

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 18, 2022

Amos 8:4-7

1 Timothy 2:1-15

Luke 16:1-15

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So much of life is a question of means and ends. In the never-ending cycle of production and consumption, we have hollowed out our lives by defining success in terms of those who have the means to consume whatever it is they desire. The pinnacle of folly is to treat money as an end in itself. And yet, there are many who put their love of money above all else, risking their immortal souls for the sake of it. Greed for money is foolish because it indicates that one values a thing that is used to measure value. This is like appreciating the scale more than the wheat that is weighed on it. Money is only useful when one has no need for it. It is departed with when some other object is deemed to be more useful, and money, having no purpose of its own, is expended in exchange for the thing one desires. In Plato's Republic, Socrates asks an old man what the benefit of having great wealth is, and the old man replies that the only good thing that comes of it is that the wealthy do not have to worry about engaging in injustice to gain wealth. Oddly enough, the old man acknowledges what is true. Having great wealth is not a virtue, but in the hands of a good man, it can guard against certain injustices like robbery or deceitful gain. To the aged Cephalus, money serves the greater cause of justice. Money is a means to an end.

In addition to the problem of confusing means and ends, the love of money distorts our appreciation for goodness. Wealth could be a curse just as easily as it could be a blessing, but foolish people are almost universal in the opinion that wealth is an unmitigated good. As such, people come to equate success with goodness, as success and wealth are frequent bedfellows. Everyone loves a winner, and the evidence for this can be seen in a number of areas. The success of a singer is based on records sold or views on YouTube. In fact, one can now be a successful "Influencer" just by being seen by many millions of people. One can easily see that it is the financial gain that is valued far more than the content itself. The content is a means to an end; the purpose of the content creation is money. Mediocrity has long appealed to the masses, and the excellent, the rare, the creation for the sake of itself is not honored by most. All levels of meanness, pettiness, evil, and corruption are overlooked, so long as a person is deemed successful, whether in entertainment or politics.<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> People often criticize Machiavelli for his observation, though it was not necessarily an endorsement, that people will follow the successful leader, even if they do not agree with his methods.

Where the figure of a successful person becomes especially prominent, the majority fall into idolizing success. They become blind to right and wrong, truth and lie, decency and malice... Ethical and intellectual capacity for judgment grow dull before the sheen of success and before the desire somehow to share in it... This leads to an inner depravity from which recovery is difficult.<sup>2</sup>

While Jesus did not come to be the leader of a slave revolt against the Roman authorities, He was not a proponent of worshipping the successful either. "God sanctifies pain, lowliness, failure, poverty, loneliness, and despair in the cross of Christ."<sup>3</sup> We must also be aware that failure and poverty are no more products of God's favor than success would be. We can only stand as those who accept God's divine will, judgment, and love in whatever form it comes.

In the parable, the shrewd manager is someone who, by all appearances is quite successful. The issue for the manager is that his success is coming at the expense of the man employing him. Now, this might be hard to track, but let's give it a shot. The rich man has goods that he wants to sell. The money manager is the one who agrees to a price that the rich man is looking for. The manager then sets the price for the sale of the product with a little extra built in for himself; this is how the money manager earns his living. That is the way it worked in ancient Israel. If there was some exorbitant profit earned on the sale, that means the rich man who owned the product is not getting as much as an honest manager would have given him. The shrewd manager is just that, shrewd.

The money manager can't be accused of stealing when he is simply giving the rich man the price that he, the rich man, expects to receive. If he had stolen anything, he could be thrown in prison for it, so that is not the problem here. This is just free market capitalism that the steward is engaged in, the right to contracts; call it exploitation of an economic opportunity. When capitalism is viewed uncritically, as if it is only capable of producing positive outcomes over time, it becomes a false religion, absent real ethical principles. This is what the shrewd manager is guilty of falling into - an amoral greed of gain. The Shrewdness of the manager is what lands him in hot water with his boss. So, what does the shrewd manager do to protect himself? Naturally, he practices what he knows best. He shrewdly reduces the bills owed to his employer, utilizing the means that are at his disposal to achieve the ends he desires. Interestingly, this does not cost the rich man, really. This costs the money manager the exorbitant finder's fee he was accustomed to. What is even more remarkable is the position this puts the rich man in. If he punishes the shrewd manager, the rich man risks his own reputation with his customers. The shrewd manager just made the rich man look pretty generous and

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015), 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

understanding. The rich man would lose those benefits if he fired his manager. Even if he does fire the manager, the manager has a couple of new friends who owe him big time. Either way, the shrewd manager comes out ahead.

The lesson here is that we are to keep wealth in the proper perspective, treating it as a means to an end, not an end in itself. In this world, money is necessary. And money is not inherently evil, but the love of money leads to all kinds of evil.<sup>4</sup> You know who seems to love money and success even more than the Pharisees? Americans, including many Christian Americans. There is a lot of talk about America being a Christian nation, but are Christians in America willing to be as shrewd as the manager in the parable? Assuming you could, would you give up worldly wealth to gain a friend as Jesus advocates here? And what kind of friend would that be? A rich one who could return you to your previous financial condition? Remember that what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. The very things we value may not be favorable to God. Each one of us must take an honest assessment of where we stand on this. I don't have any specifics in mind for you, but most of us could be more generous with our earthly resources in some way. Most of us could be less attached to our money and more attached to the people around us. I know I could.

The proper use of one's resources is a question of responsible action. And you are responsible for your actions whether your actions are responsible or not. Jesus says something here that is both terrifying and comforting: God knows your hearts. So, God knows all your intentions, all your indiscretions, all your equivocations, and all your deceptions. For the honest Christian, that is utterly terrifying. What is comforting is that, even with all such faults, He still loves you. He doesn't love some perfect image of you. He loves you. And that is an incredible thing. If you are fortunate enough to have someone who knows you, who really knows you for who you are, and still loves you, that is a treasure. If you are like me, you might even doubt their sanity for loving you. But God is not insane. He loves you; however, He does not leave your heart as it is. God is at work in your heart, even now, making it into the heart of Christ.

Having the heart of Christ is not something you can simply will into existence. God has to work this in you by remaking you in the image of His resurrected Son. As abstract as this sounds, there are objective means that are employed in the process. In order to bring about your new heart, God washes you in the waters of baptism. Ezekiel prophesied that at the time of the restoration of Israel, often associated with the messianic age, "God will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean... God will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; He will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."<sup>5</sup> God also promised to allow His people to eat in

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 36:25-26

His presence and rejoice because of His blessings.<sup>6</sup> Christ blesses bread and wine, giving it to us that we may eat and drink His body and blood in the mystery of the Eucharist, taking the very bread of His presence into our being. Baptism and Communion are objective acts of God in history, objective acts in your life, which are done for something much deeper than the acts themselves. They are the means of grace, but to what end?

Through these means, God works in you to bring about a good heart and a good conscience. He frees you to live according to His good purpose, so that you can serve your neighbor with the same love with which God has served you. God liberates you to use material possessions shrewdly, but ethically, making responsible choices that serve greater ends than your own. By becoming human, Jesus was able use His own body as the means to a great end; that end is the redemption of the world, the forgiveness of sins, the eventual resurrection of all flesh, and everlasting life. But the value of life is about much more than just quantity, for one could live forever and be miserable. The new heart that Christ gives you is a heart of joy, a heart that is fully happy. A heart that can feast on the manna from heaven with deepest gratitude and rejoicing in His presence. For Christ, we are ends, in and of ourselves, of greater worth than all the treasures of heaven and earth. He would use any means, even His own life, to bring about the ultimate purpose He has for us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 12:7