

Yarrow, October 11, 2009

Ps 65:5,6

Ps 10:7

Ps 49:2,3,4

Ps 112:1,2,3,4

Hy 57:1,2,3,4

Luke 16:1-15

Revelation 5:9-14

Luke 16:9

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The fact that tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day directs our attention to the financial blessings the Lord God has given us in the course of the past year. The year began with considerable uncertainty as to what the markets were going to do, and there were fears of a global recession. We've seen how things have unfolded since then, and it's true that some in our midst suffered somewhat from the shrinking economy. Yet now that we come to Thanksgiving Day we note, with gratitude to the Lord, that this year again He has given us considerable financial blessing. On the whole we are well off – a fact attested by our spacious homes, our comfortable cars, our abundant holiday memories, and so much more. Billions in the world would cheerfully trade places with the worst off in our midst, and it would still be an indescribable improvement for them. In a word, we have so very much. It makes a Thanksgiving Day so very fitting.

Thanksgiving Day. We'll show our gratitude by saying Thank you to the Lord in a thanksgiving prayer. Then we'll enjoy the goodness the Lord has given with a turkey dinner – and it'll be fittingly elaborate.

But here's where the questions arise for us. We realize that countless millions in the world will be in hunger tomorrow. And the hunger is not only in the stomach. For many, also well-fed, the hunger is in the soul. How can we help? Should we help? Why?

In the passage we read from Luke 16 our chief Prophet and Teacher directs us to an answer. He teaches us to take seriously the fact that we shall all die, and that we can carry no title deeds or credit cards with us into the next world. Because of that sobering reality, the Lord would have us use our financial wealth today with an eye on tomorrow. No, not in the sense of: we may as well enjoy our financial comforts as much as possible because we can't after we die. Rather, the Lord would have us use our wealth today to prepare ourselves well to meet God tomorrow.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD INSTRUCTS US TO USE OUR MONEY TODAY TO MAKE FRIENDS WHO WILL VOUCH FOR US IN ETERNITY.

1. Why make friends for eternity
2. How to make friends for eternity

1. Why make friends for eternity

Our text begins with Jesus saying, "I tell you." To appreciate what Jesus says we need to understand to whom Jesus is speaking, need to understand too the context in which Jesus speaks.

The context is described in chap 15. Jesus had been addressing an audience consisting of two parties. Here were a group of Pharisees and scribes, and over there a group of tax collectors

and sinners. The Pharisees had complained about the fact that Jesus had “welcomed” collectors and sinners (15:2), and so Jesus had told the parable of the forgiving father (15:11-32). That is, the father hadn’t waited for his returning son to apologise for wrongs done, nor kept him at arm’s length till repentance was obvious; no, he embraced his son eagerly, whole-heartedly, before he heard a word from his mouth, and re-instated him into the family. Jesus set this picture of God before the Pharisees so that they might learn the need to receive the tax collectors and sinners coming to Jesus. After all, if God receives sinners on the basis of grace and not of works, it’s for sinners to receive each other on the same basis.

This context is important. With the parable of the forgiving father, the Lord had taught that the gospel is of grace and not of works. Well now, the thought that automatically comes to mind next is this: if it’s all grace, I need not do anything; salvation will flow my way freely. That’s the point that Jesus addresses in chap 16. He turns to His disciples –persons already received by God in grace, and who will in turn need to teach others– and sets out to instruct them that the gospel of grace does not imply a free ride into heaven.¹

How He teaches that? He tells the parable of the rich man who commended his dishonest property manager. The picture is of an absentee landowner who had entrusted his estate to a manager. But the day came when this well-to-do owner received word that his manager was a swindler. So the owner did the obvious; he fired the manager – which meant that the manager had to hand in his accounts. The manager looked into the future, saw unemployment and poverty in front of him, and so –crafty swindler that he was– hatched a plan to make tomorrow more comfortable for himself. Since his master’s debtors didn’t yet know he’d lost his job (let alone why he lost it), he called them into his office and authorized a reduction of what they owed his master. That way, when he was on the street, he’d have persons he could turn to for help. For a good turn, is it not, deserves a good turn.² When the master got to hear of his manager’s dealings, he “commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly” (vs 8).

For our part, this parable raises difficult questions. Specifically, how can you compliment someone for his fraud? Should Jesus not have placed in the master’s mouth some words of criticism on his manager? Is Jesus, by telling this parable, not condoning fraudulent behaviour??

We need to recognize, though, that Jesus did not tell this parable in order to give a lesson on the rights and wrongs of fraud – for the Bible is abundantly clear on that point. Rather, Jesus told the parable in order to give colour to the punch line caught in vs 9, our text. For this is the lesson of the parable: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” So our text is addressed first of all to the disciples, in an effort to knock on the head any thought that the gospel of grace means that receiving heaven is automatic for the children of God.

With that context in mind, brothers and sisters, we can look with greater detail at our text. At first reading, we find the text difficult, unclear. Jesus tells the disciples to “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves,” and we find this a confusing instruction. Why would you want to make friends for yourself through worldly wealth? Further, we understand the phrase “when it is gone” to refer to your money being all spent. But what’s the connection between your money being spent and you being “welcomed into eternal dwellings”? And who would do the welcoming??

¹ See B Holwerda, *Om Uwentwil Getroost* (Goes: Oosterbaan & leCointre, 1951), pg 30f.

² For helpful interpretation on the details of the parable, see Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pg 86ff. See also Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 401ff.

Let me begin, then, congregation, with the words “when it is gone.” Literally, the Greek speaks here of the wealth ‘failing’. Of course, it can fail you when you have no more cash left. But it can also fail you when you leave this earth. In the words of Ps 49: “wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others” (vs 10). You can’t take it along with you to the judgment seat of God, and so can’t use it either to buy your way into heaven. Wealth ultimately *fails*. Well now, if one day we need to appear *empty-handed* before our Maker, then what? One can *assume* that God is compassionate – witness the father’s embrace of the prodigal son– and so assume that one shall easily enter the eternal dwellings of God.

Here, beloved, Jesus holds up the example of the manager. This man saw his livelihood terminated –“he failed”– but he didn’t look only at today and consider that *today* he was still OK, so why worry about tomorrow, and *neither* did this unemployed manager assume that tomorrow would solve its own problems. No, this manager looked into tomorrow and saw need to make preparations today for the needs of tomorrow. The man *thought ahead*, made plans, and carried out those plans today with a view to tomorrow’s security. Was the particular plan he hatched to care today for his tomorrows an upright plan, one pleasing to the Lord? Not at all, beloved, it was fraud, no doubt about it. Jesus says as much by describing the manager in vs 8 as “dishonest”. But Jesus’ point by having the master compliment the manager is not to approve the details of the manager’s plan (and that’s why we shouldn’t get bogged in his ethics either); Jesus’ point in having the master compliment the manager is the fact that the manager *had a plan and acted on it*. That, says Jesus through the mouth of the master, is “shrewd”, is wise³.

Actually, the manager’s behaviour was not at all unique. To plan today for tomorrow’s eventualities is how all prudent people act in this life. True, the one may prepare differently for tomorrow than his neighbour. The one lays the accent on developing today a good nest egg for tomorrow’s retirement, the other freely helps other people today in the expectation that tomorrow they will help him. Different people, different cultures, different ways of preparing for tomorrow. But everybody prepares in some way for tomorrow.

That habit, Jesus says in vs 8, needs to be picked up by the “people of the light.” I quote the Lord: “the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.” That is: there is a way in which the “people of the light” (these are the children of God, cf Eph 5:8f) take their future for granted, but do so wrongly; they need to learn from the “people of this world”. How the “people of the light” take their future for granted, and so make inadequate preparations? They know the gospel of free grace, and so are tempted to think in terms of the future being automatic, being guaranteed. As if the grace that the forgiving father showed his prodigal son would mean that the son has no responsibilities tomorrow; he can now take his place in the family for granted.... Be warned, says Jesus in Luke 16, for even “people of the light” need today to prepare for tomorrow! Even the fact that the Father in heaven is as forgiving as the father of the parable does not mean that you can take entrance into the eternal home for granted. God has given to the human race He once created a measure of *responsibility*. And even the doctrine of free grace does not undo the reality of that responsibility. So “people of the light” need to learn a lesson from the “people of this world”. Tomorrow you will fail, tomorrow your money will fail you as you appear before God’s judgment. *Then what?!* For you can’t take God’s grace for granted to the point of assuming that you have no responsibility left yourself.

That brings us to our second point:

³ TDNT, IX, pg 220ff.

2. How to make friends for eternity.

Jesus answers the question of ‘how’ to prepare by telling His disciples to “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves,” so that these friends will welcome you (as the Greek has it) “into eternal dwellings”. Thanks to the blessing of the Lord this past year, all of us have a measure of “worldly wealth”. But: how shall we now use this wealth to make friends today so that tomorrow we can enter heaven?! That strikes us very much as a riddle.

Jesus’ point, brothers and sisters, is that since can’t take your wealth with you when you pass through the gates of death (cf Ps 49), you need to *use it today* and use it *to prepare for tomorrow*. It, like everything else touched by the fall into sin, worldly wealth –whether in the form of stocks or cash or houses– will be burned on the Day of Judgment. So: use it today, and use it well.

How? Use this “worldly wealth” to “gain friends for yourselves.” How do you do that? We have to go back to the parable. The manager set to work to make friends for himself by means of his master’s property. That is, before he turned in his accounts he doctored them in such a way that his master’s debtors had their debts substantially reduced. The debtors can only thank the manager for his actions, and so, when all is said and done, end up in *his* debt; it is he who put them in a much more favourable position vis a vis their master. That puts the manager in their good books so that –as Jesus says in vs 4– they “welcome [the manager] into their houses.”

Are we to make friends for ourselves by using wealth fraudulently? Definitely not. Are we to make friends for ourselves by using our wealth correctly? Yes, distinctly yes. What kind of friends are we to make? Friends that will receive us into – no, not their homes of timber and mortar; those homes aren’t so important since every home of timber and mortar will perish. Instead, says Jesus in vs 9, we’re to make friends for ourselves who will “welcome [us] into eternal dwellings,” into heaven, the New Jerusalem.

Question. How can you use the financial wealth the Lord has given to you to make friends who will receive you into an everlasting home? That’s a question Jesus doesn’t answer in the parable about the shrewd manager. And He doesn’t have to either. The people of this world don’t have to be told how to plan today for tomorrow’s eventualities; God has endowed people with sufficient prudence to find ways and means to make the necessary preparations. The same is true amongst the “people of the light”; indeed, it is *more true* of the people of the light. If the unspiritual can find ways and means to win friends for tomorrow, those who have received the Holy Spirit can find better ways and means. The Lord Jesus Christ gave up all He had, to the point of laying down His life on the cross for the benefit of the unworthy. The result is that in the courts of God are countless of Jesus’ “friends” (John 15:14f) who sing unceasingly in heaven of the worth of the Son of God to receive glory and honour and power for ever and ever (Revelation 5:9ff). With such an example to follow, the opportunities for us to gain friends through our material wealth is limited only the reach of our imagination. Recall the words John heard in Revelation 14: “blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them” (14:13).

How can you use your worldly money to make friends who will receive you into heaven? How can you prepare today for tomorrow? You can do so, beloved, by giving freely – just as you have freely received. To keep your wealth today so that you can enjoy comfort for the tomorrows that this life brings is *not* good stewardship; that’s instead being very short-sighted. For after the tomorrows of this life comes another tomorrow, the Day of Judgment, the day you die. Then your earthly possessions will help you nothing. And to the degree that we kept our wealth for ourselves in this life, to the degree that we insisted on living at a high standard ourselves while others had to

content themselves with the crumbs that fell from our tables – to that degree it will be testified against us that we are not worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. For –vs 10– “whoever can be trusted with very little” (things like money, it’s not so important for it will perish) “can also be trusted with very much” – trusted with the important principles of the kingdom of heaven. Equally, “whoever is dishonest with very little” (like using your money in a this-worldly fashion, as if this world is all that’s important) “will also be dishonest with much” – he’ll not take seriously the important first principles of God’s kingdom. Again, vs 11: “if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” That is: if you can’t even treat money according to its inherent value (here today, but gone tomorrow; shortly to be burned on the day of judgment), how in the world can you look after matters of the kingdom of heaven – which last forever?! Once more, vs 12: “if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” That is: money is not yours; it belongs to God, and you – like the manager of the parable– may look after it for the Master. But if you abuse for selfish purposes what God has entrusted to you, what are you going to do with what’s really yours – namely, the kingdom of heaven and its wealth that God promises in the covenant of grace? Heirs of God you are, and fellow-heirs with Christ; how shall God give you all the world if you can’t use responsibly the income God gave you in the past twelve months? It all boils down to the pointed words of vs 13: “No servant can serve two masters...; you cannot serve both God and Money.” To let the wealth God gave you become your master so that you need at all costs to hold onto it, and you can’t be happy without the security of your money, is at bottom to deny that God is your Lord and Saviour. Then what shall you say when you die? For your money will not save you....

Have you understood, beloved, the instruction of the Saviour in Luke 16? The Pharisees standing in front of Jesus understood it well. I read in vs 14 that these Pharisees “who loved money”, “heard all this and they were sneering at” Jesus. Or, as the original has it, they “turned up their nose at Him.” What will you do with a message like this? Remember: one can deride the chief Prophet and Teacher by literally pulling up one’s nose. One can also deride the chief Prophet and Teacher by ignoring His Word, or by calling it interesting and just carrying on without changing any habits.

That is why I need to warn you, brothers and sisters. At stake is not your wallet or your bank account, your title deeds or your credit card; they all will perish anyway in the great fire that will sweep the earth when the Lord comes back. *At stake is your soul!* Are you using the money God gave you this past year in such a way that you are developing for yourself friends –no, not for this life– but friends who will vouch for you at heaven’s gates that the Holy Spirit has changed your heart? Will there be friends who can vouch that you love God above all else, and your neighbour as yourself?

The gospel of grace, you see, does not undo your responsibility to prepare for tomorrow. Learn from the shrewdness of the people of this world!