

# Commitment 307: Beyond Ourselves, Beyond Prosperity

A sermon based on Luke 16:1-13

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Saint Augustine said, of the gospel passage just read, "I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord." Many object to this gospel story because it follows the exploits of a scoundrel who, firstly, squanders his master's money; who, secondly, calls in debts that are not his to call in; and who, thirdly, gets commended by the master for his double dishonesty!

We're not altogether sure how the business manager squandered his master's assets — whether through irresponsibility, incompetence, dishonesty, or a combination of the above, we are not told — but it was enough to earn him dismissal! Later in the story Jesus calls him a "dishonest" manager (Luke 16:8), but what disturbs many people is that Jesus, through the voice of the rich landowner, commends this scoundrel! Not only commends him, but tells his disciples, "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." (16:8) Or, as the Jerusalem Bible renders it, "the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light." (16:8)

## A Suspension of Moral Judgment?

Christian disciples would do well to lift a page or two out of the notebook of a thieving scoundrel? I don't think so. And it's not surprising that this particular parable has caused a great deal of consternation among Christians. There have been many attempts to clean up the story. Some scholars say that when the business manager gave the debtors discounts, perhaps he was just removing either his own commission or some illegally charged interest. Some contend that even Luke had trouble with the story, because of the verses he adds at the end of the story to clarify it. Scholars confounded by this parable are quick to reach for hyperbole to explain it, otherwise they feel they have to go through a lot of intellectual contortions to make Jesus look like he is not sanctioning immorality.

Call me simple, but I'm not overly upset over Jesus choosing an unsavoury rogue as the hero of this story. For one thing, consider other rascals in the Scriptures used by God. In Genesis God uses Cain, a man who killed his brother. God used Jacob, a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel. God used King David. A monarch with a less active libido might have been preferable, but time and again we are told that God loved David. Paul, the thirteenth apostle, started out life as a persecutor of the Church, yet God used him.

Given some of the embarrassing details about these biblical heroes, we shouldn't be too quick to rush to judgment of the manager in Jesus' story. After all, Jesus makes no attempt to offer a palatable explanation for the manager's behaviour. In fact, he makes it

quite clear that this is an example of a person from the 'other side' — one of the "children of this world" as opposed to the "children of the light".

It's also important to consider the three distinct social classes in this story. You have a landowner, whom Luke describes as a rich man (Luke 16:1), and a rich man he must have been when you consider that a hundred "measures" (RSV) of oil — the amount of oil mentioned in the first transaction — is nearly nine hundred gallons! Then you have the manager, probably without property, who tried to please both his boss and his customers while handling, perhaps padding the accounts to his own advantage. And then you have the third class, making up the majority of Jesus' audience, who were little more than indentured servants and who had little hope of ever working their way out of debt.

There are many other nuances to this story, but what I want to point out is that with this social structure, Jesus' audience, while not condoning theft, probably enjoyed the rogue's success in getting out of a very tight situation. Long ago there was a movie starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford entitled, "The Sting," which involved a plot twist in which two grifters outwitted a bunch of gangsters, swindling them out of their own ill-gotten money. It was hard not to cheer on the grifters. Or consider the movie, "Home Alone," and its ten sequels, in which some mean, bad guys get their comeuppance from a little boy! We're on the little boy's side from start to finish. These stories set up a dynamic invoking your empathy with the little guy. It's the same reason I like Leo Tolstoy's stories and fables, in which the ignorant and landless peasant always proves just a little too wily for the pompous, indulgent gentry.

Some years ago an Oklahoman named Jay Wilkinson ran for Congress, and many people thought he would win easily. The son of a famous football coach, Jay was himself an All-American at Duke University, who married a Miss America finalist, after graduating from Harvard. Who could ask for more in a politician? Young, handsome, and idealistic, he was a perfect subject for Madison Avenue to work its magic, and a television commercial was designed which pictured Jay and his wife walking hand-in-hand through an Oklahoma pasture. As they walked, they looked soulfully upward, their eyes on the big Oklahoma sky, to the accompaniment of soft music and a banner below reading, "A Better Tomorrow for all Oklahomans."

Wilkinson was running against the incumbent, Tom Steed, who knew he was in for a tough fight, but Steed scheduled only one forty-second spot in response to Wilkinson's commercial, and in it he looked into the camera and said, "I may not have a fancy degree from Harvard like young Wilkinson, but I do know enough not to look at the sky when I am walking in an Oklahoma cow pasture." Steed won the election.

### **What Do I/We Do Now?**

Jesus asks us to focus, not on the thievery of the business manager, but on his ingenuity in getting out of a tight spot. What this rogue manager faced was a lose-lose-lose situation. The loss cut three ways. The gig is up for the manager, whose dishonesty has been discovered, and whose career is over; the debtors are overburdened; and the whole affair leaves a messy mark on the master's honour, which in his culture, unlike ours, was even more precious than wealth!

The manager may well have asked himself, as we are apt to do when we find ourselves in an impossible situation, "What do I do now?" And we would understand if, faced with

this crisis, the manager would have simply given up. I can imagine him saying, "Aach, I always had doubts that management was really my thing. Too many headaches. I think I'll move to the Yukon." It's not unusual, when adversity comes, for us to freeze up. Your boss tells you that you are the latest victim of "downsizing," and you may well decide that your productive life is over. It's not unusual to move into a defensive posture when under siege. Why fight a hopeless cause?

What singles this manager out from other managers — other than his dishonesty — is his creative attempt to salvage a situation that looks far beyond salvage. The amazing manager turned a crisis into a win-win-win situation — the debtors are forgiven a goodly portion of their debt; the manager has gained a lot of good will and friends who may help him later; and the master's honour is still intact!

It reminds me of the clever preacher — if you can imagine such a thing — who was approached by two men who offered the preacher a thousand dollars to do their brother's funeral. It was a manageable request, but the deceased had been the worst sinner imaginable, and his brothers stipulated that in his eulogy the preacher had to refer to him as a saint! On the day of the funeral, the preacher got up and said: "This man was a drunk. He was a cheat. He was a thief and a scoundrel, but in comparison to his brothers, he was a saint!"

Jesus told an outrageous story of a man who makes some outrageous moves because he is convinced that his story is not over, that the future is still open. Life, far from being fixed or final, may yet hold some surprises! The unscrupulous manager took what had been dealt him — and his prospects looked rather precarious and bleak — and he wheeled-and-dealed, confident that even these bleak circumstances could be turned to his advantage. It's like the slogan on a billboard extolling the merits of billboard advertising, which reads, "To you it's a traffic jam. To us it's a market."

### **An Historical Lesson in Prosperity**

I've been preaching a series of sermons on Christian commitment, suggesting that there are various levels of commitment. A basic level is deciding whether or not to follow Jesus, and, having made that decision, trying hard to live in a Christian manner. Another level of Christian discipleship involves a commitment to the Christian community, a more challenging commitment, for whenever you commit yourself to others — as those who are married well know — you have to consider points of view other than your own! And if you're serious about your commitment you won't just leave and play in your own little corner at the first sign of conflict. Most of us have made a commitment to Christ — and if you have not, I encourage you to do so, for the rewards are far greater than the challenges — and most of us have made a commitment to the church, and we are each trying in our own way, I hope, to make this particular congregation a vibrant, wholesome community, but what's next? What do we do now? And this morning I want to ask that question as it pertains to one slice of Christian discipleship, but it's a slice that colours so much of our life. It has to do with Jesus' very challenging statement at the end of our gospel reading, where he says, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:13)

Well, it may take far more discipleship courses than "Commitment 307" to unpack that statement, but let me tell you the story of John Wesley (1703-91), the founder of the Methodist Church who preached to England's poor in the eighteenth century. In one

generation, thanks to Wesley's preaching, many people became Christians. Wesley knew that they needed more than "Commitment 101" to nurture them, so he organized them into societies that were called Methodist Societies, essentially taking them to the next level of commitment — "Commitment 2-01," Christian community — in which, thanks to Wesley's practical and wholesome teaching, these new Christians also acquired the personal habits, industriousness, and discipline that comprise the traditional recipe for success! In one generation, the Methodists moved from poverty to middle class prosperity. An amazing change, and one we can applaud, for who among us does not prefer prosperity to its alternative?

However, John Wesley was not content with stopping at the level of comfort, for he saw that the undisciplined accumulation of capital also presented problems. What do you as a Christian do with all of this money? So Wesley wrote a famous sermon entitled, "The Use of Money," and he used the same parable that we are considering this morning as the text for that sermon, applying it to newly prosperous Methodists. And Wesley's advice was as follows. First, earn all you can. Take advantage of every opportunity. He warned, of course, that there are some businesses that Christians should avoid, but other than those exceptions, he said, earn all you can.

Secondly, Wesley told Methodists: "Save all you can." Well, most of us try to earn all we can, but a consumer economy tempers our ability to save. Nevertheless, our assets and pensions constitute savings that would have been the envy of eighteenth century Methodists, let alone most people of any century. The frugality that Wesley preached and lived out makes us look like self-indulgent wastrels. He made it clear that we don't need most things that we buy, and if you do without, then you can save a whole lot of money, which is what Wesley did in his own life.

Earn all you can; save all you can; and thirdly, said Wesley, give away all you can. A Methodist colleague said "that most Methodists readily embrace the first two lessons, but they find obeying Wesley harder the farther down you go on that list." (Fred Kane) I'm glad that isn't true of Mennonites!

Well, we don't live in the eighteenth century, and while the personal habits Wesley encouraged — like hard work and sobriety — are noble enough, they no longer guarantee success, if they ever did. Keep in mind, as well, that Wesley was not talking to prosperous people, but to poor people, and not all Christians, even in the eighteenth century, were living in England.

One could think of all sorts of reasons to dismiss an eighteenth century preacher, but John Wesley worked on the biblical assumption that what we earn and what we save really doesn't belong to us. Wesley worked on the assumption that while we may enjoy the blessings of prosperity, there is something beyond prosperity. We were put on this earth for a purpose infinitely greater than material acquisition.

## **Prosperity 902**

Western economic mythology doesn't allow for something beyond prosperity. In "Prosperity 101" we learned the Horatio Alger story. Alger (1834-99) believed that success comes from being lucky, from being in the right place at the right time. Alger's advice was: Learn good work habits; be punctual; be neat; work hard; don't complain; be courteous; discipline yourself — sounds like a secular Methodism. Most of all, he said, be patient, because your time will come.

Then we graduated to "Prosperity 2-01," symbolized by one of Horatio Alger's contemporaries, George Horace Lorimer (1868-1937). Lorimer became the editor of The Saturday Evening Post at the turn of the twentieth century when it had but three thousand subscribers, and by the time he left that position he had three million subscribers. Himself a worthy model of success, Lorimer wrote a monthly column in the Post entitled, "Letters from a Self-Made Merchant," which took the form of a hypothetical letter from a meat packer to his son at Harvard, advising him how to be successful in business. His first counsel was to warn his son about the uselessness of a college education, especially a Harvard education. He said there are two parts to an education: what you learn in the classroom, and what you learn outside of the classroom. The first part, he said, can make you a scholar, which is totally useless to you. The second part can teach you, not only to take advantage of opportunities, but to make your own opportunities. Don't just wait patiently for your time to come. Seize the day! Be aggressive!

One of the hottest books out today is a small book with words from the Bible, from one of the least read and most boring sections of the Bible (1 Chronicles 4:9-10), about a mysterious character named Jabez. Bruce Wilkinson, an Atlanta evangelist wrote the book, entitled The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life. The book is based on the simple prayer of Jabez, which asks God, "Bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory," and the Bible says, God granted his request. ("A Book Spreads the Word: Prayer for Prosperity Works," New York Times, May 8, 2001, by Laurie Goodstein)

This little book sold 4.1 million copies in the first three months of this year, and is No. 1 on a number of best seller lists! Thanks to its amazing sales, and spinoff coffee mugs, bookmarks and plaques, the prayer of Jabez is being murmured in many parts of North America in hopes of increased profits, property, and other blessings.

Now, it may be that people have developed a sudden hunger for the Bible — and I wish it were so — but chances are that this obscure prayer resonates more with our selfishness. Jeffrey Mahan, professor of ministry, media and culture (Iliff School of Theology in Denver), says: "It fits with the narcissism of the age. Religious life is focussed on me and my needs."

Mahatma Gandhi said, "There is enough (in this world) for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." We've gone far beyond "Prosperity 2-01" and "3-01" and "4-01," we now offer graduate degrees in prosperity, doctorates on how to close factories in one country and open them in another country, where the wages are even more paltry. And while most of us don't run corporations or make corporate policy, we profit from investments in those companies, and buy their products without much thought of the human cost.

If you think I'm being rather critical of what we blithely accept as economic reality, don't even get me started on our Old Testament text, Amos' words concerning those who "trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land..." (Amos 8:4)

### **Prosperity: What Do We Do Now?**

I'm not foolish enough to construct an entire theology, let alone an economic theory, on one New Testament parable, but there is much in the New Testament, indeed, in the entire Bible, that points us to something beyond ourselves. Whether it's Abraham and Sarah's call to be a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3); or

Deuteronomy's oft-repeated injunction to "execute justice" for orphans, widows, strangers, and resident aliens (Deuteronomy 10:18-19; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19); or the Old Testament prophets' passionate pleas for economic justice; or Jesus' attempts, through stories, to stretch our concept of what constitutes a neighbour (Luke 10:27, 36), the biblical record points beyond us to something more. The Bible itself isn't always clear what that might be; it only hints at it in poetry and metaphor, speaking of creation itself "groaning" (Romans 8:22) as if giving birth to something new — a new earth, a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1), a new humanity! (Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 3:10)

Like the shrewd rogue in Jesus' story, Jesus calls us to be even shrewder than rogues for the sake of God's kingdom. Someone has said that there are two kinds of parables; one is the "Go Thou and Do Likewise" type of parable, and the second is the "How Much More" type. The parable we studied this morning is not a "Go Thou and Do Likewise" parable. This is a "How Much More" parable, meaning that if a dishonest manager can ensure his future with shrewdness, "how much more" should Christians be astute and shrewd in advancing the cause of God? If in the secular world cleverness, ingenuity, aggressiveness, and risk-taking are axiomatic for success, how much more should those committed to the Realm of God be creative, aggressive, and willing to take risks to ensure the future of God's creation?

In a global village in which a relatively small number of people enjoy the largest share of the world's wealth, something's got to give, eventually, and I hope Christians come up with something more imaginative than what the "Let's-bomb-somebody-quick" crowd will come up with, and something more encompassing than "Let's get prosperous quick."

God call us beyond many things — beyond sin; beyond violence; beyond racism, exploitation; terrorism; beyond left and right, greed and want, prosperity and poverty. God calls us beyond our comfort zones, beyond first year courses in Christian discipleship, beyond even Christian community, to serve the world.

May God give us grace to be shrewd disciples in imaginative service to a vast and eternal kingdom. Amen

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.