

MAKE USE OF WHAT YOU GOT

Luke 16:1-13

It used to be easy to find heroes. Comic books characters, movie stars, athletes, and political figures were all lifted up as examples for our young people to follow. Today it isn't so easy. The statue of President Ulysses Grant was taken down in San Francisco because he had owned African American slaves, this despite the fact that he later freed them, won the Civil War which enabled slaves to be freed, and championed reconstruction after that war. But there are other "heroes" who we found out were not so heroic. Andrew Carnegie left a fortune to build libraries across the country, but gained his wealth in many ways by poor treatment of his workers. Charles Lindbergh bravely flew the first solo plane flight over the Atlantic, but he also championed the idea of eugenics and racial superiority. In that kind of world you would at least think that you can look to the Bible to find examples of role models like David standing up to Goliath, Moses holding up his staff to divide the Red Sea, and Paul preaching the Gospel.

But look at the example Jesus sets before us in Luke 16. He describes an accountant who is caught cheating. This man reduces the debts people owe his master so that, when he is fired, they will take care of him. What can make this illustration even more confusing is when we read "the lord commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Is Jesus telling us to be dishonest like that accountant? Aren't we supposed to hear in church about being good and honest, not about being clever and scheming to do what is best for us?

We can always skip over difficult passages like this in the Bible. Yet, we cannot ignore them. Jesus, Himself, spoke this story. He is telling us a parable. In a parable He compares one thing to God's Kingdom. He is not commending the accountant for being dishonest, but for his shrewdness, for acting swiftly in a bad situation and using the intelligence God gave to him. He is not saying that the accountant is a Christian who did what was pleasing in God's eyes. He is telling us to do for God's Kingdom what the accountant did in this world. Make use of what you have!

1.) Make use of what you have because you can lose it.

There was a college student who decided not to worry too much about homework. He would skip classes, figuring that he could get notes online or from

someone else. He would put off the assigned readings, hoping that the professor would not put anything on the test from the textbook. He would keep himself busy with video games and late night parties. All went well until he got a mid-term in every course. He had to spend the rest of the semester frantically trying to catch up. He was so busy with homework, that his mind had no room for other thoughts.

Does that sound familiar? It is no coincidence that the lesson ends with the words, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” When a young couple is in financial trouble, money will dominate their thoughts. It can tear them apart from friends, happiness, and from each other. If we don’t eat and sleep properly, then we will be run-down and unable to get done what we have to do. Jesus is telling us to make use of what we have wisely so that we avoid getting so wrapped up in matters of this world that we forget more important things like church, reading God’s Word, and sharing His love with other people. Jesus wants us to be wise in what we do because He is so concerned that those things don’t tear us apart from Him. If our minds are dominated by overdue papers, bouncing checks, or too little sleep then we have little room for God. Missionaries, like our friend Kebede in Ethiopia, tell us of how important it is to feed people before they can hear the Gospel. Hunger is the only thought on their minds. The accountant in Jesus’ story did something. He made use of what he had by reducing the debts of the people who owed his master so those people would take care of him later. So if something threatens to dominate your life, do something about it. If you have homework, do it. If you earn money, save and invest some of it. If you need a job, don’t sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Go look for one. Make use of what God has given you, not to earn the gifts God freely gives to us, but so those very gifts don’t turn into worries that turn us away from God.

2.) Make use of what you have because of what has been given to you.

The accountant could have just sat there feeling sorry for himself. He had mismanaged funds, and his master was going to fire him. But he used what he had. He could reduce what the people owed his master. That may sound like simply cheating his master again, but what did the people owe his master? They owed him interest on what he had loaned. According to the Old Testament the people of Israel were not allowed to take interest from a debt owed by a fellow Israelite. The accountant was actually using God’s law to do the right thing and eliminate the interest that should never have been charged. That is why the master commended

him. When Jesus said, “The lord commended him,” the “lord” is Jesus, but the man’s master. This master had commended the man or else it would have been made public what the master had done against the Old Testament.

Often when we get into fixes—the homework piles up, we fail to tell dad and mom about the bump in the car, we burn our life away at both ends of the candle—we want to blame God. “Why did you let this happen to me?” we ask. Then we forget to use what God already has given to us.

Agostino d’Antonio was a sculptor in Florence, Italy. He was given a hunk of marble from the nearby quarries to make a statue. He started working on it, put a scowl on his face, and said, “Take this junk away.” Forty years later a man took that same hunk of marble and made a statue of David. The man’s name was Michelangelo.

So often our problems in life come not from what we lack, but by failing to use what God has given to us. God won’t complete a term paper for us, but He gives us the intelligence and the resources through the internet to write one. We probably won’t find a \$1,000 bill on the sidewalk to pay off our debts. But He gives us the time and energy to get a job and pay it off. He won’t magically turn our children into angels. But He gives us the time to spend with them and be good examples to them. When we use what God gives to us, then we realize how great those blessings are. It is like the toy we get on Christmas. No matter how great a toy it is, unless it is used, it becomes forgotten.

3.) Make use of what you have because of what you can gain.

If Jesus has given us everything, what is there to gain? Jesus said, “Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.” That may sound as though Jesus is saying, “Buy your friends. Hold the best parties. Buy your girlfriend an expensive gift. Be nice to everyone at work so they make life easy for you.” But the whole New Testament is full of concern for how we relate to other people. Why? Before Jesus spoke the parable in Luke 16 He told the stories in Luke about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Those stories stress God’s concern for people who are lost, who don’t know Jesus as their Savior. God wants us to use what we have to gain friendships with other people so that through those friendships they can come to know Jesus.

Would any of us listen to someone who tells us that he knows how to straighten up our lives, when we see him flighty, unkempt, in financial trouble, flunking out of school, and being basically obnoxious? He would be a fine example of what not to be. In the same way, how effective can we be in sharing our faith with others when we can't handle our bank account, our families, our grades, or our relationships with other people? As Jesus said, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" This doesn't mean we have to be perfect. But Jesus doesn't want us to hide behind some cloak of defense and say, "I don't have to concern myself with my finances, my grades, or my health. God will provide as long as I am doing His work." What we do is give people the impression that Christians are lazy, irresponsible, and disagreeable.

Jesus said, "Use worldly wealth." That is not a burden, but a blessing, an opportunity to help Him gain others. If you are good at math, help a person in your house who is struggling. If you have free time, volunteer to help in the community. If you are good with money, suggest how the church can best use its money. God has given us food to eat, clothes to wear and wash, health to take care of, and families to love and spend time with. Our friend Kebede in Ethiopia recently shared with us how the agricultural ministry he works with has expanded. By using the agricultural knowledge he has the funds we send to him, they are able to teach people how to produce more and better crops. That is using "worldly wealth." Because of that the missionaries Kebede works with have been welcomed into the Arsi Negele region, which was predominantly Moslem. Their missions have spread from a radius of 10-20 kilometers around Arsi Negele to 90-100 kilometers. That's like expanding from a region the size of Story County to an area of ten whole counties and parts of seven others. When we use what He has given to us, then we gain friends, friends with whom we can share Christ.

A dishonest accountant—that is hardly the type of person to use as an example. Yet, God grants us the shrewdness of that accountant to make use of what God has given us so that we don't lose what we have, that we realize how much He has given us, and that we gain others through His gifts to us.