“Tomorrow Is Today”
Summer Series 2017 A View From the Top Installment VI, July 30th
Luke 16:1-11, (Key Lesson: Enjoying the riches of Jesus requires that we live with urgency)

Have you ever seen the film Dirty Rotten Scoundrels? It’s a genuine laugh riot starring Michael Caine who plays a sophisticated con man that’s successful bilking wealthy female tourists who visit a gorgeous European seaside retreat. Steve Martin moves into his territory and starts his own brand of chicanery attempting to swindle women from their fortunes all the while enjoying giggles along the way. There’s only room for one of them, so they agree to have a con competition, and the loser must leave town. The battle of wits reaches outrageous proportions when they duel over the fortunes and affections of Glenne Headley who plays an American woman that has just won a sweepstakes and is celebrating with a vacation. She’s attractive, but very naïve, and seems just the right type of lamb for a con man’s fleece.

Steve Martin pretends he’s in a wheel chair and that he needs money for a procedure that will allow him to walk again. Michael Caine pretends he’s a psychiatrist and that Martin’s problems are all psychological and that for the right fee he can cure him. Glenne Headley has just the right heart to do something about it and through the story tries to make up her mind who exactly needs this money that she’s so willing to give. As the story progresses there are rumors of a 3rd con artist named “The Jackal” that has been sweeping over Europe duping victims far and wide. Martin and Caine aren’t worried because they believe that “The Jackal” can’t match their skill for deception. If and when this person shows up in their seaside town, they’ll teach them a lesson they won’t forget. By the time we reach the conclusion, it’s revealed that sweet, naïve, clumsy Glenne Headley is “The Jackal” and she cons both Martin and Caine. Once this occurs, Caine’s only words are “She’s delightful.” He clearly admires a good con when he sees one, even if a victim.

The parable Jesus tells in Luke 16 proceeds with plot twists like you find in Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. Without a doubt, nearly everyone agrees that the parable of the shrewd steward is the most peculiar story Jesus ever told. The lead character is a scoundrel in every sense of the word, yet Jesus offers this as an example for His disciples to follow. In the story there are two main figures: a master who is an employer, and a steward, who is the employee. This steward was employed as an accountant and handled the financial affairs of his master who is an absentee landlord. Jesus describes the steward as irresponsible. He was wasting his employer’s resources. He was careless and mismanaged something of value. One might say that the accountant was an underachiever and that he failed to respect the integrity the position called for.

Later in the story Jesus says the man is shrewd. Once the steward is discharged for his inadequate service, he was facing the grim prospects of unemployment. In those days there was no welfare system to fall back on, so the future was dark indeed. How would he survive? How would he live? His situation is on the threshold of a crisis and he must act. He goes to the tenants who are in debt to the master. The payments these tenants made were in the form of an agreed upon portion of the produce from the rented land. From the size of these portions in Jesus’
story, the amounts were very significant. This accountant negotiates payoffs for the amount owed and reduces the total drastically. A master could not go back and cancel these favors because it would have left a negative impression on his business. He would have earned a damaging reputation and he couldn’t afford the fallout from bad publicity. Better to accept small losses now than potentially larger losses from a public relations nightmare. The accountant earns the favor of the tenants and gets to stick it to his boss at the same time.

The steward had originally mismanaged his master’s affairs and was largely an underachiever. However, when the chips are down he does what he has to when survival is on the line. He made decisions in the present to ensure he was ready for the future. This is the conduct Jesus uses to teach a good lesson from a bad example. “Make friends with your worldly resources to benefit others. In this way you store up reward in their eternal habitations.” Here Jesus is suggesting that we need to live with a sense of urgency. The steward was shrewd in the way he approached the present with an eye to the future. In his work, his livelihood, his salary, his bills, his obligations, he conducts himself for the first time with utmost seriousness. There’s no complacency, no apathy, no underachievement. The steward was shrewd when he was on the threshold of something momentous. We too are to live with the same sense of urgency, as one who recognizes the gravity of responsibility that life calls us to.

If verse 9 tells us what the steward did right, then verse 10 tells us what the steward did wrong. “Unless you are honest in small matters you won’t be honest in large ones. If you cheat in little responsibility you won’t be honest in greater responsibility.” Unlike the character in the story, our shrewdness, our urgency, is marked by complete honesty. We are to work hard, derive the fruit of labor, cash checks, write checks, meet expenses, acquire the resources for living, pay bills, support needs, all of this is life. Most people tend to place life into 2 compartments. On the one side is the sacred life and this is how we conduct ourselves on the Sabbath. On the other side is the conduct that making a living demands. It’s a dog eat dog, survival of fittest world, and if you can’t beat them, you have to join them. One side of our life tries to survive by our wits and the other side tries to maintain a life of integrity before God.

The shrewd was originally an underachiever. He was complacent, apathetic, and irresponsible but he was not doing anything dishonest. Once he’s on the threshold of something momentous he then turns into something urgent but less than pure. Jesus says we are to be shrewd and honest, as wise as serpents, but as gentle as doves. It’s a rare combination that can only occur though fellowship with Jesus. Shrewdness and honesty are inseparable because they both have to do with the believer’s responsibility for stewardship in this world. Why should Christians learn how to live shrewdly? Jesus makes it clear that this is not an option in the believer’s life. He indicates that our position on this has implications that impact the quality of our relationship with him. The word that is used for shrewdness is the same Greek word that is used at the end of Matthew 7 to describe another shrewd character that Jesus upholds as worthy to imitate.

In this story Jesus tells of 2 different ways people build in life. One person builds irresponsibly. They only think of the moment and show no concern for what tomorrow might hold. The other person builds shrewdly
because the conditions of today might not be the same tomorrow and we must construct our lives accordingly. This steward in Luke 16 is acting now in a way that the present calls for. He realizes the seriousness of the moment. He respects the opportunity that stands as a threshold to something monumental. Remember, that part of Jesus’ audience in this parable are the Pharisees. They have not been representing the Master with much credibility. Now the kingdom is among them. Do they see the seriousness of the moment? Do they realize that they are standing on the threshold of the something momentous? Will they turn and see the urgency of the kingdom that is here now? The man in the story is a scoundrel but at least he has the wisdom to see past the moment and prepare for tomorrow.

Take note that immediately after this parable Jesus tells the story about the Rich Man and Lazarus. This man of wealth would pass everyday by a pitiful man named Lazarus who lay at the gate. Eventually, the rich man dies and Jesus gives us the picture of what follows his life in this world. What Jesus shows is a man devastated by shock. He’s ambushed by his future because he believed that today would last forever. True wisdom, true shrewdness is the ordering of our life now that recognizes the vital choices we have. The kingdom is here and life needs to be different. The Messiah has come and He’s instituting his rule. One day his throne will be publically available for everyone to see. What are you doing about that now? The steward did everything he knew to do in the present to ensure he was prepared for the future. Jesus is saying we need to invest our lives with the same shrewdness, the same sense of urgency, the same insistence of need.

Examine your own life and consider how much time and effort goes into the preparation and care of this world. Retirement benefits, 401K, equity, capital, property holdings, all very urgent. How much time was invested into the purchase of our last automobile, our last home? We price shop, we bargain, we compare, we seek out the best deal. Do we think of the future beyond this world with the same priority? Some people are too spiritual for the good of this world and some are too worldly for the good of the spiritual. Believers are not to fall under any extreme. We don’t have to be spiritual and yet apathetic about this world and we don’t have to be shrewd and yet dishonest about the way we express our urgency. Our pursuits in this life should have higher goals. Worldly people use the resources of this life to enhance and preserve the enjoyments of the here and now and they ignore the claims that tomorrow has made on our lives. Honest shrewdness sees today for what it is and puts it in proper perspective.

Believers who are shrewd are reaching for something higher and are always searching for ways to use the attainments of this life to glorify bigger and better possibilities. We can be urgent and yet not become preoccupied only preserving the temporal. It’s important to understand the limits of his life and to not expect more than it can give. Like the rich man in the Lazarus story, all of his efforts went into constructing a house built on sand. He was unprepared for the tomorrow he never saw coming. The end of life was upon him and it was entirely unexpected. Paul says, “We brought nothing into this world and it’s certain that we can carry nothing out of it.” Living shrewdly is never separated from living honestly. Believers are protected from life sneaking up from behind.
Unbelievers don’t have that assurance so while they may live urgently they have to live dishonestly and pretend that this world is ultimately what matters. True shrewdness means making peace with the reality of our own mortality. We don’t live forever and we can accept that without being any less responsible in the way we work and conduct the daily practical affairs of our lives.

John Wesley used to advise his pastors, “Work all you can, earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.” We can enjoy responsible vocations and celebrate the fruit of our labors but we never fail to recognize the limits of what material things can do for us. There’s a day coming where we will never cash or write another check. We will never make another deposit or withdrawal. We will never buy or sell another stock. Like the steward in the story, there’s a very real sense in which we manage resources that are not our own. God is the creator of life and bestows everything we come to claim as wealth. Even the capacity for work, energy, health, endurance, all of this is an act of grace. The world and everything in it is God’s possession and we are stewards of resource that are not ultimately our own to claim.

“No servant can serve two masters” Jesus warns that our worldly urgency has a tendency that is dishonest with itself. It’s unavoidable that our lives gravitate toward something or someone. Our responsibility as believers is to continually examine and prayerfully search the direction of our lives to see what has the ultimate focus, the dominate affection, the primary loyalty. The Pharisees were a group of people who lived by the prosperity mentality. They were urgent in the way they conducted their affairs. God was used as a means to derive material gain in this world. It was believed that if one planted seeds of duty and obedience that God would allow the righteous to reap a bountiful harvest: food, water, livestock, and abundance. God was the means to another end. Give God what He needs and He’ll give you what you want. Honest shrewdness is different. It’s an urgency dedicated toward “Working all you can, earning all you can, saving all you can, and giving all you can.” Our resources are used as a means to glorify God as the end. We are stewards that incorporate all that we have and all that we are today because God has made a claim on all time and our future is in His hands.

Don’t forget that it’s only in Luke that this parable appears. Commentators tell us that Luke more than any other writer captures the way material possessions are really an extension of the person. What we own and what we seek to acquire reveal the quality of a person’s heart. You might not know what I’m like inwardly but you can look at the emphasis I put on outward possession and that tells you all you need to know. In chapter 3 of Luke’s story he presents the story of John the Baptist. He’s preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah and what he tells them to do is somewhat surprising. What kind of revival preparation do you think we would need to hear if Jesus were planning to visit our city and our homes? If John the Baptist were here, what would his sermon sound like? He tells his audience to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” When his audience asks for specific examples here is what John tells them: “Collect no more than is legal” “Rob no one” “Be Content” All 3 of these injunctions are concerned with how the believer is to orient the heart around the pursuit of possessions in this world. Anything
less than total integrity can stand in the way of recognizing Jesus when He shows up. We might think we’ve never blatantly robbed anyone but I think what John has in mind here is far more subtle than we might think.

Back in West Virginia we have some friends who owned a Christian bookstore for several years. Unfortunately they eventually had to close their business largely because they exchanged with many customers on credit that didn’t pay their bills. If they had been like any other business they would pursued the normal channels of legal collection but they decided to absorb the loss instead. There was one story they told about a customer named Claudia who attended one of the more charismatic churches in town. Our friends were United Methodist and this customer would often enter their store and speak of the inspired services that her church enjoyed. She would often speak condescendingly about mainline churches that had little excitement before the Lord. This woman opened a credit account and one thing she purchased was a “Jericho Prayer Horn.” It was real trumpet that was beautifully crafted and used mainly for display. The symbolism, of course, would bring to mind Joshua marching around the walls of Jericho and how prayer can bring down whatever obstacles are present in our lives.

Claudia never paid for that nor any of the other tab that ran into hundreds of dollars. She stopped coming into the store and they didn’t see her for months. Not long after that, an evangelist from Billy Graham’s ministry team visited the area and they invited the public to a renewal rally at a high school football stadium that could accommodate about 10,000 people. Our friends from the Christian book store attended and they said the place was packed to capacity. It was quite a sight with people praying for the city and interceding for the success of the invited guest speaker. In the midst of this large crowd our friends said they suddenly heard someone blowing a trumpet and when they looked in the direction of the sound, they saw Claudia holding the horn in one hand and waving a flag in the other. Both of these items came from their store and neither paid for. In between the loud bursts of the trumpet Claudia would let out a shout of praise that the entire stadium could over hear. Our friends found the whole scene amusing but that’s not the end of the story. Later that night when the event concluded, the operators of the bookstore went to a local Dairy Queen were they were still amazed over the whole episode. As they were sitting there, in walks Claudia with her charismatic friends. She makes eye contact with the people she was in debt to and she turns and walks out and quickly as she walked in. They saw her get back in her car and then go around to the drive through instead. She could blow a trumpet and shout in a crowd yet inside there was something going on that made her live with shame and insecurity.

John the Baptist told his audience to “Rob No One.” There were many that day who thought this was too vague so they asked for more detail. “If you have 2 coats, give one to a person who has none.” “If you have abundant food, go and give some to a person who has little.” The point here is that the believer is to see everything they gain as a blessing God allows to flow through one’s life. What spills over as excess is meant not for our surplus but for our opportunity for witness. If we wonder why our lives are spiritually stagnant, we might wonder if we’ve attempted to stop the flow of blessing by building a reservoir around our own property. Many of our hearts are more like dams than like rivers. We’ve constructed walls around excess instead of permitting the
free flow of God’s goodness to channel through our lives as an instrument of grace to others. Like the rich man with Lazarus at the gate, there are people surrounding us in need and we wonder why doesn’t God do something? Why doesn’t God provide for these people in need? Those needs were provided and they were intended to flow freely by the excess God bestowed. Instead that excess was turned into something stagnant and someone goes without when believers who enjoyed blessing were meant to share and didn’t.

Christian shrewdness is honest and doesn’t claim more than what life requires. Materialism is never honest and it’s never secure. If one is seeking for satisfaction on terms that are anchored to this world then wants will always be inexhaustible. Life is characterized by fear. Instead of noticing the needs of Lazarus by the gate, the worry is about the savings account that might not be enough to last though retirement. Notice Jesus doesn’t offer one word of qualification about the rich man’s good intentions. He might have been worried about his health. He might have been worried about Roman politics and how the retired didn’t have benefits that they used to. He might have been honestly concerned that a recession could erode his surplus so he can ever really have enough to be safe. The parable simply says the rich man ignored the needs before him. Selfishness is never as simple or as clearly defined as we might think. He would have been generous but he just didn’t think he could afford to be. This is why generosity always involves an element of faith. If sharing with others was easy and effortless then no one would need faith and we’d always give without a second thought for what tomorrow might hold. Generosity is difficult because even if I have enough for today, I’m never quite sure about tomorrow. This is why we are called to be shrewd about tomorrow. Faithful bravery is what thrives in the face of uncertainty.

Several years ago I had just celebrated a clean bill of health from a physician at my annual physical and I passed the word onto some believers and commented that I felt fortunate because my complicated schedule didn’t allow me to exercise much. An elderly couple over hearing this insisted that I receive an exercise bike from them and they wouldn’t take no for an answer. When I went to the house to pick it up I was astounded over what I discovered. The bicycle was in the yard gathering rust and looked as if it had been there for months. I didn’t want anyone to feel awkward so I loaded it and came home. When we brought it in the house we discovered it didn’t even work anymore and we put out for the garbage collector the next day. Sunday came around and I ran into that elderly couple as they entered the sanctuary. I told them I appreciated the thoughtfulness behind the gift. Another elderly couple could overhear and wondered they could afford such an expensive present. The woman said “I wish we could give gifts like that but we’re not able.” The couple that gave the bike then said, “We had already gotten all our use from it and didn’t even want it anymore. It was ready for the junkyard but we gave it to Steve instead.”

The parable goes on to say that even the master admired the steward for his shrewdness. The chips were down and he could have been demolished. Instead, he found the resolve to do something today that would bear fruit tomorrow. We too live in a world surrounded by sin, limitation, suffering, challenge, and yet we’re invited to participate in this threshold of something momentous. In the midst of a crisis we are called to invest everything we have and everything we are with the knowledge that we’re not serving some absentee landlord, but a master who
promises He’ll leave us nor forsake us. He’s promised us His spirit that can teach us contentment, composure, and inner courage. Our capacity to persevere with Him and overcome in the face of difficulty is what brings great admiration to the eyes of the Master who enjoys seeing our bravery.