



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson  
Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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This gospel passage is one that can strike our ears as strange. We're not accustomed to hearing Jesus saying things like, ". . . make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth . . ." It's disconcerting, to say the least. So let's take a closer look at this passage and see what might be helpful in it for our journey of faith.

Jesus tells this parable about the manager who has squandered the property with which he has been entrusted. If we're honest with ourselves and with God, we all fit that description to one extent or another, to some degree having squandered the many gifts we have been given by God. Some of those gifts are financial. Others are the human beings who fill our lives. Still others involve the talents we have which we sometimes use in the service of God's creation -- and other times use primarily to serve no one but ourselves.

The rich man for whom this manager works gets wind of his manager's shenanigans and tells him that he's fired. So before the rich man's debtors hear about it, the manager calls them to him and lowers their debt -- we're told he does this so that he makes friends who will open their homes to him after his job disappears. When the rich man finds out what the manager has done, he commends him for his shrewdness.

At that point in telling the parable, Luke has Jesus begin commenting on the action:

"... the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

It's reminds us of Jesus' instruction to his followers elsewhere that we are to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We are not called to *be* serpents; the word itself conjures up deceitfulness and dishonesty, drawing as it does on that unhappiness in the garden of Eden. We are called to be innocent. Yet we are also called not to be naïve about the world in which we live, to be every bit as wise as any serpent is and to act shrewdly given that wisdom. Without such rigorous honesty about the world it's more challenging than it is anyway to manifest God's reign.

The world is full of brokenness that makes people "do what they would not do," to use one of Paul's phrases for sin. We're fully aware of that dynamic within ourselves, and we need to remember it about others, too. Remembering it helps us respond with compassion to the ways both we and others fall short of God's vision for us; that kind of honesty helps us do our part to reflect the immense love of God in the world.

One interpreter of this passage, Sharon Ringe, makes a fascinating argument that I'll toss out for your consideration. She argues that in lowering the debt, the manager uses his position to manipulate the wealth still under his control – barely -- in such a way that God's reign is more manifest because of what he does. That is, the rich man doesn't need the wealth; he's already rich! The debtors need it more. And if the manager benefits in the process through the relationships he forms, all the better; he is building relationships that more fully reveal the economy of God.

One of the things appealing about Ringe's interpretation is that it acknowledges that our motives for doing things are often complex, sometimes more complex than we realize. It also accounts for Jesus' praise of the man's actions. It's a fascinating argument with something to be said for it. It also seems to me that we have to be quite careful when we begin thinking in such terms, because we can all too easily justify shady actions.

But that's probably true about most situations anyway, given the complexity of human motivations. We need to be as honest as possible about ourselves and our own brokenness, as well as that of others. That's part of being wise: we are wise not only about the world outside of us but about our internal world as well. It helps us be faithful rather than dishonest in little things, which in turn forms us so that we are more easily faithful in big things as well, to use the image that Jesus uses in our gospel passage this morning.

Jesus is wise, not naïve about the human heart. He knows the depths of dishonesty of which we are capable -- with ourselves and with each other -- and with Him. He also knows the depths of *honesty* to which we can go, and the heights to which we can rise when that honesty is put to the service of God.

Ultimately, this odd parable speaks of the very real world in which all of us move. Whether in the academy or in business or in daily family life, we are continually confronted with the question: just how honest with ourselves and with one another and with God we are going to be? Can we trust God enough in order for us to be completely honest about our own brokenness and the brokenness in the world? When we do, it helps us immensely to respond to that brokenness with the compassion of Jesus that rests in all our hearts.

When we look within the human heart, our own or someone else's, we won't always like what we see any more than God does. We are a mixed bag. Other things we see we'll like *very* much. And in those ways our hearts will give us hope and confidence both in ourselves and in the human race. But mainly in God. We'll be reminded that we have been given the power to manifest the love of God among us, even in the midst of brokenness . The vast majority of us even have the will to manifest the love of God.

And, by God's grace, we also have the willpower to do just that.