

# **“The Dishonest Manager”**

**1Timothy 2:1-7 and Luke 16:1-13**

**September 18, 2016 International Protestant Church of Zurich**

**Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Douglas J. Brouwer**

**Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man [the manager] was squandering his property. <sup>2</sup> 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.’ <sup>3</sup> Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ <sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup> He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’**

**<sup>7</sup> Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.**

**<sup>10</sup> “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. <sup>11</sup> If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup> 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.”**

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

On Thursday last week something happened that I have been dreading for most of the last year.

I received my absentee ballot in the mail.

I am a U.S. citizen, which most of you could have guessed before I mentioned it. And even though I live outside the country now, I continue to vote in U.S. elections by mail, or by post. And this week the ballot for the presidential election arrived. And not to be overly dramatic about it, but the day of reckoning is at hand.

I plan to mail it back in a few days, although I am sorely tempted to throw the thing in the lake.

This year, in case you haven’t heard, things in the U.S. are a bit more contentious than usual. Is that a fair statement? And don’t worry, I don’t plan to mention any of the candidates this morning, or make any endorsements, or say anything more than that about the election.

But I do want to say something. I feel compelled to say something.

And what I feel compelled to say applies to Christians from every country, not just those of us from the U.S., who are faced with a difficult choice this fall. And what I feel compelled to talk about this morning is the relationship we have with the world around us.

I want to spend some time with you today talking about being a Christian in the world today and what that means.

It would be nice, wouldn't it, if we could somehow pretend that the rest of the world didn't exist? We could have our faith and our personal relationship with God and our prayer life and our quiet times and everything that we enjoy about this wonderful faith of ours. And we could simply ignore the rest.

I have toured lots of monasteries over the years. And even though I am initially attracted to the contemplative life, and even though I think some people are called to the contemplative life – to a quiet, prayerful existence – I think that I would last about one week in a monastery. Maybe two, because I do like the candles and incense and regular times of prayer.

But taking a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience – simply withdrawing from the world – it's not an option for me. It's not my calling in life. And I'm guessing that it's not the calling for most of us here today.

And by the way, if you do feel called to this way of life, I should mention that I have a dear friend from my graduate school days who is brother at a Benedictine monastery outside Chicago – St. Procopius Abbey. And from him – this was surprising to me, not what I expected – from him I learned that there is just as much jealousy and fighting and annoying behavior inside the monastery as there is outside. All I am saying is, **“Be forewarned.”**

So, where does that leave us – the rest of us?

We live in a culture today that tolerates us – most of the time. I know there are countries around the world where Christian faith is most certainly NOT tolerated. The theme for our adult education this year has been “the persecuted church,” and many of us took this opportunity to inform ourselves about the plight of Christians in many countries. I know that I learned a great deal.

And frankly, Christians in many places lead a precarious kind of life. We must not forget them.

But in the west – in Europe, in North America, and in a few other places, Christian faith is more or less tolerated. We find ourselves being careful about what we say. We are guarded in our conversations with other people, until we know that it is safe to say what we believe. But we are tolerated, more or less.

So the question is, what should our relationship be with the rest of the world? Voting is part of the relationship, but there is vastly more to the relationship than that. And what about money or wealth – just to take one more non-controversial subject? What should our relationship be to money and material things?

As I think you know, Jesus had a great deal to say about money, including the words we heard in our gospel reading today. In fact, Jesus had more to say about money and wealth than just about any other subject.

In fact, one of the words that Jesus uses for money (or wealth) in this story – MAMON – suggests an impersonal force, something to be concerned about and wary of. In other words, money is more than the coins you carry in your pocket.

But all of this biblical talk about money is surprising, in a way, because we almost never talk about money at church, except when we ask you to help pay the bills. But Jesus talked about money all the time. He was very comfortable with the subject.

One time a question about paying taxes came up, and Jesus said, **“Does anyone have a coin?”** And when someone produced a coin, Jesus showed it to them and said, **“Whose picture is that?”**

Well, obviously, they said, the image on the coin was Caesar. So, Jesus said, **“Then give to Caesar what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to him.”**

Which satisfied them, until they realized he was talking about far more than paying taxes.

And then, one last question. What about our relationship with the government?

You heard that I plan to vote – and I hope you are not shocked to hear that – most pastors vote, I think – but what sort of relationship should a Christian have with the government, with people who are in authority, whether or not they are good and decent and moral people.

What should your relationship with the government be?

You won't be at all surprised to hear me say that Christians over the years have given a wide range of answers to these questions. From the beginning, I suppose, Christians have struggled to come together on all of this, to reach a consensus.

Those of you who are taking my **“creeds and confessions”** class on Sunday mornings have learned that hundreds – if not thousands – of creeds and confessional statements have been written over the centuries. And we are still writing them, because we are still trying to find the language that expresses what we believe, that captures what we believe God has revealed to us.

I think our readings today – the words from Paul and the words from Luke's gospel – give us some important clues. We should know what the Bible says about all of this. And so I invite you to look with me – and to look hard.

Paul, writing to Timothy, encourages the young man to pray – which sounds inoffensive enough, doesn't it? Paul encourages Timothy to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions, and even thanksgivings for everyone, for kings – oh, that's interesting! – and for all who are in high positions.

And do you know something? I find this somewhat surprising, especially given that Paul had more than his share of conflict with the government. His imprisonments and his punishments – ultimately he was to die at the hands of the Roman government – all of that might have produced a spirit of – what would you say? – hatred, maybe, or distrust or anger.

In some ways, it's shocking that Paul takes this attitude, but I sense that he means it. And I sense that he would say something similar to us today. Pray for those in positions of authority.

Why? Not because praying for someone is the same as agreeing with them, it isn't, but because prayer – as you have heard me say before – has the unusual side effect of changing us. What usually happens is that we pray for change in other people. We ask God to change people we don't like, so that we will like them more.

But prayer, especially for people we don't like, especially for people who have wronged us or harmed us in some way – prayer has an unexpected way of softening our own hearts. Prayer, if we're doing it right, changes us.

This of course is not what we expect. And maybe it doesn't happen right away – one quick prayer, for example – but over time it does. Try it. I think we are commanded to do this, aren't we?

You might say to me, **“Well, okay, prayer is good. Who can argue with that? But our system is corrupt. Politicians are corrupt. Even if they started their careers with the best of intentions, something about our political process today – certainly the money involved – and the power – something corrupts politicians. We can't believe anything they say.”**

And to that I would say, **“All the more reason, then, to pray. I think that is what the Apostle Paul is urging us to do.”**

But the Bible, you'll be happy to know, tells us to do more than pray.

The parable that Jesus tells in Luke 16 is one of the most shocking of all Jesus' teachings. Much of what Jesus said was unusual and unexpected and took them by surprise and left them scratching their heads, but this parable in Luke 16 is on a different level altogether.

You may remember that Luke 15 ends with the parable of the prodigal son, and it mentions that the younger brother squandered his money with “loose living.” Jesus doesn't really explain what “loose living” is, did you ever notice that? But our vivid imaginations have filled in all the details.

Anyway, chapter 16 comes along, and it's almost as though Jesus is thinking, **“I should say something about a better use of money. If the younger brother did not handle his money well, then maybe I should say something about how to do it better.”** And then he tells this parable – and another in the same chapter, also about money.

But here's the thing. This is not at all what we would expect to hear Jesus telling us. The manager in the story was terribly dishonest, but there is something to admire about him too, at least that's what Jesus seems to say.

Even if you don't like what he did, you have to admit that he is shrewd. He has **“street smarts.”**

Even after he is fired from his position, which he deserves to lose, all is not lost. He has prepared for himself. All of the people who used to do business with him would gladly welcome him into their homes. He has charmed them.

So, Jesus says, you need to think about that. You need to have some of that same shrewdness, some of that same cleverness. As you live your lives in a corrupt world, where evil lurks all around us, you need to be smart, smarter than you often are.

Some people listen to the Beatitudes from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount – *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers* – and the picture you have, after hearing all of that, is of someone who is pushover.

Godliness sounds pretty much like weakness.

And to that, I think Jesus is saying no. That's not what he meant at all. He is telling us to be smart and strong. We need to be people who are willing to do what is right.

At the beginning I mentioned that one temptation for Christians is to withdraw from the world – and not to have anything to do with it. Living the cloistered life in a monastery is only way of doing that. But there are others. And the temptation is strong, I think, to just walk away. If you are tempted to do that, I could hardly blame you.

But that's not the only temptation. I think the temptation is just as strong to condemn the world around us, to point fingers of blame, to say “shame on you” every few minutes. And lots of Christian people, it seems to me, have adopted this attitude.

And just to be clear, there is a great deal to condemn in the world around us. I could easily find full-time work in pointing out the sin and evil in the world around us. Lots of preachers have found great success in doing just that. And maybe there is room in every generation for one John the Baptist, one person who dares to call sin a sin.

But the question is, what about the rest of us?

And I think it's clear that the Bible is calling us to a different way of life – not withdrawing from the world, but not condemning it either, but something more difficult.

In John's gospel – this is in chapter 17, Jesus' prayer the night before he dies – Jesus prays for his disciples that they may be **“in, but not of the world.”** He says, **“I don't pray that you take them out of the world, Father, but I have done my best to remind them that they do not belong to this world.”**

That **“in the world, but not of the world”** formula is one of toughest callings that we have ever received. That's true, isn't it? There are no easy answers. Every day presents new challenges. Every situation requires that we think again about what it means.

Who am I in this situation? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus right now, with these people, with this election ballot in my hand, with the bank account that God has given to me? What does it mean to be friends with that person or to be associated with that group of people or to do business with that firm?

And yes, there are timeless truths – I don't deny that – but that doesn't make them any easier to apply. To be a follower of Jesus means working harder and thinking harder than you have ever worked or thought before.

To be a Christian in this world means to live with vigilance and to live with care. To be a Christian in this world means being salt and light.

I like the quote – and I'm not sure who said this – **“a lighthouse doesn't run all over an island trying to save ships. It stands in one place and shines.”** I think that's right. I think that's what we're called to do.

That old song I learned in Sunday school many years ago still works for me: **“This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine!”**

Let me end with this word of encouragement.

I don't think I could let my light shine without you. I don't think any of us could do it. We need each other. We need the encouragement of course to keep going – some days are more challenging than others – but we also need the examples. I am inspired when I look at you, and when I see how you have navigated the difficult issues of life.

When I was a child, I would look around the church and see lots of older people – when you're a child, everyone looks old – and I would see my dentist, my school principal (who sang in the choir), I saw lawyers and teachers and business owners, some of whom were also my Sunday school teachers – and I was reminded every Sunday, even as a child, that I was surrounded by people who were trying to get it right.

These were people who were living faithfully – or trying their best to live faithfully – and I was inspired by them to do the same thing. I wanted to grow up and be like them and be that same example to other people.

Your presence here today – in this place, on this particular morning – is a statement, a political statement as much as a spiritual statement, about who you are and what you believe and how you intend to live your life.

And I say, good for you. I give thanks for you.