Kurigasawa Baptist Church — Sunday Worship Message, October 26, 2025
"The Parable of the Shrewd Manager" (Luke 16:1–10)
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The parable of Jesus that we read this morning is one of the most difficult and puzzling among all the parables in the Gospels. The reason it is difficult is that it seems, at first glance, as though the Lord Jesus is encouraging dishonest behavior. The key phrase in this story appears in verse 9: "the wealth of unrighteousness." Understanding the meaning and interpretation of this phrase opens the way to grasp the message Jesus intended to convey. Although the parable uses an example of dishonest action, it points us to something far better and richer beyond it.

Let us review the flow of the parable. Verses 1–2 say:
"There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'"
The "rich man" here refers to an absentee landlord. He hired a manager because he did not wish to stay on site to oversee the operations himself. Therefore, he entrusted the manager with considerable authority to handle all matters concerning the land. During the time of Jesus, "rich men" were usually large landowners. They would lease out their land and receive a portion of the harvest as rent. The manager, who lived locally, was responsible for deciding how to use the land—whether for wheat, for other crops, or as pasture. Thus, the landlord completely entrusted the administration of his property to the manager as his representative.

However, because the landlord lived elsewhere, he could not easily know how much income the land was producing. Therefore, a manager needed to be a person of integrity and reliability. Someone who made false reports would be unfit for the role. The same is true for modern trust banks: they must handle their clients' assets with utmost care and fidelity. Yet human beings are weak. When a person manages great wealth for years, he may begin to think that the property entrusted to him is actually his own. This reality of human nature was as true in Jesus' day as it is today. Eventually, word reached the owner that his manager was wasting his property. In modern legal terms, his act would amount to "embezzlement." The owner summoned him and demanded, "Give an account of your management." He did not immediately dismiss him, but ordered him to fulfill at least the minimum duty of submitting a financial report. Perhaps he had a day or two to prepare it. In this desperate moment, the manager began to think frantically about how to survive the crisis he himself had caused.

If we were that manager, we would realize that in a modern legal system, imprisonment would be inevitable. However, in the Jewish society of Jesus' time, there was no structured penal system. A dismissed manager might lose his status as a free man and become a slave, forced into manual labor. If he could not bear that, he might flee and become a beggar. Yet the manager could not accept either of those options. So he devised another plan—to avoid both hard labor and begging.

Verses 4–7 describe his scheme:
"'I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'"

In short, he reduced the debts of his master's debtors. A "bath" (batos) was about 23 liters, so one hundred baths of oil equaled roughly 2,300 liters—worth about 1,000 denarii, equivalent to about ten million yen if one denarius equals ten thousand yen. The manager cut this in half, reducing the debt to about five million yen. The second

debtor owed one hundred “cors” (koros) of wheat, about 23,000 liters, worth around 2,500 denarii, or twenty-five million yen. He reduced it to eighty cors—about twenty million yen.
The manager had been given the authority to sign and modify such contracts, so he took advantage of it. By reducing their debts, he gained favor with the wealthy tenants who were his master’s business partners, hoping they would later employ him. It was clearly an act of disloyalty—a breach of trust that harmed his master’s wealth. Yet such reductions of debt were not unheard of in Palestine; landlords sometimes canceled debts when harvests failed. The manager cleverly imitated such practices and even had the debtors alter the contracts themselves to share responsibility if discovered. Clearly, he was a shrewd man.

Surprisingly, in verse 8 the master commends him:
“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”
Here, “the people of this world” refers to unbelievers, and “the people of the light” to believers. Jesus is not praising dishonesty but the manager’s keen awareness of time and situation. The man knew his dismissal was imminent but that he still had a little time left. He used that brief moment wisely and decisively. His methods were wrong, but his urgency and insight were commendable. Jesus’ point is directed not only to His disciples but also to us:
“You are not discerning enough. You do not understand the times.”
Jesus was not saying believers should be indifferent to worldly affairs, but that they must see them rightly—in the light of God’s plan. The end of the world is approaching; God’s judgment is near. Yet through Christ’s death and resurrection, salvation has been accomplished, and Christ will return. Do you recognize this?

Then verse 9 says:
“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”
“The wealth of unrighteousness” refers to all material wealth in this world. The Jewish rabbis used this phrase with the idea that worldly possessions are morally tainted—much like calling a kitchen knife a “weapon.” A knife can serve good or evil, depending on how it is used. So too with money: it can either destroy or bless. Jesus teaches us to use it for relationships and service that please God.

The phrase “when it is gone” refers to the time when earthly wealth passes away—at death. Those who have been helped through our wise and godly use of wealth will welcome us at the gates of heaven. I understand verse 9 to mean this: Do not live as slaves to money, but serve God by using wealth wisely. Lay up treasures in heaven.

Finally, verse 10 says:
“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.”
In everyday life, this means that a person who handles small tasks faithfully will also handle greater ones responsibly. But in Scripture, “very little” refers to earthly wealth—“the wealth of unrighteousness.” It is not ours, but entrusted to us by God. To be “faithful” means to use that wealth in ways that please God. “Much” refers to the true and eternal riches—the privilege of entering God’s Kingdom and receiving eternal life.
Those who faithfully manage worldly wealth entrusted to them will, when called to the Kingdom, receive great treasure and enter eternal dwellings in gratitude and peace. Possessing wealth is not proof of God’s love. Everything belongs to God, and we are merely stewards. Let us therefore use wealth wisely—for God’s sake and for the neighbors He loves. This is the attitude toward wealth that Jesus teaches us in today’s parable.

(Prayer)