

Sermon: "Our Cheat'en Heart"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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A DIFFICULT TEACHING

One of the more popular country song's of all time is Hank Williams song, "Your Cheat'en Heart." "Your cheat'en heart will tell on you."

That's what we believe. We believe that we get what we deserve. If we cheat, if we are unfaithful, we'll get "what's coming to us."

And that's why today's lesson is so hard to understand. The "cheater" in today's lesson doesn't get what he deserves. And that doesn't fit in with our view of how the world should work.

As a result, today's lesson has been described by many as one of the most confusing texts in Scripture. Concerning this parable St. Augustine once wrote,

"I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord."

The commentator's interpretations of this passage vary as much as the latest hurricane models, and, like those models; none of them seem to hit the mark.

I guess a prudent pastor might pick an easier passage on which to preach, but you know me, "where angels fear to tread." More than that, I have found that the heart of the gospel is often found in the so called "difficult sayings of Jesus."

We learn more about what it means to be a disciple of Christ when we tackle those passages which seem to challenge our idea of what is right and wrong. Such is the case with today's passage.

The interpretation of the parable is found in verse 9 when Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." How can Jesus say that? What kind of ethics lesson does this convey?

More than that, it doesn't sound like very good advice. If you think this is a good idea to make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, just look at what happened to Ken Lay and Martha Stewart.

If we've learned anything in the past few months we've learned that "cooking the books" and "insider trading" is not a good idea. And yet that seems to be what is going on in this passage.

A MODERN VERSION

Let me retell the parable in modern terms so you can understand why so many find this story disturbing:

An employee goes to the boss and snitches. "Boss, your manager has been cheating you." The boss calls the dishonest manager on the carpet, tells him to clean out his desk that very day. He also demands a complete accounting. "Show me the books."

The manager thinks to himself,

"I am unaccustomed to hard work. Unemployment compensation is peanuts. What am I to do?"

The dishonest manager decides to get together some of his boss's clients. Then the swindle begins. At an expensive restaurant, he meets with these clients for one last fling on the expense account.

He says, during that fine lunch, "Now tell me, what do you owe the company?" Each owes vast sums. "Look, why don't you just write off half of what you owe? And we'll call it even. Now I want you to remember what I've done for you when the time comes."

Do you see what seems to be happening here? This sleaze is writing off vast debts at his boss's expense! He's Martha Stewart and Ken Lay combined. And Jesus commends him as an example? What kind of story is this?

Well, first of all, it's a story which reminds us that we can't make the leap from the first century to the twenty first century without serious biblical interpretation. The unjust steward is not Martha Stewart not Ken Lay. The social and financial systems of Jesus' day were quite different from our day, and we need to understand that if we are to correctly interpret this passage.

On the other hand, as we interpret this passage we also need to bear in mind that we have something in common with the first century world. We still love money. Money is still a "god" for many people, and the world still operates on the golden rule, that is, he who has the gold makes the rule.

But, this passage suggests that, by the grace of God, we can learn to play by another rule. This rule is established not on Wall Street but in another place where gold is so plentiful that it is used to pave the streets.

We can learn to be surprised by the joy of forgiving and giving that is possible in God's kingdom, a kingdom in which even our bad actions can be used for a greater good.

JESUS' WORLD

So, what was the world like in Jesus' day?

It was a world of dreadful poverty and oppression for 90-95% of the people.

But, the main characters in our story for today were not among that unfortunate majority. The rich man was one of the privileged 1 or 2 percent who owned a substantial amount of land and property, and the steward was one of the lucky few who were entrusted with the responsibility of managing his large holdings.

This was not a world where the unemployed could learn a new job and make a new life. In Jesus' world, losing your employment could literally be equivalent to losing your life.

So, you can imagine the panic that set in when the rich man told the steward that his days on the job were over. Not only would he lose his only means of support; he would also suffer the dishonor of losing face before family, friends and the rich man who had shown him such trust.

In a world where honor was deemed to be even important than money, the manager had lost his honor.

NO AUTHORITY

Now, when you come right down to it, at this point, the manager had no real authority to make deals with anyone. He was an ex-manager already.

But, surprisingly, he continued to act like he had authority.

He gathers all those who owe something and suggests that maybe an accommodation can be made. He tells the one who owes a hundred jugs of oil to take his pen and make it fifty and so forth.

Some of us know how this works. You have a D on your report card, but if you can find a pen of the right color you can make it into a great big B! That's what they did. They changed the books in their own handwriting!

Apparently these sharecropper-farmers didn't know that the steward had lost his job and that the rich man had not authorized this change. They should have known. There wasn't a rich man in the land who would act in this way.

But, I guess sometimes we believe what we want to believe.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Now let me tell you what I think is the rest of the story. I believe that when the wealthy landowner came for his customary inspection of his property, he was in for a big surprise.

When he came into town, he was not greeted with the customary resentment or fear. No, the road was lined with cheering farmers! This rich landowner is now their best friend. He has done what no other landowner has done before.

The rich man was probably puzzled by it all until he got to the big house and was thanked profusely by the servants for his generosity.

Now the rich landowner knew what had happened, and he has a choice to make. He could go out to the cheering crowds and say that a terrible mistake had been made, that the unjust steward was not in charge of anything. He could remind the crowd that he had no right to make the changes that he made.

He could rightly say,

“None of this will hold up in court, and all of you are in trouble as well. You made those changes in your own handwriting!”

But, then the cheers of the farmers would turn to boos. And, quite frankly, the rich man found being cheered a lot more fun than being booed. So, he decides to do the unexpected.

He praises the unjust steward for his ingenuity, and quite possibly decides to keep him as his head manager.

Now, I know, this part of the story is not in the text, but how can you explain the words of the rich man unless something like this has taken place?

I don't hear anyone saying, “Wow, that sure was a clever thing that they did at Enron, doctoring profit and loss statements!”

No, they're saying things like,

“A lot of innocent people got hurt by what they did. They should throw those guys in jail.”

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

But, that was not what happened in this story.

Yes, the rich man's manager was a crook and possibly incompetent.

But, notice how it all turns out in the end. Honor is restored to the rich man and the manager. And for once, the poor people are given a break.

Who would have thought such good could have come from such shady dealings?

Well, Jesus tells us, that's what happens, even in this dog eat dog world, when the needs of people are placed over the desire for profit. Even though our motives are suspect at best and downright criminal at worst, God can still transform our world when we put people ahead of profit.

When all is said and done, what is it about the unjust steward that Jesus finds commendable? It is the fact that this manager forgives. He forgives the debts of others.

True, he wasn't authorized to forgive those debts. He forgave for the wrong reason, to curry the favor of people he might need later on and to make up for past sins.

But, even imperfect forgiveness was powerful enough to change everything.

I think that Jesus is telling his disciples through this parable,

"If this great a change can occur because of doing the right thing for the wrong reason, how much more can be done for God's kingdom when we take what we been given to us this day and use it for the glory of God."

FULLER'S FOLLY

The parable of the unjust steward is a story which continues to unfold in the lives of people God has chosen.

In November of 1965, Linda Fuller told her husband Millard that she was leaving him. Millard was so busy making the unheard of sum of 1 million dollars a year at his business that he hadn't noticed she was slipping away.

So, panicked by her wake-up call, he piled her and their children into their Lincoln Continental and set off for Florida.

On the way they met up with some friends in Georgia who had moved to Clarence Jordan's Koinonia community. Millard agreed to have lunch with Jordan, wound up staying a month, and eventually ended up starting Habitat for Humanity.

You may have heard of this unrighteous steward's crazed economic scheme. No interest loans. Houses being built for the poor by the well off. Absolutely mad. Right?

Well, most of us know the rest of the story, and it turns out that it wasn't so crazy after all.

PLAYING BY DIFFERENT RULES

If you think about it, all of us are like the unrighteous steward in this story. What we have is not our own. It belongs to God. And quite often we have made a mess of things, squandering God's good gifts on our own wild schemes.

But, sometimes God redeems even our most disappointing efforts. God in Christ reminds us that our job is not to be successful as the world defines success. Our job is to forgive the debts of others on behalf of our Lord.

We are to use money and resources that are not our own in order to make God's kingdom a reality in the world. We are to forgive the sins, the debts of those who don't deserve it because that's what our gracious God desires.

We're not playing by the world's rules where everyone gets what they deserve. We're playing by kingdom rules in which the surprise of forgiveness keeps popping up and changing everything.

THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW

If you ask Dr. Phil how to prepare for tomorrow, he'll give you the standard line. Dig deep. Try harder. Draw upon your natural talents and resources. It's not bad advice. Most of the time we can get by following practical advice like that.

But, there are times when trying harder is not enough. There are times when you've done the wrong thing, and the boss is going to call your bluff. There are times when the odds are overwhelming and the resources we have are not nearly enough.

What can we do when that happens?

We need to remember that in the final analysis we depend not on our own power and wealth but upon the power and wealth of the one whom we represent. We need to remember that nothing is too hard for the God, that God can and will use our very imperfect efforts to make a difference for the kingdom.

Those who follow Christ can still stride into the future with confidence. It is not the confidence born of trust in our own ability and moral righteousness. It is the confidence born of trust in the power and grace of God as revealed by Jesus Christ.

We need to remember that the one who told this unusual parable was none other than Jesus himself. Jesus not only told good stories; he also lived them.

Even when he moved toward a cross, he didn't do it as one resigned to that bleak fate. Through it all He was confident that the future belonged to God. He bet his life on that and, in Easter, his risk was vindicated, and a world full of debts was forgiven with one Divine stroke.

We need to follow Jesus on that road to the cross. We need to bet our life on the belief that God can give us what we need when we need it. We need to bet our life on the belief that God desires to deliver us from our unrighteous ways and, in the process, bring forgiveness and salvation to others as well.

UNLOCK THE DOORS

A pastor talked about her church. It had once been a great congregation in the heart of the city. But the city changed, the neighborhood declined, and now the congregation was made up mostly of those who commuted in on Sundays from the suburbs.

Like many such congregations, they had a problem with vagrants, homeless men around the church. They put locks on the doors. At night, they broke the locks. A meeting was held to discuss further security measures, bigger locks, and better doors.

What could be done to keep these vagrants from damaging their precious building?

"I'm bothered," said one woman on the board, "by the church locking out, and shutting doors, particularly to those in need."

"Well what do you want us to do?" asked one of the members of the board, "just throw open the doors and tell them, 'come on in, help yourself?'"

"Why not?" piped up a voice at the back of the room.

It was one of the oldest members of the congregation. He said, "We've been having a tough time attracting folk to this church. Here are people who are so eager to get into the church they break the doors down. Let's let them in."

"I move the question!" said someone else. They took a vote.

That night, they left the doors unlocked, wide open. Twenty homeless men showed up.

There were problems, of course, but gradually the church did what was necessary to accommodate them. The pastor said, "Those men have given new life to our church. In fact, they helped us be a real church."

What they did may seem like a foolhardy risk. But, sometimes I think God wants us to take a risk, a risk born of confidence not in ourselves or even in the gratitude of those whom we serve.

God wants us to take a risk born of the knowledge that the God we worship and serve is a God of extravagant grace and hope.

God brings salvation to foolish, unjust servants.

In short, God saves people just like you and me. He takes our "cheat'en heart" and makes it true.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH