



Pastor Robyn Hogue

SERMON

Unexpected Brilliance

Luke 16:1-8

September 18, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

I want to tell you a story about a farmer many years ago in a village in India who had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to the village moneylender. The moneylender fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he proposed a bargain. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.

Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning moneylender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a dark pebble and a light pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the dark pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the light pebble, she need not marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid.

They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the farmer's field. As they talked, the moneylender bent over to pick up two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two dark pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. Now, imagine that you were the girl standing in the field. What would you have done? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her?

Careful analysis would produce three possibilities: (1) the girl could refuse to take a pebble but her father would then be thrown in jail. (2) The girl could pick a dark pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment. Or (3) the girl could pull out both dark pebbles in the bag, expose the moneylender as a cheat, and likely incite his immediate revenge.

Here is what the girl did.

She put her hand into the money bag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oh, how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind, if you look into the bag for the one that is left, you will be able to tell which pebble I picked." Since the remaining pebble was dark, it would have to be assumed that she had picked the light one. And since the moneylender dared not admit his dishonesty, the girl would have changed what seemed an impossible situation into an extremely advantageous one. She acted with unexpected brilliance!

Jesus tells a parable in which an individual acts with unexpected brilliance. He tells a parable, which on first glance, appears to be about money. And it is most often interpreted and preached through that assumption. It is often called the parable of the unrighteous steward. And it is one of the most difficult of all the parables. Incompetence and dishonesty seem to be rewarded. But, Friends, that is not my message on this parable today.

I want us to note that in verse 9, Jesus talks about "unrighteous mammon." Unrighteous mammon was interest money, profit from usury. And Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest.

Here are some of the references on this:

Exodus 22:25: If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.

Leviticus 25:35-38: If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

Deuteronomy 23:19-20: Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.

Nehemiah 5:1-12: Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”

Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

And there are more examples in Psalms, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but some of God’s people got around this by keeping the letter of the Law by not lending money to other Hebrews but by violating the spirit of the Law by lending out commodities such as oil, corn or wheat, while charging interest. In times of famine, the ancient records show that the interest on oil could be as high as 100 percent. The interest rate on wheat was commonly 20 percent. We can now see that this man, through his steward, was charging his neighbors interest, and this illegal interest was the unrighteous mammon to which Jesus refers.

When the steward finds that he is going to be fired, he suddenly has an opportunity he did not have before. And he uses his opportunity with unexpected brilliance. He tells all those who owe his master to forget about the interest. They need to repay the amount of their original loan and no more. This would be good news for those in debt, right?

And now imagine this, he wasn't punished for this. In fact, according to verse 8, the steward got a commendation from the master! We can't be sure that the word "master" here implies the character in the parable. Jesus refers to him as "a certain rich man." It is possible that Luke is offering another insight by telling us that Jesus, the Master (with a capital M), commends the character of the steward in the parable.

What on earth is Jesus trying to teach His followers?

Our steward in this parable gets the reputation as "the steward of unrighteousness" for he is taking care of unrighteousness and turning it to righteousness again. Unfortunately, our English translations have captioned this fellow as "the unjust steward," thereby implying to our modern-hearing that he is a man of low scruples, an unjust or wicked man. But, what if we linger with the Greek for a little bit longer and hear it in the context of the first culture? If we can do so, then we would hear that this is the guy that fixes unrighteousness; this is the guy who is in charge of making things right; this is the one who manages (stewards) justice. Are you with me? So, if this is so, I have an important question. Who else do you know that is in charge of making things right? We'll get back to that question in a bit. For now, I want you to remember who just came to your mind.

In the course of my ministry, I've talked with many people who've spent years indebted. They are indebted because they are unable or unwilling to forgive someone. They were wronged by someone or perceived that they were wronged by someone and rather than seek justice and then forgiveness, they have done what I now see as "adding interest" on to this first debt. You see, there was the original event, the original debt, but then over time, a lot of other things were added to the list of "injustices," perhaps rightly named. Imagine now that you are a person who has wronged someone else and over time, the other person has added a lot of "interest" onto that first debt of apology. Wouldn't it be good news if the person you wronged told you that all of the stuff they've added onto their distrust of you, all of that later resentment, judgment, etc, was forgiven and all they wanted to do was resolve the first problem? Wouldn't that be a huge relief?

Remember when I earlier said that this guy in the parable who usually gets named the unjust steward is really the one who is in charge of making things right; this is the one who manages (stewards) justice? I asked you an important question. Who else do you know that is in charge of making things right? Do you remember who came to mind? That's right, Jesus is in charge of making things right; He is the ultimate steward of injustices, the manager of justice.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus tells us "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." He came to fulfill the Law that allowed no sin interest to be added to us. Jesus has totally forgiven us of all the added-on debt we can never repay. And He does so with unexpected brilliance.

Remember, forgiveness is for our benefit. Another person's behavior may never change. We can and should call them to account, but it's going to be up to God—not us—to change them. Our responsibility is to be set free from the pressure and weight of unforgiven added interest.

I believe the Spirit has been speaking to you in this sermon. Someone, some situation has come

to your mind and I've been praying that Jesus will speak to you about a next step He wants you to take in that relationship. Each week I put space in the printed bulletin for you to take notes during the sermon. It is a space for you to capture your thoughts and then write out what you believe the Lord is asking you to do. It's a space for you and the Lord to get very personal about the message. It is there to help you grow in Christ. Use that space now to write out what you need to do in terms of that situation or relationship. You may need to seek justice with the help of Jesus. You may need to let go of 'added interest' that has burdened a specific relationship and then talk with the person about the original debt of harm done or apology owed.

Whatever our pain or situation, we cannot afford to hold on to the interest added debt. If we keep our eyes on the One who forgives us, it will be a liberating force like nothing we've ever experienced; We too will be people of unexpected brilliance!