
18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

SEPTEMBER 22, 2013

REWRITING OUR DEBTS

Pastor Jim Dunn

(Quotes are from Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*, pp.157-163 and my entire understanding of the parable of The Dishonest Steward must be credited to Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp.86-118)

Luke 16:1-8

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

16 He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. **2** And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' **3** And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. **4** I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' **5** So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' **6** He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' **7** Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' **8** The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

There's a story called *The Burglar's Christmas*. It's about a young man who leaves home, breaks all ties with his family, and drifts from town to town and job to job. For a while he works for a newspaper. Then, he sells houses. Then, he tries to go into show business. He doesn't do well at any of those things. He eventually ends up in Chicago. He's out of work. He's out of money. He has no food. He's never stolen anything before.

But it is Christmas Eve. He thinks to himself that at least at Christmas he should have something to eat. But when a woman drops a package as she's walking along the street, he gives it back to her instead of just running off with it. He feels as if he's failed even at being a thief, the same as he's failed at everything else. But he decides to give it another try. Become a burglar on Christmas Eve. Break into a house and steal some jewelry. So, he breaks into a house. And gets caught by the owner. And who's the owner? His own mother.

His parents had moved to Chicago, not knowing that's where their son had gone. Of course, he didn't know either. Well, he confesses to his mother why he'd broken into the house. His mother says she forgives him. His father doesn't say much. They ask him to stay, and they have Christmas Eve dinner together. Then, he gets up to leave, but his parents say, "Stay. It's okay." He looks at his mother and says, "I wonder if you know how much you would have to forgive."

Is it harder to forgive a stranger or someone you thought cared about you? It's one thing to be robbed by a stranger. It's another matter to be robbed by your own son. "It's one thing to be the victim of a stranger. But it's another matter to be the victim of someone you know and care about. It's one thing to be the victim of a random crime. That hurts your pride. But to be the victim of a family member, or a friend, or a fellow church member, or one's spouse. That hurts your heart.

"You know what they call that, don't you? Betrayal." (Lucado) Betrayal is what that young man did to his parents in *The Burglar's Christmas*. Jesus also told a story of betrayal (Luke 16:1-8).

It's about a farmer. The farmer is told that his money is being wasted by his business manager (16:1). Well, that's like stealing, isn't it? Perhaps the manager has been paying for expensive vacations out of the farmer's bank account. And loaning the farmer's money to people who can't repay the loans. And buying farm land before going to see if the land is any good for farming. Whatever the crime has been, it's so big that the manager is no longer able to hide it. Others know about it, and they tell the farmer.

So the farmer confronts his manager. "How could you do this to me? I trusted you! You have betrayed me!" (16:2) Now, what's the farmer gonna do? When betrayal comes, when your heart has been hurt, what do you do? Get angry? Get even? Get out? Well, the farmer does not get even with his manager. He could have his manager thrown in jail. He could require the manager to pay back all the money he's wasted or else be thrown into jail. Instead, he only dismisses him. And he does that before the books are turned in, before the checkbook is handed over, before the farmer knows just how much money has been wasted. (16:2) He has forgiven his manager before he knows how much he will have to forgive.

Well, that's what all of us are supposed to do. Forgive no matter how big the betrayal. "Forgive no matter how much the betrayal hurts. Is that realistic? But then what would we suggest we do instead? Besides it being wrong not to forgive. Holding onto our anger cannot bring us healing. Getting even will not remove the hurt." (Lucado) Getting out can't escape the hatred you feel towards the person who has hurt your heart.

David Gershon has learned this. In 2002, David's wife Jamie was eating lunch on the campus of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where they were both students. A bomb went off, containing nails, nuts, and bolts. The friends she was sitting with were killed. She survived because she was reaching under the table to get something out of her backpack. But she suffered burns over 30% of her body, and a nut was lodged in her small intestine. After it was removed surgically and Jamie was healed enough, the couple got out of Israel and started a life in Washington DC.

Jamie went to a counselor and that helped her, but David did not find that helpful. He still had panic attacks in which he would for no reason begin to hyperventilate. His healing didn't begin until he read that the bomber, now in an Israeli prison, had expressed guilt. David went back to Israel. He went to the home of the bomber's family. And he wrote a book about that: *What Do You Buy for the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife?* David says that experience has helped stop the panic attacks. Though he said in a very recent interview he's still not forgiven the bomber.

Now, that's honest. Even our best efforts at trying to forgive may leave us in the same boat as David Gershon: we just can't do it.

That's why we find the second part of Jesus' story so helpful. Because the farmer was so quick to forgive him, the manager finds that the mercy of the farmer is something he can depend on. Just as we can depend on the Lord's mercy to forgive us when we can't forgive and to gradually help to forgive the person who's betrayed us.

The farmer is merciful towards his manager. He forgave his manager even before he knew how much he would have to forgive. So, now the manager depends on the farmer's mercy to save him financially. He's now going to be out of work. He's going to be out of money. He's going to be out of food. He's never stolen anything before. He's not strong enough to dig. He's too proud to beg.

But he's got one thing going for him. The farmer is merciful. So, while he still has the farmer's accounting books, before the rest of the community finds out he's been fired, the manager calls in the ones who rent land from the farmer. They owe huge debts to the farmer, and would surely consider the manager a real friend if he could convince the farmer to slash their debts. Well, right about now the manager needs all friends who might give him a job. So, he tells the renters that their debts have been slashed.

The manager's counting on the farmer to say nothing and to let the slashed debts stand, to be merciful both to the renters and to himself. And that's what happened. When the debts were slashed, the farmer said nothing. He did not say "It's all been a terrible mistake."

When the Son of God was betrayed by Judas, He did not say "It's all been a terrible mistake." He could have. "As Jesus told Peter, if He'd wanted to stop Judas He could have summoned 12 legions of angels." (Lucado) Instead, He said nothing. He had mercy. He allowed Himself to be betrayed, arrested, put on trial and convicted falsely, and killed on a cross. He said nothing. He had mercy on us. Mercy we can depend on to forgive us when we can't forgive. Mercy we can depend on to gradually help us forgive those who have betrayed us.

Amen