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GAME TIME
LUKE 16:1-9

It certainly appears at times that God has a sort of quirky sense of humor. He has given me as the major focus of my adult life a ministry that has as one of its main tasks standing in front of people and speaking. This is ironic given that when I was in high school I avoided public speaking the way I avoid eating cilantro. My senior year a number of friends wanted me to run for student body office, but I declined because candidates had to give a speech. My sophomore year my English teacher required us all to give a 4 minute speech to the class. The assignment almost made me sick. I recall dreading the day my turn was going to come up and I would have to speak. I sat in class that day doing the math. I knew how many were assigned to speak before me. I was one of the last to speak that day. I remember the feeling of hope when several went longer than they were assigned, things were taking longer than expected and I realized it was a race against the clock. If people could stretch it out a little bit longer the period would end before my turn came and I would get a reprieve.

I felt a huge relief when it became obvious that I would not have to speak that day. Of course the problem was that though I might not have to give my speech that day the teacher would just move it to the next day of class. The assignment wasn't over, it was just postponed for a day. And sure enough, my time came. Today I cannot tell you what the speech was about, nor do I have any specific memories of it. I just recall the terror of anticipation I felt. Apparently I survived it. But that little experience was an example that there are some things that will inevitably come, so you had better prepare for them. I still face the inevitability of an assignment. Sunday comes every week, and I had better be prepared. That's something we all know about. There are some inevitable things we will face, and we need to be prepared for them. Today we will learn about the most important of those by looking at a rather odd parable from Jesus that is found in Luke 16:1-9

JESUS COMMANDS PRUDENCE

This is the most difficult of Jesus' parables. It leaves some people scratching their heads because it sounds inconsistent with what Jesus stood for. However, I believe our problems with this little story can be resolved if we pay attention to the culture.

The story is about a wealthy man who had a business manager. The Greek word used for the manager's job was *oikonomos*, which literally meant "house law." His job was to rule and run the estate, the business and affairs of the master or owner. He negotiated contracts and managed accounts. Laurie and I had a good friend who played major league baseball. He and his wife had an agent who was their business manager. The agent's company not only negotiated their contract, they managed all their finances, invested and controlled their money. I remember one time they decided they wanted to buy a car and they had to call their agent for permission to get the money to do it. That's a little like what the manager in Jesus' story did.

Unfortunately this manager abused his position. He was misappropriating funds to finance an extravagant lifestyle. The word translated "wasting" his possessions in verse 1 was the same one used in 15:13 to describe how the prodigal son squandered his wealth in "wild living."

This guy was cut from the same cloth as Bernie Madoff. He was using his master's money to fund his own lavish lifestyle. Imagine the conversation someone had with the master. Hey, did you know your manager just bought a new Lamborghini chariot and a team of expensive Arabians to pull it? I don't know if this means anything but a friend of mine told me he saw him at the casino up in Tyre, and he dropped a bundle there. He was also boasting about a new beach front house he had just bought. I don't know what you're paying him, but I just thought you ought to know.

The master figures out quickly that his employee is ripping him off. So he tells him to bring the books, and that after they've reviewed them his employment is terminated. It was a bad day for the manager. Suddenly he's forced to consider his options. How about construction work? Apparently he was from the tribe of Rick Myatt. Put me on a construction job and two things will happen, one is the building won't get built right, and the other is someone is going to get hurt. Probably me. No, that option was out.

As far as he can see his only other option is begging. I hear that can be somewhat lucrative, but it is both humiliating and will certainly not fund the kind of lifestyle he was used to. So he ruled that one out as well. What could he do? Being a schemer, he hit upon an idea to make it possible to have another job like the one he had just lost.

He calls the master's debtors in and reviews their accounts. The first guy owes the master 800 gallons of olive oil. That's a lot of olive oil. It would be the equivalent of 2 to 3 years wages for a common laborer. Today if a day laborer makes \$8 an hour that works out to \$16,000 a year. So call it 2 and a half years wages, or \$40,000. The manager says "If you pay today I'll give you a 50% discount. Write me a check for \$20,000 and we're square." The debtor was thrilled. I would be too. If my bank came to me and said you have \$160,000 remaining on your mortgage, but if you can come up with \$80,000 and give it to us now we'll call the mortgage paid in full, I'd try to find some way to do that. Then he goes to the next guy who owes a thousand bushels of wheat. This works out to 8-10 years' wages, so call it \$144,000. The manager says "I'll give you a 20% discount if you pay today. Give me \$115,000 and we're done." Again who wouldn't want that? That's almost \$30,000 in savings.

In verse 4 Jesus has the manager say that he hopes as a result of his actions "**when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their homes.**" That sounds like he's hoping people will have him over for dinner. He's not hoping for social engagements. He's hoping to be given employment in their houses. He's hoping someone might need a business manager and will hire him. His plan is to give his boss's debtors a deal, one that is so good that when he's fired they'll be willing to do him some favors. He's saving them thousands of denarii.

Verse 8 is puzzling. Jesus said the master of the house praised the dishonest manager when he discovered what he'd done. What he praised was not his moral character, but his shrewdness. It is surprising to note how Jesus has the master describe his sketchy former manager. It says in verse 8 "he had acted shrewdly" but the Greek word used there goes beyond shrewdness. It usually is translated, "wise," "discerning," "sensible," or "prudent." That's where we run into a problem. Jesus has the master praising his former employee for being "discerning" or "wise" after he had apparently stolen from him, and Jesus seems to commend this dishonest behavior. How are we to understand this?

First understand that the prudent action that the master and really Jesus himself was praising was preparing for a future that he knew was coming. That's the main thing that Jesus wants us to see in this story. He used an unusual context, an unfaithful servant as his example, to highlight the message. Don't lose the point of the story. The point is that preparing for a

future you know is coming is a wise, prudent, good thing. It is something Jesus said you absolutely should do.

It bothers us that Jesus would use a schemer to illustrate this message. It seems like he approves of his scheming and his dishonesty. God has used slimy people before. Read the life of Jacob. He was a total schemer almost to the level of being a con man, but God used him. However, there are some things in this story that suggest that we might be missing some cultural matters that soften the actions of the manager a little bit.

First, remember that the manager is hoping that his actions in cutting the bills of the debtors might open doors for him. But is it likely that he would think people would offer him a job if they knew he had cheated his boss? I know, I'll build my resume by misusing my master's funds, then when I get fired, rip him off by reducing the amount he's owed. That'll be a sure recommendation for me. Is that reasonable?

Let's suppose that you have a business and you are looking to hire a new chief financial officer. You interview a person who has worked for one of your suppliers. He seems eminently qualified. But then in an effort to get you to hire him he offers to change the billing so it looks like you owe the supplier half of what you actually owe. Would you hire that guy? No way. If he does it to his current boss he'll do it to you. You'd treat that guy like he's radioactive. You'd be thinking "dude, I am so not hiring you."

Here's a second question. Is it likely that Jesus thought a normal reaction to the master being again ripped off by the manager would be for him to praise the scammer? Yeah, that guy may be as crooked as a dog's leg, but he's pretty smart. That makes no sense.

I suggest that there's something that was understood by Jesus' listeners that we don't know. Look for a moment at Luke 3:10-14. In the context John the Baptist has been calling people to repent and prepare for Messiah's coming. "What should we do then? The crowd asked. John answered, The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptized. Teacher, they asked, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, and what should we do? He replied, Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

He told tax collectors not to collect any more than was required because common practice was for tax collectors to squeeze people for as much money as they could possibly get out of them. They went for more than the actual tax and kept the excess for themselves. That was how things worked. And soldiers might falsely accuse people of crimes to force them to pay money to avoid prosecution for those phony offenses. It was just the way things were.

In much of the world it is standard practice that if you want to get anything done you have to pay a bribe to get someone to do what he's already paid to do. In Mexico if you want to get telephone service or get the trash collectors to pick up your garbage you have to bribe them to do it. One U.N. report said that Mexicans pay \$2.6 billion a year in bribes. I recall talking to a missionary in Africa who told me they didn't encourage people in the US to send them packages of supplies because they would have to pay a bribe to receive it. In many places you might even have to pay a bribe to keep police from hauling you into jail on a trumped up charge. I read a story about a business man in China who was trying to get permits to expand his business but ran afoul of authorities who wanted a bribe. He refused to pay it. So they cooked up some phony charges and threw him in jail. They left him there for months until he coughed up the equivalent of \$29,000 in bribes.

This kind of practice was in play with this manager. He supplemented his wages by tacking on a percentage profit for himself to deals that he negotiated for his boss. There are indications in history that this was common practice. In other words, the boss knew he was doing this. It was considered part of his pay, just as excess taxes extorted by tax collectors was viewed as part of their remuneration. So what this manager did was to trim his cut off the deals he had negotiated. He did not steal anything from his boss, which is why the boss applauded his action.

When we grasp that this story makes more sense. He thinks the debtors might be willing to offer him a job later because he got the boss the money he was owed and he sacrificed his own slice of the pie. It was a good deal for the debtors, which they would have appreciated, but it didn't cheat his boss. The master applauds the fact that the manager did his job in getting him the money he was owed and in doing so acted wisely by sacrificing short term profit for his long term good.

PRUDENCE MEANS PREPARING FOR ETERNITY

In verse 9 Jesus tells you the application of his story. “**I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.**” He has made the point that wisdom prepares for the future, now he applies that principle to our eternal future.

Unfortunately this statement sounds like Jesus said we need to use our wealth here on this earth to make friends for us in heaven so that we will be accepted there. In other words it sounds like he’s saying we can and should buy our way in to God’s kingdom. That certainly would be a contradiction of the theology we see in the rest of the New Testament, even of Jesus’ own words. Can he really mean that you’ll only be welcomed into God’s kingdom if you use your money to pile up brownie points before God?

In verse 9 Jesus is still using his story as an illustration. When he talked about “gaining friends” he meant doing what the shrewd manager did. He prepared for the future. He didn’t literally mean buy some friends in heaven. So the idea of making friends and being welcomed into eternal dwellings is figurative, alluding to the story. It stands for preparing for the eternal future.

He’s drawing our attention to the fact that the fallen manager went from living only for the now, to sacrificing now to live for the future. Jesus is telling us we need to have the long view of life, not the short term bottom line, what is life like today, view. We need to think eternally.

It’s helpful if you see this story in its larger context. Jesus was seeking to change his disciples’ paradigm, their way of looking at life. The paradigm they had was heavily influenced by the thinking of the leaders of their culture. It is precisely that thinking that Jesus is attacking in this story. If you read it in its context you will see that. A little further on in this chapter you’ll see where the problem was. After Jesus talked about serving God not money in 16:14 it says, “**The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.**” They had a worldview in which to be blessed by God was to be rich, so clearly those who are rich must be the most godly. They were all about money.

In other places in Scripture we find that they were consumed with pride, with having honor in this world. In Luke 11:43 Jesus said, “**Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and**

greetings in the marketplaces.” Like most of us, they wanted to be somebody, and Jesus said that was more important to them than anything else. They had a religion which allowed them to care most about being acceptable in the eyes of people, honored and rich. They were completely focused on this world. Jesus told this story to challenge that world view. He said, “eternity is coming. You’d better prepare for it. It’s more important than the status, praise and wealth of this world.” That’s his point. ***Eternity is more important than success, acceptance or wealth in this life.***

IMPLICATIONS

RECEIVE JESUS

Perhaps the most familiar verse in the Bible is John 3:16. In a discussion about how one can see the eternal kingdom of God, in other words prepare for eternity, Jesus said, “**God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**” Believe in Jesus’ terms meant more than give assent to. It meant rely on. Trust his word. Follow what he says. Let him rule my life.

Ephesians 2:8 says, “**it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.**” The good news of Jesus Christ is that entering into God’s eternal kingdom is a free gift that we cannot earn, but can only accept. That’s how gifts are. Laurie’s birthday is coming up next month, and I plan to give her a gift. I’ve been suggesting she might want to work a little harder to earn that gift. Wait, that’s not right. If you earn it, it’s not a gift. A true gift is a gracious expression of love. In fact the ancient Greek word for gift, charisma, literally means a result of grace.

For the religious leaders to receive Jesus was an act of choosing eternity over the present. Their position was dependent on being right theologically. If they followed Jesus they faced the real possibility of losing everything. Look what happened to a former Pharisee named Paul. Jesus is telling them that the smart choice is to choose eternity and put their faith in him.

GO TO PRACTICE

So we enter God’s kingdom as a gift, simply by believing in Jesus. But there are Bible verses that talk about earning rewards in heaven. In Matthew 6:20 Jesus said “**Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.**” He said in Matthew 6:4 when we give to the needy without doing it for notice by other people

“your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Jesus seems to say we need to do some things in order to be rewarded in heaven.

Well, yes, but that was before the new covenant was put in place, right? 2 Corinthians 5:10 says “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” Wait, do we get salvation as a gift or is it a reward for what we do? Let’s be clear that it is a gift. But 1 Corinthians 3:13 says the work we have done on this earth will be tested by God. Then in verses 14-15 Paul says, “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he will himself be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” He’ll come out with all his possessions burned up, his hair singed, his clothes burned off and he’s smelling of smoke, but he’ll come through.

How do those go together? I don’t have all the answers. I’m just telling you what God says. But this parable Jesus tells reveals two really crucial ideas that you and I need to grasp and live with as an ever present reality every day of our lives.

First: eternity is game time. When Toby was young I did what many dads do, I coached some teams he played on, including some hockey teams and a high school baseball team. That experience illustrated for me some important concepts I want to share today. One of those is that kids were always clear that the games were what mattered. They would miss practice, but they hated to miss games. Games counted. And games were the fun part of playing. They were intense as a result.

The implication of this parable and of all of Scripture is that eternity is game time. That is what counts. That’s where the intensity comes in. It is where the fun is. This just makes sense when you consider the duration. Yes, this life may last 80 years or more, but I can tell you from personal experience that it is astounding how quickly those years pass. Eternity means forever. Take 80 years out of eternity and you have eternity. Our life on this earth is hardly a blip compared to eternity. The scriptural teaching is that as fun and exciting and important as a game is compared to practice, so eternity is compared to the life we are living right now.

Now comes the second concept, the radical one. The way we live today will impact our experience in game time. I never had any difficulty as a coach

convincing kids that games were fun. Practices, however were different. They weren't fun, they weren't usually exciting. They were just work. So I encountered kids who didn't want to practice. They just wanted to show up for games and play.

There was a truth kids needed to grasp. Think of those commercials they have on television for AT&T where a guy is talking to 4 kids around a table and he asks them, "Which is better, faster or slower, bigger or smaller, one or two?" My question would be "which is more fun, to play really well in a game or to play badly?"

My answer is play well! Are you sure? I am absolutely, positively sure." Okay, honestly I have to admit there is an element of faith in that statement. All I've ever done in life when it comes to sports is play badly. And it wasn't fun. I used to play hockey a little. For a brief period I played on a team with Toby where he was the goalie. I remember one game where I was playing defense. We had the puck down near the other team's goal. A teammate passed the puck to me at the point out near the blue line. But because I'm terrible I had trouble gaining control of it. One of the other team's players came charging at me intending to steal the puck from me. Knowing that would be a disaster I panicked. I decided I'd try to just pass it across the ice to the other defenseman. Unfortunately a guy on the other team saw it coming from a mile away. He intercepted the puck going full speed and was off on a breakaway. He went in on Toby all alone. Toby stopped him. No one said anything to me, but I could hear them all thinking, "Okay, never pass the puck to Rick." That's just not fun.

My entire life I've not played very well. I do remember one highlight. My last baseball game of my college days I had a really good day. I can still remember it. I got 3 hits in 4 at bats and drove in 5 runs in an 8 to 5 win over UC Riverside. It was the one time in my life that I actually made the difference for my team in a positive way. I was the key player. That was really fun. It was way better than my usual failure.

So here's the point: kids seemed to have difficulty connecting practice with games. They often didn't get that practicing, sacrificing to work between games in order to get faster, stronger and more skilled, would actually enable them to play better thus enjoy the games a lot more.

We have that same problem. We have difficulty making the connection between this life and eternity, but the same principle applies. The revolutionary but elusive idea is that how I live right now will impact what I experience in eternity! The kind of person I am now has some implications for the kind of person I will be in God's eternal kingdom. When Jesus says we should store up treasure in heaven he's telling us what we do now is connected to what we will experience in heaven.

Romans 8:29 tells us that God is in the process of conforming us to the likeness of His Son, Jesus. James 1:2-4 says we should think of it as joy when we face trials “**because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**” But why does God do this? Why does he make us go through the process of growing in Christ and all the difficulty that involves? I can only conclude that there is something about that process in this life that carries over into eternity. There is a connection!

This is not about earning your ticket into the kingdom. Entrance into God's kingdom is a gift of God's kindness and grace. But we can know that every sacrifice we make now for God's kingdom we will someday be glad for. Every bit of preparation, every bit of obedience to God, will pay dividends.

ADJUST YOUR FOCUS

Last fall Laurie and I went on vacation but we ran into a little problem. We planned the trip around the flights we could get using frequent flyer miles. When we tried to line up lodging we found good deals on places to stay with one fly in the ointment. We had one night at the very beginning of the trip where we couldn't find anything. We finally found a good deal on a hotel for that one night. So when we got there we unpacked all our clothes, then noticed some things we thought could be better about the room so we went out and bought some furniture to make it better. We also noticed that the recreational facilities were lacking because they didn't have a Jacuzzi. So we got in touch with a contractor and arranged to have him come put one in.

No we didn't do that. In fact, we didn't even unpack our clothes. We were only going to be there for one night. It would be idiotic to invest time and money into that place because we wouldn't be there very long and because it didn't belong to us. That is what our life is like on this planet. We are not here permanently. This world does not belong to us. Even the stuff we have

here is just loaned to us by God. We just get to use it. 1 Corinthians 7:31 says “this world in its present form is passing away.”

Given that shouldn't we adjust our focus to that which will last forever? Laurie's brother Scott and his wife, Karen, have been visiting with us this week. They were telling us yesterday about Karen's sister and her husband who have served as missionaries for 30 years in Africa. It has been difficult, uncomfortable. For 10 years they were in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania where life was just plain gritty hard. Even now in Nairobi it is a little dangerous and often stressful. They haven't been financially rewarded for their work. They get no fame from it. But they are building up treasure in heaven. They are making a huge investment in eternity.

So should we all become missionaries or we're wasting our lives? No, there are many ways you build up treasure in heaven. In Matthew 5:43-47 Jesus said we do so by loving others unconditionally. In Matthew 6:4-5 Jesus said by helping those in need and by praying we make eternal deposits. Later in Matthew 6 Jesus said by trusting God and building his kingdom we prepare for that day. James said persevering in faith does it. Ephesians 6:7-8 says by doing your work wholeheartedly you are storing up treasure in heaven.

Recently I was in a grocery store and I happened to notice that the assistant manager had left out the list of responsibilities for the courtesy clerk, the low man on the pecking order, who had the closing shift. Get all shopping carts in from the parking lot. Make sure all checkstands are full with bags. Replace all the “go backs” from the checkstands. Make sure restrooms are clean. It took me back to seminary when I had that job at an Albertson's market. I often had that closing shift. I can remember checking the restroom and finding it to be so gross it was hard to believe human beings had done what happened in that room. It turned my stomach, but I gritted my teeth and cleaned it up, even though I felt like I should have been given a hazmat suit to do it. Do you realize that doing that job with diligence, faithfulness and a good attitude was as pleasing as doing my best as a pastor? God will reward faithfulness in both situations.

We have a neighbor who has had back surgery and has had a difficult recovery. Laurie has made her a meal and last week went to just visit with her and to express concern for her. In doing that she was storing up treasure in heaven. There are many ways to store up treasure in heaven. We can do that all day every day. We hear a lot about IRA's, 401(k)'s, pension plans,

saving up for the future. Jesus tells us here that there is a much more investment that we should all be making, and it is in our eternal future. We can make investments in that future every single day of our lives.