



Catalog No. 932

Luke 16:1-8

Eighth Message

John Hanneman

January 16, 1994

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

All of us at times face unplanned and unscheduled circumstances, situations that call for cool heads and wise and quick thinking. In this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke, today we come to the story of a man who faced a crisis situation. Let us see what we can learn from his response.

Luke 16:1-8:

Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And He called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.' And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light." (Luke 16:1-8 NASB)

What a strange story! You are probably asking, what has crisis management to do with the kingdom of God? This story is probably the least favorite of Jesus' parables. No one in his right mind would attempt to teach it. But there is deep truth in this text which will be very profitable for us if we learn it.

Let's begin by making some observations. The disciples, who are being trained by Jesus, are the main audience for this parable (v. 1), but the Pharisees are within earshot, for they, too, were "listening to all these things" (v. 14). Everything in the parable would seem to indicate that the master is an upright man. The steward is called unjust; if the master were ignoble he would have been labeled as such, and acted in a much different manner. The master is concerned about the squandering of his wealth, so the steward is dismissed. But that is all. He is not scolded, punished or jailed.

The rich man is a landowner, a farmer, and the steward his estate manager with authority to carry out the business of the estate. It is evident from the large rents that are owed that the renters are well off. They agreed to pay a fixed amount of produce for the yearly rent. The amounts were not due until harvest, but they were owed from the day the agreement was signed. Notice that even after the bills are changed there is still no attempt made to collect even the reduced amounts. The steward no doubt was making extra money "under the table," but these amounts were not reflected in the signed bills. He

was a salaried official; additionally, he was paid a specific fee by the renters for each contract signed.

The steward is summoned and questioned, and charges are brought. The implication is that the master has been hearing things about him, a sign that the landowner is respected and liked. The steward has been manipulating the system a little too much. His scheme probably worked something like this. He would summon a tradesman to make some repairs for an agreed sum; then he would have the tradesman bill for double the amount and they would share the extra charges. In the Middle East, it is said, there are two kinds of people: those who rob you a little and those who rob you a lot.

The master calls in the steward and asks, "What is this I hear about you?" He does not make any specific accusations against the man. He hopes to surprise him into talking and divulging information. The steward knows the master is trying to trick him into talking; crafty operator that he is, he remains silent.

The fact that he leaves without saying anything is amazing. The steward has a number of options to mount a defense for himself. He could claim that since he deals in money he would have made enemies; he could request a meeting with his accusers and hope to outwit them; he could point to the long history of labor that he and his family had given the master; he could blame others; say the money that was "wasted" was given in bribes; blame the master for not giving clear instructions, etc. The discussion surrounding the firing of an employee normally would last several days. But the fact that he remains silent implies his guilt. He admits that the master has discovered his system, and he expects to be judged for his disobedience. He knows that excuses won't get him reinstated to his job. He is dismissed on the spot. He gets no second chance. If he did, he might embezzle more. The word "turn in" or "surrender" means he must surrender the books, not balance the accounts. The books would have been fixed anyway. Since the steward is fired and not jailed, the master is unusually merciful toward him. He no longer has authority, but his dismissal is not yet final, nor has it been made public. He still has room to maneuver.

But he has a problem. Since he has been dismissed for squandering his master's property, no one would hire him. He needs to change his negative image. He is not strong enough to farm and is ashamed to beg. He plans to risk everything on the quality of mercy he has already received from his master. If he fails, he will certainly go to jail; if he succeeds, he will be a hero in the community.

He summons his master's debtors to refinance their loans. (The servants of the master assume the steward still has authority; they go to get the renters.) The steward calls them one by one so they do not have opportunity to confer with one another. He has to act quickly before they find out. He does not greet them by calling them "Friend" or "Sir." He merely says, "write quickly." He does not want the master walking in on this new transaction he has dreamed up. He gives the renters their bills so that the papers reflect their handwrit-

ing. They do not know that he has been fired. If they did, they would be breaking faith with the master and he would no longer rent land to them. The debtors assumed that the reductions were authorized. This is key to the story. The amounts are reduced up to 50 percent, the value of which is roughly equivalent to 500 denarii in both cases. The fact that both reductions are almost identical indicates the haste of the steward's plan. He would quietly make it known that he had arranged for the reductions. The steward is therefore a double thief; he is dishonest twice.

The master would be aware that the local village had already started a great round of celebration in praise of him as a noble and generous man. He has two alternatives. He can go back to the debtors and tell them it was all a mistake. But if he does, the villagers' joy would turn to anger and he would be cursed for his stinginess. His other alternative is to keep silent and accept their praise. He is a generous man. He could have jailed the steward, but he did not. Generosity is a prime quality of a nobleman in the East.

Realizing how clever his dishonest steward has been, the master praises him. The steward knows his master is generous and merciful. He risks everything on this, and wins; he gets another job. Even though the truth will come out later, he will be viewed as a wise man because of his shrewdness. The quality that is praised is wisdom, shrewdness. The word "praise" conveys simple approval of what the steward has done.

What can we learn from this strange parable that will be spiritually profitable to us? I will suggest three things. Here is the first: *Just like the steward, when we are confronted with our guilt, we face a crisis.* This story is about crisis management.

We all face crises in our lives. They may arise in our marriages, with our children, over our property, in our jobs. But there is one crisis that every one of us has to face, and that is the crisis of the kingdom of God. Most of us don't deal with this until we come face to face with our sin and guilt. We are faced with a shocking revelation and we come up short. We are called to give an account. We are caught in the act, we must stand before someone who knows what we have done and we feel naked and vulnerable.

When God presents us with the knowledge of our sin we are left speechless and defenseless. We can't run and hide. We can't escape. In the crisis of the coming of the kingdom, our sin engulfs us. How can we resolve our guilt and find acceptance and approval from God? We cannot work for it; we don't want to beg for it. If we are left to ourselves, our situation is hopeless. Because of his evil, man is caught in the crisis of the coming of the kingdom.

A few years ago I found myself in a crisis on the high seas. I was part of a group that sailed out of Santa Cruz on a beautiful summer's day. Suddenly, the wind began blowing and the waves tossed the boat about. We couldn't sail back to shore because we hadn't hoisted the proper sail. We began to drift down the coast. Then I became seasick and I had to go down below. I couldn't offer any assistance to the crew. I was in a crisis situation. I felt helpless and useless. We could not dock until we sailed all the way to Moss Beach. This is the kind of crisis of the kingdom of God comes upon us—suddenly, without warning.

The crises we face in life help us learn something very important about God. And that is the second point: *Our only hope of salvation is to depend solely on the mercy of God.* The steward acted wisely and shrewdly. In his time of crisis he knew that the only source of salvation for him was the generosity, the mercy of his master. Because the

master was indeed generous and merciful, he chose to pay the full price for his steward's salvation. The solution was not based on the steward's good work, but on the character of the master.

One thing that makes this parable even more confusing is the placement of the chapter division. We are tempted to read the parable in the context of the following parable which also concerns money. While there are some similarities in these stories, this parable of the unrighteous steward has much more in common with the one that precedes it, the parable of the prodigal son. For instance, both the steward and the son betray a trust; neither the prodigal nor the steward offers excuses; the word "scattered" is applied to both; in the Syriac and Arabic versions, the word for the property wasted is identical in both stories; in Luke 15, a son throws himself on the mercy of his father; in Luke 16, a servant throws himself on the mercy of his master; both the steward and the prodigal are shown extraordinary mercy by their superiors; the steward is not jailed for changing the bills; the prodigal is not punished for having wasted the family's assets; there is a party for the son, there is praise for the steward.

But the parable of the prodigal son is the most popular parable, while the account of the unjust steward is the least popular. The problem we have with this parable is that it seems a dishonest man is given as an example to be followed. But the Middle Eastern peasant at the bottom of the economic ladder would find sheer delight in this story. Nothing would please him more than a tale in which a David slays a Goliath. The steward is criticized as "unrighteous" and called a "son of darkness." The Western reader is surprised that a dishonest man is portrayed as a hero, but the Eastern reader would be surprised that such a hero is criticized.

A study of the parables, however, reveals a surprising list of unsavory characters: an unjust steward, an unjust judge, the neighbor who does not want to be bothered at night, the man who pockets someone else's treasure by buying his field. In three out of these four parables, Jesus is using the rabbinical principle of "from the light to the heavy," which means, generally speaking, "how much more?" If the widow got what she wanted from the judge (18:1-9), how much more will we receive from God? If the man got bread in the night from his neighbor (11:5-7), how much more will we receive from God? If this dishonest steward solved his problem by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help us in our crises when we trust his mercy?

The story is telling us that man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of God. He will pay the price for our salvation. We don't have to be good before we get saved. We don't have to be moral to be saved. We don't need a clever defense to be saved. What we must do is throw ourselves totally on the mercy of our Master. That is the only thing that will help us in our crisis with the kingdom of God. What drains us emotionally and spiritually is trying to handle these things on our own.

In 1960, the wife of a condemned spy visited a certain Arab in Jerusalem to ask for advice on how to gain her husband's freedom. The man told her to wait outside the palace for the king's motorcade to form and throw herself in front of the king's car. He explicitly instructed her not to plead innocence, warning her, "You know he is guilty and so does the king. To offer excuses is to destroy all hope. Throw yourself on the mercy of the king!" The woman carried out his instructions. The Jordanian monarch knew full well how a noble king was expected to act. He released the spy.

A few years ago my wife and I faced a crisis when we bought a home. We had sold our own house but could not find a house on the

market that was suitable. Because of time constraints, we had to buy another house. No sooner had we done so than we realized we had made a terrible mistake. For several months we were mired in a deep depression. Then one day I met our realtor. I told him how unhappy we were and asked him to get in touch with me if he ever came across the kind of house we would like. He said he had already found one, but was timid about calling me. Within a week we had bought that house and sold our own. I don't know how everything worked out. It was a miracle. The one thing I did understand was the generosity of our Father. I had done everything I could think of but nothing had worked. I had reached the end of my abilities. All that was left for me to do was throw myself on the mercy of the Master. And God acted generously, based on his character, not mine.

We find this theme repeated over and over in the book of Psalms. There is no god like our God. He is our strength, our fortress, our refuge. "Though the enemy encamp around me," says the psalmist, "yet I can trust in him." Listen to these wonderfully comforting words from Psalm 91:

**"Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him securely on high, because he has known My
name.
He will call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him, and honor him.
With a long life I will satisfy him,
And let him behold My salvation." (Ps 91:14-16)**

In a time of crisis we must learn to throw ourselves on God's salvation.

In this parable, Jesus was appealing to a well-known aspect of Middle Eastern life. The story is not about the character of the steward, but about the character of God. At first, we are not very sympathetic to the steward. But it is not easy to find good moral examples in life, is it? The gospel doesn't present us with a moral system so that we can be better than others. It teaches us about grace, about God's invasion into the midst of our confusion. The gospel is the story of how God works with people like you and me and how he saves us. Like the steward, we need to be less concerned about our behavior and more concerned about the actions of God. We need to be wise like the steward and trust solely in the mercy of the Master for our salvation.

Here is my third exhortation: *We should be wise even as children of light.* The key word in our story is wisdom. This is why the parable about money which follows actually tracks better with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Wisdom is a skill—a skill in living, a skill deployed in self-preservation. It carries with it the idea of cleverness, savvy, knowing how things work, being street smart; not cautious, not playing it safe, but being alert to opportunities. Wisdom means to act with foresight, to look to the future. It is illustrated by the wise man who built his house on the rock in anticipation of the coming storm. It is seen in the story of the five virgins who bought extra oil, anticipating future need.

In the text the children of light are criticized, thus the parable is not for the unconverted, but for the converted. Jesus addresses the disciples, telling them how a rascal steward dealt with his crisis. The steward knew what to do because he knew the character of the master. But the children of light do not act with such clarity and

decisiveness with respect to the crisis of the kingdom. They are exhorted to have the same wisdom in relation to God and his kingdom as the steward did in relation to the world. They should know how to manage their crises by throwing themselves utterly on the mercy of God. Wisdom means throwing ourselves upon God. Do we have as much wisdom in dealing with kingdom issues as we do with dealing with earthly crises?

I took my daughters skiing a couple of weeks ago. Less than three hours after we arrived on the slopes, Sara broke her collar bone. At the first aid station they asked me if I wanted her treated there or did I want to make some other arrangements. I telephoned our health insurance company to ask what procedure I should follow; then I called our clinic to get clearance in order for her to be treated right away. I knew that if I didn't do these things, I would face trouble later with red tape. I was wise. I knew how things worked.

We are shrewd and wise when it comes to understanding how the world works. We spend years trying to learn how the stock market works. We read magazines and go to seminars to learn how to become financially secure. We invest long hours planning our retirement. We understand how insurance works, how education works, and we understand, or at least try to understand, how politics work. This is not all wasted effort by any means. Even Donald Trump can be shrewd in relation to the world. But Jesus' word to the disciples is that they were not wise in how the kingdom of God worked. Unbelievers outpace disciples in their foresight, ingenuity and risk-taking.

I attended a Sunday School class in a church in Oregon a number of years ago. The woman who was teaching the class told a story about a child who asked her once the meaning of the word "reconciliation." A man raised his hand and asked, "What did you say to the child?" The woman made a few comments, but she never answered the question. It was because she wasn't wise. The man was facing a crisis of the kingdom of God, but she couldn't respond to his question.

Do you know how reconciliation with God comes about? Can you explain it to someone in crisis? Do you know about forgiveness? Do you know how sin works in your own life, the areas where you are most susceptible? Are you wise about walking in the Spirit? Have you taken time to understand the mystery of marriage? Have you taken as much time to learn of the character of God as you have in investigating your own family background? When a crisis strikes, do you know how God works and do you trust him enough to throw yourself solely upon him? This is what this parable is about — being wise as children of light as we face the crisis of the kingdom of God; being shrewd enough to know the character of our Master; and trusting enough to throw ourselves on his mercy, knowing that he has paid the full price of our salvation.

Imprudence is living indiscriminately, mindlessly, letting other people make decisions for us. Prudence is taking hold of God, not being paralyzed by pressure, being serious but not grim, choosing God instead of the world, salvation instead of waste. If we lose sight of God's priorities, we lose the cutting edge. If we keep sight of the character of God, then we are truly wise.

May God give us the grace to be wise, to fully understand his character, that we might throw ourselves completely on him, trusting in his mercy and grace.

© 1994 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino