

Making Eternal Friends

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[0 : 00] You may like to open again the Bibles at page 851 to the reading from Luke's Gospel, page 851, Luke chapter 16 and let's pray.

God our Father speak to us from your word this morning we pray. Write it on our hearts so that we may not only understand it but obey it for the glory of Jesus our Saviour. Amen.

There is no shortage of advice in our world about investments. You can talk to numerous people about banks and bonds, about shares and future and gold and property.

And I'm sure the advice is very varied in its competence. I remember hearing somebody late last year saying with absolute certainty that the Australian dollar would never get above 70 cents US this year and now it's over 90.

So just be careful who you listen to. People will advise you about superannuation, about annuities and fixed terms and the advice of course is hugely full of expert wisdom and full of contradiction as well.

[1 : 14] The choice is limitless. And all the slogan of our world in effect is to make your money work for you so that you have a good nest egg at retirement, so that you're well off, so that you're wealthy and comfortable and so on.

Making your money work for you is part of the spirit of our age in effect. Now we may think that life was simpler in ancient Jewish times. In many respects it was. But still, there are various tricks there as well.

There was a law in the Old Testament in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy about levying interest rates. You're not to do that to your fellow Israelite.

So for example, if one of your fellow Israelites was in particular need, you might lend them some shekels but you couldn't charge interest on that.

And that was in part to prevent the disparity of rich and poor. So those who were in need wouldn't become in a sense more impoverished by having to pay not only the loan but the interest back to a fellow Israelite.

[2 : 23] It was to encourage an element of egalitarianism. Certainly it was to encourage mutual care and love within the people of God.

That interest was not to be levied, to limit exploitation and so on. Now of course clever people found ways around these laws. History is full of trying to overcome ethical standards with some sort of casuistic loophole.

So for example, let me suggest you, I borrow from you 75 shekels, I lend you 75 shekels. I cannot charge you interest.

But when I give you the bill, oh it says 100 shekels. Now that was a well known practice in Jesus' day and leading up to that. The bill itself has no interest in it.

But the amount of repayment of course is beyond what was actually lent. It was a sort of stupid loophole but it was relatively common practice.

[3 : 28] And it fairly high and exorbitant interest rates as well. Well, you might borrow 60 from somebody but the bill that you are given to repay is 90.

No interest is stipulated. The lender cannot be caught by any authority who may try and check up on all these things. But interest or usury is embedded in the transaction.

After all, you've got to make your money work for you. It applied then as now. Now it's not often that in the Bible somebody who is dishonest is praised.

Very rare and very surprising. But it happens in this passage today in Luke chapter 16. This is a parable with its fair share of difficulty.

And already a couple of people who are here today have said to me having read it through this week in anticipation of today because it's advertised as our preaching program, find it a puzzling, difficult passage and rightly so.

[4 : 31] Jesus said to the disciples, there was a rich man who had a manager. Probably the man is an absentee landlord.

He's rich, we're told, so he owns property in other places it seems. And he entrusts that and pays a manager to look after it, to make him a profit, to make his money in the form of property work for him.

The manager runs the estate in the landlord's absence and he's squandering his property. We're not told exactly here why that is, whether it's incompetence or negligence, but certainly later we're told he's dishonest and that's probably part of it.

That somehow through some dishonest practices, this manager, maybe in looking after himself, is actually running down or squandering the landlord's property for his own benefit.

We're not told what he did wrong, that doesn't matter for this parable. And when he's confronted with the wrongdoing, the manager does not plead innocence or object to the accusations.

[5 : 46] So in verse 2, the landlord summoned the manager 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.

Behind that summary statement, of course, is that you've been doing the wrong thing, you are sacked, but you need to give me an account, an audit. A list of debtors and creditors and what is owed and all those sorts of things.

The man doesn't object to that. Now, of course, in those days there was no centre link. There was no social security system for somebody unemployed. What is this man going to do?

He can hardly ask the landlord for a reference. That's not going to help him get another job. I sacked this man because he was incompetent and dishonest. He's not going to win many potential future employers to employ this man.

The manager says to himself, Well, what will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I'm not strong enough to dig. So, that sort of manual labour type job is not going to be for him.

[7 : 01] I'm ashamed to beg. People maybe would be unlikely to give him money knowing that he'd been sacked for dishonest practices. And then he says in verse 4, I've decided what to do.

It sounds a bit bland the way it's written, but it's a sort of, Aha, now I've worked out what I'll do. I've concocted a plan. What am I going to do to provide for my future?

What am I going to do to make sure that I'm not destitute in the future? Now I've decided. So that when I'm dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.

Now there's the key in a sense for what this parable is actually in the end teaching. Here is a man who will do something with money to make friends who will welcome him when he's jobless.

He'll call back the favour for the sake of his own ability to keep living after he loses his job. So what's he going to do?

[8 : 10] He summons his master's debtors in verse 5, one by one. He asked the first, How much do you owe my master? And he answered, A hundred jugs of olive oil.

Often loans in those days were in terms not simply of money, but of commodities like olive oil, which was a very basic thing in Israel in those days as now.

And a hundred jugs is perhaps, they reckon, nine hundred gallons. So we're not dealing with a little bit here. We're dealing with more olive oil than you can ever pour over lettuce.

He said to him, Take your bill, it was a hundred, sit down quickly and make it fifty. Now that would be pretty good for those with mortgages on your house to wander into the bank and say, you know, how much do we owe you?

Well, it's about a quarter of a million. Well, let's make it a hundred and twenty five thousand. I mean, most of us wouldn't object. We'd probably take the bank manager out for dinner. If they ever did that to us, which is almost unimaginable.

[9 : 14] Halving his debt from a hundred to fifty jugs of olive oil. He asked another one, how much do you owe? He replied, a hundred containers of wheat, a thousand bushels, a huge amount of wheat.

Oh, take your bill and make it eighty. Now there's just two examples. Presumably there were many others. We're told that he summons all the debtors and speaks to them one by one.

And so there could well be a whole range of people for whom this dishonest manager has cut the debt, whether it's by twenty percent, fifty percent, some relatively large percentage.

And at least these two examples are in terms of big amounts that are owed. What is this action that he's just done? There's three interpretations generally about this and it's hard to be certain about them.

One is simply that he is, and this is commonly held, is that he is simply in effect diddling his landlord. So he's saying, you owe a hundred, let's just make it fifty, so that you can be my friend when I leave this job and blow my manager.

[10 : 31] He'll lose out. So that's one interpretation, that he's actually being dishonest here and fraudulent against his manager. Maybe even more than what he's been, it seems, in past history that's led to him losing his job.

He's cheating on his boss to benefit others, but so that he wins some friends and some favours when he loses the job. The second and third interpretations are that he's actually taking off, in effect, the illegal interest amount.

So the person might have actually borrowed fifty jugs of olive oil. The bill was written for him a hundred standard sort of illegal practice and big interest rates applied then.

And so what this man may now be doing is actually in one sense technically an honest thing. But again, it's to the detriment of his boss. His boss might have benefited from that bill that was double the jugs of olive oil that were lent.

The third interpretation like that is that the man himself, the manager, would have gained from that bill. So you lend fifty, but you pay back a hundred. And the manager is actually cutting his own profit.

[11 : 46] That seems to me a little less likely because, but it could be because he would not get that profit once he loses the job. Of course, the profit would go to the next manager or to the boss or someone else.

Now, we can weigh up those options and in a sense, it doesn't matter too much whether he's taking off the illegal interest or simply just defrauding his landlord.

The landlord's response to this though in verse eight is he commends the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

Now, he's not commending him for his dishonesty, but he's commending him for his shrewdness or cunning in how he operated.

Now, if it's the first option, that is simply he's halving the debt or cutting off a big percentage and his boss is going to miss out, possibly would expect the boss to be so angry about that act of dishonesty and it's, remember this man has already been squandering the property.

[12 : 56] That may have been dishonest squandering up till now. It's hardly likely that the manager would or the owner would commend him when he himself loses so much.

Partly, it heads me towards the second or third options where he's taking off the illegal interest amounts. But then, in effect, his action is perhaps not dishonest, but honest.

But it's certainly a clever option, a shrewd option. Well, in the end, we're not told explicitly what's behind all of that. In one sense, it doesn't matter all that significantly.

The point is this, and Jesus makes the point in telling the parable. The man does this so that he has friends when he leaves this job.

He's using this worldly wealth, this money, so that he accumulates friends to welcome him when he loses this job.

[13 : 56] He's courting friendships so that he's got some backup system when he's unemployed when it's coming. So he's winning the favour of debtors so that they might help him and welcome him in the future.

And even his master or boss commends him for such shrewd action. He may not be pleased because he's been cheated, if that is the case, but he certainly sees and admires the cunning.

Now, one of the difficulties in reading this parable is that we may interpret it as saying that the goal or the end justifies the means.

Now, many people in our world live under that sort of principle. That is, if the goal of the action, the end of the action, is a good thing, then it doesn't matter so much if the means of getting to that goal are themselves a bit underhanded or dishonest.

So, a thief might say, well, I'm stealing this and this and this because I'm really providing for my children. Some people might say, well, I'm actually gambling because I need a bit of money for my children or I'll give it all to charity or something, which I doubt they would ever do.

[15 : 16] That is, some dodgy practice may be justified in their minds by saying it'll bring about a good at the end. We might lie to somebody so that we don't hurt their feelings.

That is, the goal of not hurting their feelings or the end of not hurting their feelings justifies lying in some people's thinking. Sometimes this parable has been used to support that sort of ethical view that the end justifies the means.

And so his actions are commended because even though they're dishonest actions, he's got a good goal in mind, cunning plan. And so in verse 9, when Jesus then applies the parable, some interpret it along these lines.

I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it's gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. as though Jesus is saying, it's okay to act dishonestly with your money so long as the end result, the goal, the eternal goal is a good one.

Well, that's not what this parable is teaching. This parable is not teaching us to be dishonest. In fact, the word for world, for dishonest wealth in verse 9, mammon, is literally the word for worldly wealth.

[16 : 43] It's not necessarily dishonest. It's just wealth, money, possessions. In a sense, the God of this age.

Not necessarily dishonest. And I think the translation, sadly, in verse 9, has probably over-interpreted the word. You can see in the footnote that it's mammon.

Jesus is using this parable to teach us about shrewdness in using money. He's not teaching us that the end justifies the means.

He's not telling us that, yeah, it's okay to be dishonest so long as you're working for heaven or something like that. But rather, that as the manager shrewdly and cunningly uses money to gain for himself friends when he leaves this job, so followers of Jesus should use money shrewdly or cunningly to gain eternal friends as verse 9 says.

The end of verse 8, Jesus begins to apply the parable. The dishonest manager has been commended by his boss because he acted shrewdly and then we get the statement for the children of this age, that is, people of our world, unbelievers, are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light, that is, the followers of Jesus, disciples of Jesus, Christians.

[18 : 21] So, Jesus is saying learn from the shrewdness of people in our world, learn from those who are ingenious and clever in making their money work for them on earth, but you learn from them not so that you become rich on earth, but rather to get eternal friends because our world is so consumed by the God of Mammon that it serves it in a sense ingeniously, shrewdly and cunningly and we should learn from how the unbelievers of our world serve the God of Mammon but reapply that to how we serve God in accumulating eternal friends.

That's the point of the parable. It's not saying be dishonest for a good goal, it's be shrewd and cunning with wealth for a good goal.

As I said before, we're constantly being exhorted to make our money work for us and our world is so ingenious in serving this God of Mammon that it's actually brought about a global financial crisis, if I've understood it all correctly, through the sort of means by which people have been so consumed with money in various markets, that it's actually brought a crash last year in America with ripples around the world.

But the ingenuity of our world is only for this world, it's worldly wealth that it's consumed by and everything in our society is for worldly wealth, superannuation and annuities and stocks and shares and insurance and property and even the so-called futures market is actually very short term because it's only the future on this earth, it's not a future for eternity, so don't be beguiled by the language of futures markets.

Jesus is saying we should be ingenious and shrewd and cunning with our wealth for our eternal futures market, in particular for making eternal friends.

[20 : 27] How do we do that? Do you do that? How do we use our worldly wealth for making eternal friends?

Strategically, cunningly, shrewdly, wisely. What eternal friendships are you cultivating? Consider these possibilities.

Notice the language by the way, that it's to make eternal friends so that when your wealth on earth is gone, those eternal friends will welcome you into the eternal homes.

So consider, you die and go to heaven and you are welcomed by a Nigerian man, somebody you've never met on earth, but he welcomes you and greets you elaborately as Nigerians would no doubt, and says, because of your use of worldly wealth to support Peter and Elspeth and Stephen in Nigeria for many years, I became a Christian.

I'm here because of them and because of your financial support of them over so many years. You've never met me, I've never met you, but welcome to your eternal home.

[21 : 59] Another possibility, you arrive in heaven and you're greeted by a bishop. Some people might think that's unlikely, I think not entirely.

And that bishop comes up to you and welcomes you, not because they're a bishop, but they say, because of your use of worldly wealth, to support the ministry of Andy Pridot at Melbourne Union, I became a Christian when I was a uni student.

I later went to Bible college, was ordained, was a minister, became a bishop and I'm here in heaven in this eternal home in part because of your wise, shrewd use of worldly wealth.

Welcome to heaven, my friend. You arrive in heaven to be greeted by an Australian schoolgirl, never met her before, but she says because of your use of worldly wealth in giving me a Bible when I finished grade six, which I later read in a time of depression or sadness, I became a Christian.

I'm here in heaven because of your use of worldly wealth. Welcome. Welcome to heaven, my friend. You arrive in heaven to be greeted by a whole host of Chinese people who've never been in Australia.

[23 : 11] Why do they welcome you? They come up to you and say because of your generosity in giving to start the Mandarin ministry at Holy Trinity in 1999, a number of people have been converted through that ministry.

From that ministry some have come back to China and through their ministry back in China I became a Christian. Because of your use of worldly wealth, I'm here in heaven.

Welcome to you, my friend. You arrive in heaven to be greeted by a former neighbour, somebody you did know well, but because of your example of love, your care for them when they were going through a difficult time or whatever it was, later on maybe unbeknownst to you, they become a Christian.

And part because of your love and ministry and giving and generosity to them and they welcome you into heaven. It might be an errant child and you leave this earth not knowing that they're even a Christian anymore.

But because of your example of love and your generosity for them time after time they finally become Christian and they welcome you into an eternal home.

[24 : 23] Imagine arriving in heaven and finding the gateway to heaven lined with all these eternal friends, many of whom you never knew on earth and didn't even know existed. What an extraordinary welcome that would be.

In many ways this has been a passage that has excited me and challenged me in recent years. I preached it here in 2002, you may not remember that, but I remember a number of people being quite moved and commenting afterwards about the sermon and it moved me as well to think of the eternal friends, many of whom I will not know.

The end of nearly, well, 13 and a half years of ministry here, it's impossible to say the fruit of ministry. In a sense, eternally, I don't know.

Certainly for me, leaving and going with CMS to Asia is a very costly thing in terms of worldly wealth. And that's an issue that is one I keep praying about, that God will give me sufficient, as I'm sure he will.

But I'm very conscious of using not only my time and gifts but also my money, what little there is really, for eternity, for making eternal friends.

[25 : 36] And so can you in sharing in this ministry with me in the future and supporting it in prayer and finance. So consider, you arrive in heaven, you're greeted by a Burmese family whom you've never met.

And they welcome you and say, because of your generosity in 2008, giving money for relief after Cyclone Nargis, we converted from Buddhism to Christianity because we saw the love of Christians for us.

And it's because of your use of worldly wealth that I came to faith. Or someone from Burma greets you and says, because of your support of the Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology and your support of me teaching there as I'll be teaching more often in the years to come.

Somebody, a graduate from that place has come to our area as a missionary and I've been converted out of Buddhism. And I'm here in heaven because of your use of worldly wealth.

Welcome to heaven, my friend. You arrive in heaven to be greeted by a former imprisoned drug addict from India who was supported in part by people from here, graduate of a college in India where I've taught and so through supporting my ministry with CMS in part, that investment has been for him.

[26 : 57] But his ministry is to other drug addicts in India, now in Mumbai. And so people who are the fruit of his ministry will in some way benefit, have benefited from the investment of us in them.

Or you arrive in heaven to be greeted by a Malaysian family who say, welcome to heaven, my friend. We were Muslims, but a graduate of the school where I'll be teaching or college where I'll be teaching taught us the Christian faith and we converted.

Welcome to heaven, my friend. Are you making your money work? Are you making your worldly wealth work in the wisest way possible?

Are you gaining even unknown heavenly friends? When Carrie Packer died, someone said, how much has he left?

And the answer, of course, is everything. You cannot take it with you. Amongst the generations who've lived on this planet, we are about the wealthiest who've ever lived.

[28 : 13] But we cannot take it with us. But we can use it wisely, shrewdly, strategically and generously for accumulating eternal friends to welcome us to heaven.

Christian ministry. Christian ministry everywhere needs money. I doubt that there's a Christian ministry in the world that has got more money really than it needs, to be honest.

Just as we saw last week that there is no place in the world where there are too many labourers. So it is with the money that supports it. For every Christian ministry needs financial support here at Holy Trinity and beyond.

Investing in eternal friendships is the longest term and wisest investment that we can ever make. It will reap eternal dividends and many of them we will not see or even know about until we are greeted by that crowd in heaven.

These are not investments that any financial planner on earth will advise you to do. Of course not. They're so short-sighted. They're only living for this world. But Jesus here is urging us to be wiser investors, to invest in eternal friendships.

[29 : 40] Jesus says in verse 9, I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it is gone and you die, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

For the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of other people and for the sake of eternal friends, let me urge you to use your worldly wealth generously and sacrificially.

Not just supporting me with CMS. I gain no financial benefit in one sense from that. But in that, in Holy Trinity and our other link missionaries, in supporting Christian ministry generously and strategically, you may not see a return in the short term.

Many missionaries labour without seeing much fruit and the labour in a local church and CRE classes and so on don't often show obvious fruit. Who knows? What joy, what lasting joy, what solid joy that those friendships will bring you on the day you are welcomed to heaven?

Such use of wealth will contribute, I think, to what is the greatest picture in the Bible. picture we'll see over the next four weeks.

[31 : 29] A picture of people of every tongue and tribe and nation gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb and singing his praises for eternity.

You and I, God willing, we'll be there one day with our eternal friends, the ones who now we are investing in.

Let's pray. God, our Father, make us wise users of our wealth, we pray, so that we serve not mammon, the God of this age, but serve you and your gospel, God willing, we pray, so that we are investing in.

We pray, so that we are investing in. By means of generous and sacrificial giving to Christian ministry and mission both here and elsewhere.

We long for the day when we, with all your people, will sing your praise and the praise of your Son, our Saviour.

[32 : 38] Amen.