1-2 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' The manager in this story loses his job because of mismanagement, for squandering the rich man's property. The Greek word for "squandering" is used in only twice in Luke, in this passage and in the parable of the Prodigal son. In both cases it means to waste, to spend frivolously for pleasure and lavish living. The manager was "squandering" the resources entrusted to his care, i.e. misappropriating them for his own use and luxury, rather than for the benefit of the owner as intended. This dishonest steward has dishonored his master in a public way, for by squandering his property, he made him look foolish, appear weak, and unable to control his own affairs... and that created an impression that would encourage others to try and cheat him, and take advantage of him as well. When the owner found out, he quickly fired the dishonest manager. Then when word about what happened got out into the community, at least they would know that the owner took strong action and he was not someone to be cheated or taken lightly. So now this dismissed steward has a problem, an employment crisis. Once it got out that he had been fired and the reason why, obviously, no one would be willing to hire or trust him. But as the unemployed manager considers his situation and options, he is shrewd enough to recognize that there is still a narrow window of opportunity before the community learns about his situation. Under the pressure of his financial world falling apart, he makes an urgent decision to provide for his future, and he figures out a slick way to save his neck by cutting deals with the owner's tenant farmers. The fired manager summonses in each of the rich man's debtors inferring that he still has the authority to do so, and then he drastically reduces the amount each one owes... and of course the good news of all this would quickly spread throughout that peasant community. Similar to Henry Ford after that erroneous newspaper headline, the rich man would suddenly be very popular with his debtors, and the whole community would celebrate the owner's amazing generosity... and his honor was now restored by the steward's shrewd scheme. To that local community, the rich man is now admired and respected, as the successful and generous benefactor who reduced their debt and so now he has only two options open to him. He could insist to the celebrating and appreciative debtors that it was really just a big misunderstanding and a mistake, and that he was taking back all the debt concessions because the steward had acted without his authorization... and be resented and considered stingy, petty and dishonorable. His only other option was to go along, praise the steward's scheme, receive the accolades and gratitude as if it were his own idea trading his financial losses to enhance his reputation and honor, which would be in keeping with Middle Eastern culture and values.

When the disciples heard this story, no doubt they chuckled a bit, impressed at how this clever scoundrel manipulated things in putting the rich landowner in such an awkward position. Then Jesus explained the point he was making, vs. 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. Jesus specifically addressed this parable to his followers, suggesting that if this shifty, crooked and disgraced steward could so neatly turn things around for the passing monetary gains of this world, how much more so, the disciples of Christ, should be focused on God's grace, the infinite prize of the eternal kingdom. Through this parable Jesus is saying, "I wish the children of the light, I wish the people of God would be as eager and

Page 2 of 3

ingenious for the gospel as the wheeler-dealers of this age are in their pursuit of money, comfort, security, stuff and pleasure." To avoid anyone misunderstanding his point, or that Jesus was commending thievery & dishonesty, he explains, it's about choosing faithfulness to God above all else ...

Luke vs. 13

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Every morning people get up focused on their worldly pursuits, working hard in overdrive, scrambling to rise to the top, and Jesus is asking, "Why aren't my disciples just as focused and energetic within my community of grace?" The dishonest & shrewd steward risked it all to get what he wanted, while in contrast, Christians, 'children of the light' can seem pretty lackadaisical about living out our faith commitments. So am I more passionate about my goals and objectives in this world, than in responding to God's grace and call to discipleship, and trying to live faithfully within God's will & purpose? Am I working toward deepening and developing my spiritual life as hard as those of this world, who do not know God, strive toward the success and ambition, that drives them? Jesus urges his followers in

Luke vs. 9,

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

This phrase, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, sounds very disturbing and not at all "Christ-like", and probably needs some further clarifying explanation. "Dishonest wealth" is not a particularly good or careful translation. A better, a closer to the original thought & intend would be, "the wealth of this world that can corrupt". But it's not that the money itself is crooked, evil or dishonest, but that the wealth and things and success of this world can become a temptation that leads to corruption & dishonesty. Jesus is saying, since all that we have to invest and use in life are the resources given to us by God, for this mortal lifetime use them, use wisely whatever we have to grow and to bless, to build that which will truly last, matter and endure. Just as that overseer was to manage the owner's land & property for the benefit and purpose of the true owner we should not squander those resources of life for just our own passing desires and pleasure.

This life, just as that fired manager recognized, is a brief and narrow window of opportunity in which to use the material resources entrusted to us by God, for good, to manage that property for the benefit of its real owner, recognizing that the stewardship choices we make do have lasting, meaningful and eternal consequences... for Scripture makes it very clear that we will stand before God, and hopefully celebrate how we have used our lives along with the blessings & resources entrusted to us... but let me also be very clear about this, it is not a question of us working to earn, deserve or achieve our salvation, for that has already been fully paid by Jesus on the cross, and nothing that we can will do will ever change that... but what a blessing to live our lives in delight of God's love. Recognizing that important truth, suppose you knew that you had only a very short and specific time to live, how would you use that time? and what would you do? - would your final efforts be to accumulate more & more stuff, to buy an even bigger house, win an argument, or defeat an enemy?... in the end, would any of that really matter? Of course not: more likely, you would go out of your way to connect-reconnect with the important and significant people of your life -- urgently restoring any broken or damaged relationships. You would almost certainly try to prepare spiritually, and be thinking more in terms of longer-term investments, i.e. getting ready to see God in the promised kingdom.

As God's beloved & finite creatures, it's wise & useful to consider whether the choices and decisions that we are making today, are ones that will help us become and take us to where we want to go and who we want to be. What am I doing with my one mortal life that will last for eternity, and am I on the road that leads to who and where I want to end up? Just as when you plant seeds and seedlings for a garden, it's important, to look ahead, to put them where you want the plants to grow and produce... my focus and efforts now, the things that I am doing today, need to be intentionally working toward the future that I want. The parable Jesus told was to teach his disciples that it's easy to be so intent and focused on the immediate concerns of today, that we give way too little thought and energy to the more critical concerns of tomorrow. It's a call to have the foresight, to use our

Page 3 of 3

life & resources well, knowing that our mortal lives are limited, will end someday, and we will graduate to the promised glory and kingdom of God. In the parable Jesus told, even the crook was shrewd enough and had enough foresight to make provision for the future. That same issue is also being addressed by the prophet Isaiah,

Isaiah vs. 1

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Grace is given freely by God, who loves us and wants to bless us, so as those who've been abundantly blessed the challenge is: vs. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? The life and teaching of Jesus was all about the Kingdom of God, an alternative way of living focused on the Lord's love, an alternative way of relating to others as community, an alternative way of seeing this world as temporary. So, with love, compassion, grace, mutual respect and generosity, we can live as faithful, creative and trustworthy stewards of all that God has graciously entrusted to our care.

The point of both the parable and this Isaiah passage is that God wants us to use our lives and resources well and wisely, by investing our lives in ways that draw us closer to God, which will prepare us for eternal life in the Kingdom... ..as through the appropriate use of our blessings and resources, our lives can demonstrate God's love & compassion for this world.

As we read in Isaiah and Luke, vs. 6, 8, 13 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. (And) you cannot serve God and wealth.