

A District Sales Manager

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] This is a very problematical story that appears in the 16th chapter, and I need just to remind you that in this story, Jesus is teaching his disciples.

That's how the passage begins, so you've got to keep that in mind so you don't get carried away with the story and forget the purpose that it has. The second thing that you need to notice is that Luke is teaching the most excellent Theophilus, whom we don't know, but whom we suspect was the senior official of the Roman Empire and lived in Rome.

And so that Jesus is teaching his disciples, Luke is teaching Theophilus, and the New Testament is teaching us. And the function of the New Testament is to be the sword which cuts through, I think more in terms of a surgeon's knife that cuts through to the spiritually diseased areas in our life, opens them up so that they can be treated or whatever.

So that's the teaching process that is going on. And if you break it down, it's a very simple story. It's a very distressing story for most people because it has one line in it, which says in verse 8, the master commended the dishonest, Stuart, and everybody says that's not right.

But we'll come to it. And you can wait in deep suspense to see what happens. The story then begins with the rich man, the master.

[1 : 41] Now the rich man is somebody who is portrayed in Luke fairly often. He is the source of the wealth around which the story is written. James tells the story of a rich man who was distinguished by gold rings and fine clothing.

One of the most eminent rich men in the whole of the New Testament is further on in this same chapter, 16 of Luke.

And he is the man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. The Pharisees in this same chapter are called those who were lovers of money. So he really is dealing with wealth and how you relate to it.

As most of you, your job is dependent upon wealth and you are measured by how well you relate to it, whether you add to it or whether you subtract from it.

[2 : 47] And the consequences for you if either of those things happen. So that the rich man is the man who has the wealth. The steward, or as I've entitled it, the district sales manager, he enjoys the wealth but it doesn't belong to him.

It belongs to somebody else. But he has the enjoyment of it and lives close to it. It's a kind of expense account living that has added another dimension to his life.

It drives me just bananas when you get one of those advertisements, you know, in a little leaflet that says you can get, you can stay at this hotel all night.

If you just present this and you'll get 50% off your bill and you go to the hotel and they tell you, all the guys who are on expense accounts have taken all the rooms and people with your kind of discount, maybe you'd like to come back next week.

And, you know, the whole business of living in relationship to a false source of wealth makes it very difficult for anybody who doesn't live next to that kind of wealth.

[4 : 07] I don't mean it's a, I mean it's, I ain't going to get in trouble, I'll move on. But, I, you, you figure it out. But he, he lived close to the cash flow and that was the basis of his life.

So that in a sense he was, he was not, he was a man who was prosperous, but he was, he was riding a balloon, so to speak.

And, uh, along comes the rumor. Now, it doesn't have to be true. All it has to be is traveling. And this rumor comes and pricks his balloon.

So that the thing on which he depended suddenly collapses. And, uh, and, uh, it's, it's exactly like, it's, it's the dreaded rumor.

It's the thing that makes, makes the stock market burp all the time, you know, rumors. And, uh, and then people get caught initiating rumors occasionally and making money when the stock market burps.

[5 : 12] So that you get, uh, you get this kind of thing happening. This rumor leads to the consequence of being called to account.

You know, that, uh, it's, uh, uh, suddenly the, the, uh, auditors move in and they want to see what's happening. And, uh, that's a lovely picture.

One of the things you've got to realize as you hear this story, though, which I think is very important to realize, is that Jesus didn't take his disciples along and show them to the people in the marketplace and say, you should be like this.

What he's doing in this story is taking the disciples and holding up the people in the marketplace and saying to his disciples, you should be like this. These, it's the people in the marketplace that are the object of Christ's teaching and saying, you should be like them.

So this man is called to account and, uh, somebody is out buying him a gold watch, you know, so that, uh, the time is coming.

[6 : 22] When he's called to account, knows that he's going to lose his job, then he begins his personal assessment. And he says to dig, uh, I, I, I can't do it.

I mean, I put a shovel in my hand and I simply can't do it. To beg, I am ashamed. He, he, he makes this kind of personal inventory.

The kind of inventory all of us make when you find your company has been bought by another company. And much as your work has been treasured over these many years, we, uh, are sorry to let you know that it's not treasured as much as somebody else.

And so, uh, we're going to say goodbye to you. And that's when you are precipitated into doing a kind of personal inventory that this man does. And his, uh, you know, they, uh, I, uh, I, I'm much too old and much too weak at this point, but I still think I could go out and get a laboring job, but I couldn't.

But, uh, this is the realization that, that this man came to. He couldn't dig. And, uh, his social standing, his place in the community, the level of life that he had, the lifestyle he established, the way his life, wife lived, all those things meant that he would be totally ashamed to be found begging.

[7 : 42] And he realized that all the people whom he could count on as his friends were the people that he'd been ripping off for the last 20 years.

And that was the only circle of friends that he had. And he needed a community that would receive him. And so that was the assessment that he made, uh, of his situation.

Well, it was at that point that he did the thing for which he is commended. And one of the commentaries calls it the cleverly resolute action imposed by the hopelessness of the situation.

Get it? The clever, the, the cleverly resolute action imposed by the hopelessness of the situation.

You know, and that's, that's the, uh, the, the point that we all hope we won't have to come to, where we, uh, really have to be clever and, uh, resolute to do something simply because we have no other choice.

There is no, there's no other way we can, can turn. And, uh, and that, that's the, that's the position that we're in.

[8 : 55] I mean, that's the position that, that, that the New Testament works us into all the time. If you read it, I mean, it's, it's a hopeless book, uh, in that it, uh, it doesn't have proper respect for the dignity that, uh, that we consider to be inherited or, or, or, or right.

Uh, it keeps cutting that out from under us and leaving us in the hopeless situation. Uh, puts you in the situation where you won't do it unless you have to.

Uh, and thank God I've never had to. Well, I mean, you see the contradiction in that. Uh, what you do is thank God when you have to, not that you've never had to.

Uh, that, uh, that you come to the place where, uh, the hopelessness of your situation forces you to take resolute action. Well, he knew how to take resolute action.

He cooked the books, or it looks like he did, but, uh, it's, it's hard to believe that this story is used in that way.

[10 : 01] So you can consider these possibilities. He called in the debtors who owed his, his, his master money. And he said to the one, how much do you owe? And he said, I owe a hundred measures of oil.

He said, take your bill, write down 50. Then he called on another who owed a hundred measures of wheat and said, take your bill and write down 80.

Now, uh, it's very interesting, um, that this, uh, this situation is, is there because, uh, how did he, how did he justify this?

How did he, how did he manage to do this? Now, one suggestion is that in one instance, the, uh, that, that what, that what was happening here, because remember the Jews didn't believe in taking interest.

So, uh, was he just knocking the interest off and asking for the capital to be returned? And some people think it very likely that that's what he was doing. Was he taking the part of it that belonged to him, as opposed to the part that belonged to his master out of the deal, and saying, you don't owe me anything, just pay the, the 50 that you owe my master, and we'll call it, we'll call it square.

[11:24] Uh, but somehow there had subtly infiltrated into this bargaining system, uh, the fact that, uh, while he owed a hundred measures of wheat, he probably had only received 50 measures of wheat.

That is, you didn't, you didn't acknowledge that, uh, that interest was being charged. You just, uh, made the figures look. So it's like when you go to one of these wonderful sales, where they say, no GST charged, you know.

And, uh, how do they manage it? Well, they just don't tell you, that's all. I, I mean, uh, it's there, but you don't see it. And, uh, and I think they can take the pattern for that from, from this part of Luke, you know, where the interest is there, but you don't see it.

And, uh, he takes it away and, uh, makes them write down a, makes them write down a new bill, which he presents to his master.

And in that way, uh, his master gets the money or gets the, gets the continued indebtedness. And he comes and says to his servant, uh, in, in the words which cause all the problems, he says, uh, the master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness.

[12:51] Now, one of, one of the words that's difficult is, is this word dishonest. Uh, in, uh, an older version or translation, it says that he was the unjust.

He was the unjust steward. But what it means basically was that he was a person who accepted the pattern of his age. I am just doing what everybody does.

You know, and we justify a whole lot of business dealings on that basis. I'm just doing what everybody does. You know, he does it. So I do it. And, uh, that's how most of the, uh, in the war crimes trials, that was the main excuse.

I just did what everybody was doing. I, I don't accept any personal responsibility for that. I just behaved the way my culture behaves. And, uh, and that excuse is very limited as to, uh, how much good it does to you in the end.

And you can think of a thousand examples of it. But he said, that's all I was doing. And, and, uh, but in doing that, it says that he was, uh, he was very shrewd.

[13:58] And, uh, his shrewdness, uh, is, is that he, is, is that for which he was commended. And it was a shrewdness, which is not unlike the shrewdness of, uh, Adam and Eve when they were at the, uh, at the tree.

They, you see that this shrewdness is, is essentially capable of being, uh, evil. That is, it's, uh, there's something about it.

It's, it's a kind of wisdom, but it's a kind of perverse wisdom. And, uh, when he's commended for that shrewdness, do you remember when Adam and Eve were there and they looked at the tree and the fruit of the tree and, and they said, uh, this is good for food.

It's a delight to the eyes. It's desirable to make one wise. Well, they wanted to, they, they thought that the wise choice was logical, rational, and apparent, and they would make it.

That's how they exercised their wisdom. In the same way that the steward in this story sees the wise choice and he makes it. The difference is that it's used in the instance of Adam and Eve.

[15:10] They opted out of the garden. He uses the same wisdom to opt back into the garden by building for himself a, uh, a group of friends through the way he shrewdly dealt with them and their indebtedness.

Uh, he belonged to a society that, uh, used friends and made money. And he changed the, the nature of his society into one in which you make friends and use money.

Uh, and, uh, that was the, the difference between, uh, the way he behaved and the wisdom that he exercised. So, you get the, the story coming to, uh, uh, a dramatic climax when you see how he dealt in his, in his situation.

Well, the, uh, the way this works is, uh, for the disciples to now figure out what Jesus meant by telling them this story about the dishonest steward.

And, uh, he, he was pointing out to, to the, to the disciples that their existential situation was such that they had no bargaining power left on their side.

[16 : 32] They were facing, uh, he was facing, uh, having to account. He was, uh, the, the word had got out against him. He was through as far as the marketplace was concerned.

And he, he had to, he had to act on that basis. And that's the, that's the position in which, uh, we find ourselves in, in relationship to God.

We have taken what doesn't belong to us. We have used it for our own purposes. And we come to the place of being called to account.

Now, that's, uh, that's the simple story that Jesus was telling his disciples. They were, that, uh, people come to this point and what are they going to do? Jesus, it says, told them this because he said, the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon so that when it fails, uh, they may receive you into the eternal habitation.

[17 : 43] Uh, this is what, what it means when it tells us that we are to use money and make friends.

That the circumstances of our life in this world is such that our ultimate goal is to, uh, enter into the eternal habitation.

Now, I'm facing the problem of having to retire, you know, uh, which is an inconceivable possibility for me and totally unnecessary and I don't understand it.

But, uh, the one thing that happens is that at that point in my life, I stop earning money and start living on interest.

And, uh, at that point in my life, I don't have, I no longer have a home and I got to find one, you see. And so if I can get some interest built up and a home, then life will be complete.

[18 : 47] But I'm faced with this contradiction. And that says that that's not what life consists of. Life consists of having friends who will, uh, be friends to you in your need and having an eternal habitation to which you will go.

And that that's, that's what life is all about. And that's how you are to live your life. And that's what Jesus tells his disciples they have to do. And it puts us, you see, as, as Christians in the marketplace, as, as, as those who profess to be the disciples of Jesus Christ, that we are deliberately to use whatever power, whatever influence, whatever money we have for the purposes of the kingdom.

Because, uh, you know, the rumor can come, the accounting can be called for. We find ourself destitute. We can't dig. We won't beg. And we haven't got any place to go spiritually.

And, uh, it's at that point that we make the big decision in our lives. And it's at that point that Jesus says, you don't know how to deal with this situation. But if you look in the marketplace, you'll see how people have to deal with it every day.

And I'll bet you there's 50 stories in this room of people who have been caught in that kind of situation and have had to deal with it. And Jesus says to us as disciples or those who, uh, might want to become disciples, this is what you've got to do.

[20 : 28] You've got to look at the sons of this world and watch how they deal with this existential trauma in their lives. And you've got to learn to deal with it so that you don't get caught in the place that they get caught in.

This, uh, unjust steward is to be for you an example of how you are to cut your losses, establish your gains, and find what you're going to do.

Now, you see, what God offers us in Christ is salvation. It's a different, it's a different kind of, of money, so to speak.

You know that the marketplace works on the basis of money. You are fluent when you have a lot of it, and you're practically incoherent when you haven't. And nobody can understand you.

They can't hear what you're saying anymore, because the only language that, that, that people can hear is money. That's, that's how the marketplace works. And nobody says it shouldn't.

[21 : 36] Uh, Jesus says that's inevitably the way it must work. But he says, you've got to learn another language. You've got to have another source of wealth.

And that's to be your ultimate wealth and your ultimate habitation. And that is yours when you come to the place where you, under the pressure of the circumstances, are forced to make a deal.

And you're forced to make a deal when you haven't got very much on your side. All you've got is what has been. And you have to make a deal.

And in a sense, the gospel comes along to each one of us in those circumstances in our lives. And if I can, without being blasphemous, say that Jesus comes to you and says, have I got a deal for you?

And he has. And that deal has to do with you recognizing your, your own, uh, need, your own ultimate need.

[22 : 45] Recognizing why you have been entrusted with what you have. And that that entrustment is not for you to live off it. It's for you to bargain for something that has real value in terms of a relationship to God by faith through Christ.

And an ultimate security which nobody can take away from you. Now, that's, you see how he takes the goals and the ambitions that we have, and we try and keep within our power and within, you know, that we can hold on to it.

And suddenly it's taken away from us and you have to make a bargain. And that's the bargain you have to make. And Christ gives this brilliant illustration to his disciples.

Now, I have, I have a friend who, whom I visited yesterday and who's a bit older than I am, who's had a stroke.

And you talk to him. And he hears your question. He can speak quite fluently. But he can't remember. You know, so you say, tell me.

[24 : 01] And he says, yeah, yes. But he can't articulate it. He can't get the words out. He knows what they are.

He knows what the answer to the question is. And he might be able to lead you by some devious route. Mostly he just calls for his wife and gets her to do it because she knows what he's trying to say.

Well, I think some of us are extremely fluent in looking at our lives in terms of the mammon of unrighteousness and the security we have.

But how do you bargain when that's taken away? How do you talk? What language have you got?

And spiritually, we're often reduced to the condition of somebody who's had a stroke.

We still know in our hearts what we want, but we don't know how to talk about it. We don't know how to articulate it. We don't know how to get hold of it. And that, I think, is why Jesus tells us this story and commends the unjust steward, that he might be an example to the disciples to show them that they, when they're pushed with their backs to the wall, have got to make a decision.

[25 : 17] And in that decision, they find where their true wealth is, that is, faith in Jesus Christ, and their eternal habitation in the place that he calls them to.

And that's what our life is about. And that is the thing that God has to bring all of us to, to make that recognition.

And it's hard to do. As long as you are fluent in the language of money and power and all those things, and yet you can't speak in the language of ultimate value and ultimate worth and ultimate faith in God, God who has a deal for you that you can enter into.

Let me pray. Father, thank you for this strange and wonderful story of the man in the marketplace and how, in the extremity of his situation, he dealt with the circumstances of his life.

The fact of his own weakness that he could not dig, the fact of his own pride that he could not beg, and the fact of his own perversity that he had nobody on whom he could rely.

[26 : 38] Father, help us to escape from the illusion that we have answers to those questions, that we have the capacity to cope, that we're not deluded or deceived.

Help us to recognize that your loving purpose is to bring us to the place where we recognize our utter and complete need of you, and that all that we have is entrusted to us to serve your ultimate and eternal purposes and to seek the coming of your kingdom in our lives and in the lives of the people of our world.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.