

Faithful to God

Joshua 24:1-27, Luke 16:1-18 (ESV)

September 4, 2005

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” Jesus asked these two questions to his disciples, to the Pharisees who overheard him, and so to us. The two questions are variations of one question, repeated not only for greater understanding but also for extra emphasis. “If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” Despite the way the question is asked with a negative assumption, there is good news embedded here for you and me, and the question leads us to it.

What this question affirms is that far beyond the unrighteous wealth of this world there are “true riches,” fabulous wealth not tainted by unrighteousness, true riches waiting to be given to us. That might not be obvious in the rough and tumble life of the everyday world. That might not be something we could discover on our own. But here, in the teaching and gospel of Jesus Christ, we are told about something wonderful in the great beyond. Again, what this question affirms is that beyond the complicated entanglements of this world where we care for and use things that belong to others there is that which is “our own,” our very own, not anyone else’s, and it is waiting to be given to us. It can be given to no other, for it belongs to no other. It is waiting to be given to us, if only we will have it. Even though it appears here in a question, the affirmation is made that true riches are to be our very own.

What is this wonderful thing toward which the gospel points us? Given that the wealth with which we are familiar here is a part of this passing world, true riches must be lasting, eternal, permanent, and other worldly. Given that everything we have here can and will be taken away from us, the one thing that can be our very own is life itself. And taken together, these true riches which are to be our very own are nothing other than eternal life itself. Can you imagine? We live in a world which worships youthfulness as we strive vainly to hold onto that life which, from our perspective, passes all too quickly. Can you imagine life that does not pass away? We live in a world of poverty in terms of direct knowledge of God. Can you

imagine living in the very presence of God? That is where eternal life is. We live in a world of fear, loss, and confusion. Can you imagine the joy and surety of possessing that which is our very own, so that no one could take it away? That is at least part of what eternal means. Are you interested in these true riches? Do you want that which is your very own? Then the gospel of Jesus Christ is for you.

Jesus assures us of the gift of eternal life because he is the one who wins it for us and he is the one who gives it to us. Eternal life is not the whole of the gospel, but it is a part of the gospel, and the gospel would not be complete without it. When Jesus taught this lesson about eternal life to his disciples, he was on his way to Jerusalem to die. That would be a strange coincidence, except that it was by dying on the cross that Jesus defeated the power of death. By suffering the worst that death could do, Jesus allowed death to spend itself and so undo itself. In the death of Christ, death itself has died. In the death of death, Christ has won eternal life. In recognition of this great victory, God rewarded Jesus with resurrection. Now the risen Christ lives and reigns forever. And since he is the one who has won eternal life for us, he is also the one who gives eternal life to us.

Now, given this good news of the true riches that are our very own, why are the affirmations made in the form of a negative question? “If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” The good news is presented here in a question because the question includes a warning about the danger of our forfeiting the true riches of eternal life. The good news is presented here in a question because we are at great risk of turning our back to the very good which Jesus extends to us. There is another option available. There is another attraction for our interest. There is another suitor for our hearts. There is something glittering there, and, yes, it is gold. The gods that the fathers had served beyond the river and in Egypt had long ago fallen out of fashion, but everyone loves money, and that is the problem. Here is Christ’s explanation of our predicament: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

We live in spiritual danger. We are designed to worship God and made to serve our master. The problem is that we are tempted to worship the wrong god and we are tempted to serve the wrong master. And if we do that, our lives run in the wrong direction, with the wrong results, and all is lost. “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” That is a simple, exclusive truth. We cannot serve two masters. That is true on an everyday human level, and that is true on a spiritual level. The greatest competition God has in the

world is money. Jesus knew that very well. That is why he taught so much about money. So, of these two, which will we serve? Whom shall we serve? To whom shall we be faithful? God or money?

Lord, help us! Christ lived and died and lives again so that we may serve God and not money. Christ taught us this gospel and asked us this question so that we may serve God and not money. Why is it so hard for us? Money is not evil in and of itself. Money is, in fact, very useful. The problem is, of course, that in addition to using it we begin to love it. But money is not supposed to be loved. God is to be loved. God is to be loved because God made us. Money cannot do that. God is to be loved because God sustains us. Money cannot do that. God is to be loved because God saves us. Money cannot do that. God is to be loved because God loves us. Money certainly cannot do that. So, the choices are clear. Whom shall we serve? To whom shall we be faithful? Jesus urges us to love, serve, and be faithful to God.

What, then, of money? If we are not to love it, we are certainly to use it! That is what money is for. In the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus makes the point of how it is possible to use money to secure one's life, up to a point, in this world. "And the manager said to himself, '...I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'" As Jesus observed, "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." Then Jesus builds on that to teach us that there is a use of money in this world that is appropriate to our life in the world yet to come. "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." This cannot possibly mean that we can buy our way into heaven. We cannot do that, and besides, Jesus has already done that for us.

So what does this mean? Jesus was teaching people who were already his disciples. This is not so much about salvation as it is about Christian life. If the way of the world is to use money for one's own good, the way of the world to come is to use money for others' good. Just as shrewd people know how to get ahead here, let us learn how to do here what is commendable there. "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much." All the money in the world is so very little in comparison to the riches that await us. It would be foolish to be deceived and captured by what we see here. If we are greedy with what little we have here, it is unlikely that we will ever be entrusted with more there. But if we are generous with whatever we do have here, the good master will give us more in the world to come. Do you see? We are not encouraged to irresponsibility with our money. But we are urged toward a higher, holy responsibility. We are to use our resources to the glory of God and to the benefit of those in need. And if we cannot honor, serve, and be faithful to God

with our money and with how we use it here, how could he possibly ever entrust us with something important there, such as eternal life?

As our Lord and Savior has said, “If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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