

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: STORY TIME

Don't Knock Opportunity

(Luke 16:1-13)

Study #4

Introduction: When opportunity knocks...

During my years in High School, I was presented with a golden opportunity - and I bronzed it.

Like all Texas High Schoolers, I was required to take a foreign language. Like most Texas High Schoolers, I opted for Spanish. I took Spanish for three years.

Can you imagine, given that Kathy and I have lived in San Antonio for the last thirty three years, how valuable a working knowledge of Spanish would have been? Just think of the doors that being bi-lingual would have opened here and on trips to Mexico and Uruguay.

It would have been great. But in High School I didn't study hard to learn Spanish and have become a very typical English-only American.

I look back on that experience and am so sad by the wasted opportunity! The opportunity to learn Spanish knocked, and I failed to open the door.

Daily, we all come face to face with opportunities. Doors open to us to learn, to serve those around us, to love, or to take a step forward into some new venture.

I've been known to bronze a few golden opportunities. I've also had friends who have heard opportunity knock and have flung the door wide open.

Over time, we learn - and often we learn by frittering them away - than opportunities are invitations to action. Good ones should never be squandered.

Today, for the fourth Sunday in a row, we're turning to Jesus' parables.

In the parable we'll see this morning, Jesus tells us, by way of a really clever little story, that when we are given certain opportunities, we should grab them by the throat. Today, the Bible calls us to be Jesus-centered opportunists.

Setting the context:

The parables of Jesus are found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke,¹ and in our Sunday morning studies recently, we have been limiting ourselves to those parables recorded for us by Luke.

Some of those we have seen are found in Matthew and Mark, too (like the Parable of the Leaven and the Parable of the Mustard Seed), but some are unique to Luke (like the Parable of the Good Samaritan).

The story we are seeing today is one of those only found in Luke, and it is located right in the mid section of Luke's Gospel. We might even call it the "heart" of Luke's Gospel, because the parables found here reveal just how much Jesus loves people who are far from God.

Here is where we read about the Great Dinner party that we explored last Sunday. There we saw God's heart that His banquet hall be filled and that every chair be taken at the great feast.

If we just continued reading, we would come next to the stories of a lost and found sheep, a lost and found coin, and a couple of lost sons.

¹ For some reason, the Apostle John didn't include any parables in his Gospel.

We can't read those stories without being bowled over by Jesus' amazing love for people who haven't yet come to know God.

Well, right after those three stories, Jesus, speaking to His disciples, told the story before us now.²

We can easily identify with this story because it's filled with practices that we sometimes hear about in our own day. There is a dishonest employee, kick-backs, and a price-fixing scheme.

And Jesus will use THIS story to give a life-changing lesson in faith and faithfulness.³

A Parable of Unrighteous Opportunity (vv. 1-8a)

A Rich Boss Discovers a Cheat on the Payroll (vv. 1-2)

The cheater (v. 1)

It seems that there was a wealthy man who had hired a manager to oversee his affairs. This manager wasn't rich on his own. He simply managed the riches of his boss. His sole responsibility was to look after and to protect and to prosper his boss' resources.⁴

In the first century, managers had a lot of responsibility and lots of latitude in how they carried out their responsibilities. Evidently, too, this manager had very little oversight. He took advantage of that lack of oversight and helped himself to his boss' riches.

² They were likely in Perea, an area just north of Judea on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Jesus and His followers were just about to start making their way to Jerusalem for the final time, where He will give His life on the cross. Perea was located between Samaria in the north and Judea to the south, on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

³ Darrell Bock says that this parable is one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand. (Commentary, p. 1323.)

⁴ The Greek word that is used here for "manager" is the word from which we derive our English word "*economics*."

[1] Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions."

In some way or other,⁵ the manager was wasting his boss' wealth. We are to picture him lavishing that wealth on himself. Just imagine him enjoying the lifestyle of the rich and famous with what was supposed to be his boss' money.

When his boss discovered what he was doing he was not amused.

The cheater gets fired! (v. 2)

[2] "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

Calling the manager into his office, he ordered a complete audit of the books.

Understandably, he was really put out. The end of the interview was the end of his employment. He fired the manager with, "***You can no longer be manager!***"

And this manager didn't have a leg to stand on. He couldn't deny his wrongdoing. He was guilty as charged, caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

As Jesus continues with the story, though, the focus shifts from the justifiable anger of the rich man, to the painful (even if self-inflicted) plight of the manager.

He is concerned with survival. He has no idea as to how he is going to maintain the lifestyle to which has become accustomed, now that he has been fired.

⁵ Darrell Bock says that the issue may have been either incompetence or dishonesty. I believe it is more likely dishonesty.

His sugar daddy is gone. The gravy train won't be stopping at his place anymore. Worried sick about his prospects, he took stock of his situation.

The Dishonest Manager Worries about His Future (v. 3)

[3] “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; I am ashamed to beg.’

No question that he's concerned. But don't jump to the conclusion that he's sorry about his sinful ways. He is simply a dishonest bookkeeper who is trying to think of what to do with hard times just around the corner.

For years his M.O. has been to skim money off the top and keep as much as he could for himself without actually having to do any W-O-R-K (horrible, four letter word.).

Of course, he still wants to stay as far away from work as possible. But he's got to figure out a way to keep from starving. So he comes up with a plan. And the plan is genius.

If it is true that “necessity is the mother of invention” then we shouldn't be too surprised with what he thought up. He was desperate, and in his desperation he was deluged by a soaking brainstorm.

Necessity gave birth to a wonderfully creative and opportunistic idea.

The Manager's Ingenious Plan (vv. 4-7)

A self-protecting brainstorm (v. 4)

[4] ‘I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management, people will welcome me into their homes.’

The design of the manager's scheme is to provide for his needs when the roof caves in on his comfortable life. He is going to arrange things so that he'll be supported by “*people*” who will be glad to help him.

Here is what he dreamed up.

The plan in action (vv. 5-7)

He called everyone who owed his boss any money to a (no doubt secret) meeting with a very shady agenda.

Now, just because this story is found in the Bible and just because Jesus is telling it, don't try to make this manager a model of morality. He is being dishonest as the day is long.

He didn't call these debtors in to ask them for jobs or to ask them to pray for him. He called them all together to place them in his debt.

[5] “And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

The man answered, **[6a] “A hundred measures of oil.”**

Now that was a lot of olive oil. In first century Israel, a “*measure*” of oil equaled about six gallons.⁶

So, this first debtor owed about six hundred gallons of oil to the rich man. The manager told this debtor, **[6b] ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’**

And just like that, the spreadsheet now reads, “*Debtor #1 owes fifty measures of oil.*”

No, of course he had no authority to do this. But he's not concerned about doing the right thing. Integrity isn't on his radar and he couldn't care less about protecting his former boss' interests.

All he was interested in doing was protecting his own hide.

⁶ The word for “measure” is taken from the Hebrew word for daughter, (Hebrew - *bat*) implying that the amount of water a young woman could carry from the well to her home became standardized as the *measure*.

I suspect that the other debtors were standing around watching this first deal with keen interest, no doubt hoping that the manager will do the same with them. Sure enough, he repeats the same gimmicky scheme with them all.

[7] “Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ and he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’

He is going to need friends - soon! - and he’s buying them up as fast as he can.

We don’t know how many debtors there were, or how much they each owed. But, we are to understand that they all had their debts substantially cut.

And by the end of the day I’m betting that they were all feeling pretty friendly toward the manager. I mean, how would you feel toward someone who, with a stroke, reduced your total indebtedness by 50%?

Grateful? Friendly? Open to helping him out? Sure!

Now, the manager has **“people”** who will welcome him into their homes when he is unemployed.

There is one final scene in this parable we’ve got to see. It’s the “exit interview” between the manager and the boss. I would have loved to have been there for this meeting.

The Rich Boss’ Surprising Response (v. 8a)

Over the years of his employ, this manager has cost his boss lots of money. He had been guilty of shady deals and money squandering. More recently, his debt-reducing plan had done even more damage to his boss’ net worth.

But, as Jesus concludes this parable the rich man is not angry at all.

I picture the manager reclining in his boss’ office with his feet up on the coffee table, filing his fingernails, and grinning. He is no longer afraid of the future because he knows that he is taken care of.

And the boss shakes his head with a smile and, Jesus tells us, **[8a] “And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly.”** Or, “You son of a gun, you did it to me again.”

The manager acted shrewdly, *opportunistically*. And THAT is Jesus’ parable.

In this parable, the boss is rather nondescript. We know that he was wealthy and we’ve seen that he was a man of action. And just now we’ve learned that he recognized and commended creativity when he saw it, even when it was exercised to his disadvantage.

But, the boss is only one of the two major players in this parable. And it is the manager who is the focus of Jesus’ closing comments as He now explains the parable to us.

Backing out of story-telling mode, Jesus commends the dishonest manager. Yes, Jesus is going to teach us spiritual lessons based on the actions of the manager.⁷

Applying the Parable with Wisdom and Love (vv. 8b-9)

A Word to the Wise (v. 8b)

[8b] “For the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.”

Now, we might understand Jesus to be saying, “*Business people are more shrewd in their business dealings than non-business people.*” That would be like saying that owls see in the dark better than people do, or that fish swim better than cats.

⁷ Bock writes, “Luke 16:8 is perhaps the most difficult verse in the entire Gospel.”

More likely, though, He is saying something like this:

“People who are immersed in the affairs of how to get along in the world are better at pushing their agendas forward than believers are at pushing God’s purposes forward.”

And, if I can color between the lines a little bit, I think Jesus is also saying that people who aren’t spiritually minded at all are frequently more passionate about promoting their agenda than believers are in promoting the Lord’s agenda.

Opportunity came to the manager in Jesus’ parable in the form of unemployment. He answered that challenge with creativity, twisting the situation to his benefit.

Opportunity for pressing the Gospel into our world comes to us by a casual conversation, a person in need, a crisis that demands a response.

These are all opportunities knocking. And we are to answer that “knock” with creativity, twisting the situation to Jesus’ purposes.

You and I are to imitate the manager. Not for his dishonesty. But we are to be as creative and shrewd in living for and speaking about Jesus as he was about solving his unemployment problem.

If that is a bit of a challenging word, brace yourself for what the Lord says next.

The Best Friends Money Can Buy (v. 9a)

[9a] “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness...”

The manager in the parable made friends by the use of money. When he provided kick-backs to those who owed his boss money, he suspected that out of gratitude they would take care of him when he had nowhere else to go.

Jesus says we - His followers - are to do the same thing.

Again, He is not suggesting that we get our friends involved in some crooked deal so we can blackmail them into helping us when our backs are against the wall.

He is speaking to opportunities that are all around us to share God’s love by the use of our resources - our resources of time and energy, and yes, cold hard cash.

Lovingly sharing our material wealth with others opens doors for the Gospel.

Eternal Dividends from Earthy Investments (v. 9)

[9] And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness; so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

So, what in the world does THAT mean and who in the world are THEY?

I think that THEY are people who are far from God whom we bless and befriend by the use of our money.⁸

Paraphrased, Jesus’ words of verse 9 might read,

“Use every resource you have at your disposal - including \$\$\$ - to make friends for yourself. Invest materially in people. Of course, money, and everything it can buy will fail. But, “when it fails”⁹ - and it will! - the investments you have made in people will be wonderfully compounded, yielding eternal dividends. There will be a host of people waiting to welcome you into heaven. And some of them will be there because you showed love to them on earth, and they trusted the loving Christ they saw in you.”

⁸ Some say that “they” refer to angels (although I don’t know where they get that idea.). Others are of the opinion that a better translation would be a simple, impersonal, “that you may be received.” Literally, it is “they will receive you.”

⁹ Richard Trench reads this phrase “that when you fail” and makes it equivalent to “when you die”. But, grammatically, the statement is better understood, “that when IT fails”, that is, “when money fails.”

Does that sound crass? *“Use money to make friends.”*

It is not crass at all. It puts money and material possessions in their place.

Some time when you want a fascinating Bible study, survey Jesus’ teaching about wealth. One thing you’ll discover is that He always blasted the use of spiritual things to gain material advantage. That was the sin of the Pharisees.

Then you’ll see that He always applauded the loving use of material things to bring spiritual blessing to others.

Yes, it’s crass to use your friends to make money. It is loving to use money to make friends and to bless those friends in Jesus’ Name.

Before we consider some practical takeaways from this parable, I’d like for us all to listen to what Jesus says next. He’s still talking about money, evidently believing that if we’re going to apply His parable wholeheartedly we’ll need to “get” this.

First, a thought about the relative value of money.

The Parable’s Follow-Up: Money, 101

Money’s Just a Little Thing (vv. 10-12)

[10] “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. [11] Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth¹⁰, who will entrust the true riches to you? [12] And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”

¹⁰ *“The wealth of unrighteousness”* (often translated *“unrighteous mammon”*) is not material things which are intrinsically unrighteous because they are material, but are *“unrighteous”* in comparison to the *“true riches.”* (v. 11)

There are all kinds of nuggets to take away from this gold mine of wisdom from Jesus about money.

He speaks about responsibility. He speaks about the need for faithfulness in small things before being entrusted with big things.

But here’s what I want us to notice out of Jesus’ words today. Look at what He identifies as the small stuff. He calls money (*“unrighteous wealth”*) a *“very little thing.”*

In the grand scheme of things, money is minor. It is a tool that can be used to accomplish big things. But wealth is not a big thing.

Wealth or the lack of wealth doesn’t determine happiness or integrity. Wealthy people can be crabby and so can non-wealthy people. Both poverty and wealth can produce selfishness or love.

God is a big thing. The eternal soul of every person you’ve ever met is a big thing. But money? Not so much.

So, Jesus wants us to come to grips with the relative importance of money. He also wants us to beware the danger of money. While it is a wonderful servant, money is a terrible master.

Money’s a Terrible Master (v. 13)

[13] “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he be devoted to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Truer words have never been uttered. Trying to give allegiance to two masters at the same time is crazy-making. And we who have received God’s grace in Jesus owe Him our allegiance. We owe money and the toys money can buy nothing. We owe our unalloyed allegiance to Jesus.

He is Lord and He is alerting each of us to the danger of trying to tightrope along in life, giving our allegiance to God AND money. It won’t work.

So, as Jesus was speaking to the disciples when He gave this parable, so to you who have received His grace, submit to God, your king. And use your money and all your other resources to serve that king.

Now, this parable we've seen today brings with it a very exciting assignment. We are to use our personal resources to befriend people in Jesus' Name and for Jesus' sake.

How will we respond to that assignment?

Well, if we keep on reading we will see one potential response.

Conclusion:

One possible, terrible response to this parable...

The parable and the teaching on money were given to the disciples. (See verse 1). But standing a little distance away, eavesdropping, were the Pharisees. Luke gives us the Pharisees' response.

[14] Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and were scoffing at Him.

That's really not all that surprising. The kind of life Jesus describes here, where a person keeps a loose grip on material possessions didn't seem "practical" in the cold, hard cash world of first century Israel.

It might not seem all that practical in 2014, either.

It is easy to slip into the mindset that says, *"I can serve Jesus fully AND still devote myself to the pursuit of what is often called 'the almighty dollar.'"* That's why Jesus warned against trying to serve two masters.

It is easy to allow ourselves to get caught up in believing that money is really, really important. That's why Jesus pointedly referred to it as ***"a very little thing"*** - to remind us that there are a few things that are waaaay more important than money.

Since it is so easy to slip into this way of thinking, I'd like to offer up an opportunity this morning.

To all who are here today who have received God's grace and may have forgotten what is really important and who may have even forgotten who is Lord, here is an opportunity to confess.

On the one hand, we might want to confess to anyone here today who has not received the grace of God.

We want you to know that we're really sorry for forgetting what's really important.

We Christians have sometimes been guilty of behaving as if money was the most important thing around. We've often acted as if money was more than a tool to accomplish good things. We've acted as if money was all-important.

And we also are sorry that we haven't always used our money for the best purposes. We haven't used our money as well as we could to meet needs in Jesus' Name and to make friends and to bless friends. We're really sorry about this.

We want to say to you that what we really believe is that you are worth more than our money and our things. We care more about you than we care about our money.

We just forget sometimes.

But we are remembering now and it is our intention to keep remembering. We intend to use the resources God has provided us to do good.

We intend to show how much we value you by serving you with our "stuff" and our energy and our time and our words about the One who loves you best. We'll tell you about Jesus as we lavish you with value.

And we confess to Jesus, our Savior and the One to whom we owe everything, that we have often put money and the pursuit of money above serving Him.

We turn from that now. We may have tried to walk that tightrope and give allegiance to Him AND money. Today we see the folly of that and pledge our allegiance to Him alone.

If our response has looked like the response of the Pharisees, we repent and look to another model for applying what we have seen in Scripture today.

It is the infinitely and eternally better response of the first disciples.

An infinitely and eternally better response to the parable...

When Jesus gave this parable, He was addressing the disciples. (See verse 1) It was given pointedly to them.

And, if you were to trace through the book of Acts, you would find those first disciples putting the ideas of this parable in shoe leather. They were generous, compassionate, and giving. They invested heavily in people.

And the result was just what Jesus said it would be. Many, many people turned to faith in Christ through the double-edged witness of the early Christians who talked about Jesus and who loved like Jesus. Their lives became walking advertisements for life with God.

For you and me, figuring out how to apply this parable is really one of the simpler assignments in Scripture.

We are applying this parable when we:

- send money to support missionaries who are taking the Gospel to foreign lands;
- use our money to send Bibles to distant places;
- use our financial resources to support local Christian works;
- give money to support the work of this church;
- use our money to provide for those who are in material need.

Your financial investment in Operation Christmas Child, Angel Tree, Youth for Christ, Habitat for Humanity, the San Antonio Pregnancy Care Center and a host of other ministries are wonderful ways to use money to influence people for the Gospel.

Having neighbors over for dinner, loaning tools to people on the street, providing rides to friends without transportation and bringing meals to the sick is what this parable is talking about. So is giving groceries to the Food Pantry and designating money to the Benevolence Fund.

Jesus wants our lives to be so marked by generosity, that those who have never tasted God's grace, will taste it from us, whetting their appetite for His banquet feast.