

When we read the many parables that Jesus told, it's essential that we look at the big picture about what Jesus is saying before we delve into the details. And there's no better example for that than in this week's reading, because if we just look at the details, we hear Jesus tell his disciples the parable of the dishonest manager who gets fired for cheating the business, but then when he goes and cheats the business again, the boss commends him for it. Now that just doesn't make sense. But there's a greater meaning behind this story. So let's look at how the parable takes us inside the mind of the dishonest manager and inside the mind of God.

At first, the manager learns that he is about to be fired. Someone apparently got caught dipping into his boss's profits and now he's out of work with few prospects. He's too proud to beg and not strong enough to do manual labor, so he goes to his former clients as if he's still employed and cuts everyone a deal; slashing their debts by 20% even 50% to gain favor with these potential new employers. The manager even got a little revenge against his boss for firing him by cutting into his future profits. Now in a just world the man should be caught and thrown into prison to pay for his crimes, or at least forced to pay back this debt. But instead Jesus tells us that the boss commends him for what he did because he acted shrewdly.

The point of the parable is not the servant's dishonesty, but his wise-decision making in the time of crisis. His whole future depended on quick thinking and immediate actions. The dishonest methods that he used are not being commended, but his shrewdness is. The man's job was coming to an end, but what if his life was about to end, if that were the case, concerns about money wouldn't matter, but reconciling with others, making friends, being generous and forgiving, all those things would matter, not that anything we could do would get us into heaven, but it would be a shrewd way of living out the short time we have left.

So Jesus is calling on us, to look at what we're willing to do to secure our future. He says whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.

Are we willing to cheat on a test to further our education. Are we willing to overprice our product so we can make a bigger profit. Are we willing to push someone out of our way to get a better deal. In this dog-eat-dog world at times we may be forced to bend the rules a little to keep ahead of the competition.

And so Jesus says, the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are children of the light. He's saying we're better at getting what we want in this earthly kingdom than we are in the heavenly kingdom.

Martin Luther described this in his two kingdom theology. He said we live in two kingdoms the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven. In the earthly kingdom we have to live according to the rules and laws and practices of that kingdom. This is world we work in, go to school in, the world of our local and national government. We live within a set of rules in this kingdom and if we break the rules we pay a penalty. If we break a traffic law we pay a fine, if we steal or harm another we are imprisoned. We make a living in the earthly kingdom buying and selling our goods and services. We cannot help but live and participate in the earthly kingdom during our pilgrimage on earth.

We are also part of the heavenly kingdom a Kingdom ruled by love and forgiveness and grace. This kingdom also has rules and calls us to be obedient. We have commandments, we have principles, love one another as I have loved you, love even your enemies, die to yourself, have the faith of a little child, pick up your cross and follow me, the greatest of all is the servant of all.

Unlike the earthly kingdom, this kingdom is everlasting and the faithful have been promised that one day we will enter it completely, for all eternity.

So we have these two kingdoms, and we live in each of them. When we are consumed with the work we do, perhaps at that moment we are living completely in the earthly kingdom, when we are in prayer or in worship, perhaps at that moment we are living completely in the heavenly kingdom. And at times we are living in that cross-section where we are living completely in both kingdoms. So what if we had the same commitment to living in the kingdom of heaven as we do to the kingdom of earth. What if we had the same commitment to our life in faith as we do to our work and our hobbies? We will work for years to save money for our retirement, which on the average is less than 10 years. What are we willing to do to secure our future in the heavenly kingdom?

Jesus commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness and all-out desire to win in the game of life, but he does this only to contrast earthly life with kingdom life. Jesus does this to challenge us to live with such shrewdness and passion and desire in our life in the heavenly kingdom as faithful disciples.

You cannot serve two masters, he says, you cannot serve God and wealth. You cannot serve God's heavenly kingdom and our earthly kingdom, for you will either hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other.

Our life in faith is a journey, a journey of letting go of our control and letting God rule in our life. Because when we try to do it on our own, in whatever that may be, we will always come up short, but when we give up our lives to God, God gets it done through us, and God will take it further than we could ever imagine.

In my many of years of ministry, both as a pastor and before that, as a contributing member of a church, I've heard many people talk about how they could never do this or

that, or that they don't have the right skills or abilities to do whatever challenge has been set before them.

But many of these same people confess those famous words from the book of Philippians, chapter 4 verse 13 that claims, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Now the apostle Paul made that claim first, but Norman Vincent Peale in his book "The Power of Positive Thinking" brought it to the attention of many who yearn to be successful. And I've heard many quote that verse, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", to motivate themselves to do what they have to do, and to entertain the thought that truly anything is possible.

But the key to this verse is not the "I can do all things" part, but the key is the "through Christ who strengthens me" part. For as long as we try to use our strength and our will and our desire, that self-serving influence will always limit us from what God intends. But when we give it to God and pray and ask for guidance, and die to ourselves, and give God the glory for what He has already inspired us to do, God will manifest God's self in our lives, and His will, will be done. A friend of mine and lecturer with the Life Spring Network, Pastor Jason Pankau, describes this so well when he says our life of faith is a journey, a journey from all me, to all me and a little God, to more and more of God and less and less of me.

Jesus calls to our intellect today and invites us to be shrewd in our decision making. And to be shrewd with our faith in this day and age means that we have to give up our control and let God lead us. In the parable for today, the dishonest manager gave up his future, to the generosity of those clients he had given a deeply discounted benefit to, for he realized that he no longer was in control of his situation. It was a shrewd business situation.

Whatever you are dealing with today, whatever may be laying heavy on your heart, whatever may be causing you stress this day...I invite you to make a shrewd decision, a faith-based decision, and give it over to Christ. For it is when we are weak that we are made strong. And Christ can do all things through you and he will strengthen you for the journey. So give your life to Christ in faith, for whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. Amen.