

Be Shrewd – Be Wise!

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 09/22/19
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Last Sunday we noted that one of the earliest and most persistent charges against Jesus was, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Still, time and again the church – the, oh-so-respectable, upstanding, good, and righteous church – must relearn the truth that Jesus Christ loves and died for sinners.

What is the reign of God like? Jesus tells a story about a rich man who had an employee whom he heard was stealing from him. The boss calls in the little thief saying, “Show me the books.”

Then a real swindle begins. The guy calls in his boss’s debtors telling them, “Here, I’ll write off your debts to my boss, just to show you what a nice person I am,” thinking, “When I’m fired for my thievery, these people, for whom I’ve written off huge debts (at the expense of my boss) will help me out.”

Then Jesus says the boss calls in the thieving, swindling employee and says, “Great work, you little crook; I wish everyone in my company showed as much initiative and creativity as you.”

Presumably Jesus tells us these parables in order to instruct us about the nature of God. Isn’t that why we come to church and listen to these stories of Jesus? We are all trying to learn more about God, about the truth of God.

So what on earth can Jesus mean for us to learn by telling us this morning’s parable?

I don’t know. Most people say that this is one of the most confusing, perplexing stories that Jesus ever told. How on earth could Jesus be in a position of praising immoral, criminal behavior?

Many commentators suggest that Jesus isn’t really commending this man for his thievery. Jesus commends the man for his “shrewdness,” saying that he wishes the “children of light” could be as savvy in getting what they want, as this crook was in getting what he wanted. And that certainly seems to be faithful to some of the concluding comments.

But still – it’s an outrageous story. Why would a nice person like Jesus tell this sort of tale to nice people like us. Perhaps because, in our better moments, down deep we know, we are not such nice people! Deep down, we know we are very, very far from perfect. That goes for everyone in this sanctuary. It includes me. It includes you. We belong to a community of people who are in ministry to a hurting world.

Unfortunately, some of us have forgotten this. We have forgotten the very vows that most of us have taken at some point of uphold the Church Family by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, service and witness.

As I remember it, the cool thing about the prom is that it’s “all about feeling grown up.” You can – for a night – be something you’re not: a fairy princess and prince, a hot little number swathed in silk, a rich kid nonchalantly emerging from a shiny black limo as if you always have a driver at your beck and call.

To Jesus, being grown up apparently means denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following him. Being grown up means spending your life in service to others. It means being the person God created you to be – fun, goofy, creative, stylish, interesting, loving, awesome. In Christ, we become that special, one-of-a-kind person God fashioned us to be.

Does this mean you can never spring for a manicure or a limo? No. It means that you will be judged by the life you have found in Christ. Does this mean you can’t follow the latest trends? No. It means that you try, first and foremost, to follow Christ. The two are not necessarily incompatible. But God is not impressed with those who have gained the whole world while forfeiting their lives.

There are many things in life we think are important.

Jesus says there’s only one thing important. One thing.

That one thing is our – souls. “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul.

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If Church School and adult classes has taught us nothing but this, they're worth it: What we are inside is more important than who we are on the outside. The riches of the soul are worth more than the wealth of the world. When we learn that, we've learned all there is to know. Forget Life's Little Instruction Book, forget Oprah, forget Mark Zuckerberg. Remember Jesus: "What profit is there, if you gain the world but lose your soul?" End of story.

Parents need to listen, too. Undoubtedly, they want the very best for their youth. Going on to further their education. Taking on the responsibilities of life that mark a person who is growing. They pray to get through these years with minimal trips to the emergency room or the police station. They want them to have fun, but not to lose their lives. They want them to enjoy, but not at too high a cost.

Remember the vow the congregation promises to undertake by promising to surround each child with a community of love and forgiveness? Sometimes, our church families have failed to provide cross-bearing, self-denying models for our children. Children without good role models are at a serious disadvantage.

Dear friends, Jesus invites us to resist the temptation to simply follow the expectations of others and choose instead to live up to the expectations of the Christ. There's probably no such thing as a free lunch, and Jesus says there's no such thing as a free life. Life costs, especially when it is a life lived with integrity.