

WHAT'S NUMBER ONE? (Lindfield 22nd Sept. 2019)

LUKE 16:1-13

Jesus seems to be praising the dishonest manager. We don't know exactly what he did wrong but it seems he may have been over-charging his customers and pocketing the difference and somehow his boss found out. Getting fired meant he'd have to dig roads or wells – and he wasn't strong enough to do that OR he'd have to become a beggar and he was too proud for that.

His solution seems the best course of action. His customers think they're getting a good deal and the boss realises that 50% of something is better than 100% of nothing. Then Jesus gets to the point: *No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

Jesus seems to be recognising that the manager is, indeed, shrewd. Imagine if he put that shrewd mind to a better purpose? What could have been achieved? When we hear about all these internet scams, some of which are devilishly clever, I can't help but wonder how better off the world might be if these smart people used their minds in more positive pursuits. People seem always to want the quick dollar, the easy road to success, even if people get hurt along the way.

Even though the boss seems happy with the manager's solution, we don't know if he was still fired. There is no indication if he was remorseful for his actions or just sorry he was caught. There is no indication that there was any change of heart. The fate of the manager is not the point of the parable.

Jesus is not saying you cannot be wealthy. He doesn't say that anywhere. Philanthropy plays an important part in our society. Charities and other organisations could never exist without it. Many wealthy people give vast sums of money to all sorts of causes and no-one knows about it. Jesus is speaking about priorities. If your money is as important, or more important than your relationships – with family, friends and with God then things are out of kilter. *You cannot serve God and wealth.* Jesus is implying that you can use your wealth in the service of God. But when material possessions begins to assume a greater place in your life then all is not well.

We have many justifications for this. A parent, working 100 hours a week says, "I'm doing this for the kids so they can have a better life" – better than what? Is an absentee father or mother better than the overseas holiday or the new car every 2 years? Would they rather have a story read to them at bedtime or come and watch the soccer game on a Saturday morning?

If we care about how wealthy we are over all other things we will suffer for it. Our bodies will suffer. More stress, more anxiety leading to more stress. Heart disease, high blood pressure – even cancer. Less sleep, a poorer diet, all these things mount up over time. Taking a walk, riding your bike, gardening, playing with the kids, date-nights with your partner – all go by the board. Excuses are made, reasons are given – who is trying to convince who?

If we care about getting wealthier our spiritual lives suffer and shrivel. We just intuitively know this is true. We find ourselves pulling away from the things that nourish our souls. No time for church, too busy to pray. God understands. Eventually our spiritual lives dry up completely.

We have to have money to pay the mortgage, the insurances, run the car, all the children's expenses, etc etc. God knows we need to do all that. It is just as irresponsible to go to the other extreme and give everything away and then have to rely on others' charity to provide the basics. No-one is suggesting that.

If you don't have much money, if you're only just keeping your head above water financially, this parable is still for you. Substitute anything else for "wealth" and the principle is still the same. I've known members of Rotary whose entire life is their club. Rotary is a very fine organisation that does an enormous amount of good. I've known men who play golf 5 times a week and get very cranky when it rains. There's nothing wrong with playing golf. I've known plenty of people whose whole life is centred round the Church. They're on everything, they turn up to everything but even the Church is not a substitute for God. There are plenty of PKs (Pastors kids) who never go near the church because it robbed their father or mother of precious family time. I know plenty of marriages that have ended because the clergy partner was more committed to the work than the family.

We can't love God and money (or Rotary or golf or the Church) equally. It's a matter of balance. Figuring out that balance is the tricky thing. That's what Jesus is really saying. Jesus never says it's going to be easy to work it out. We spend a lifetime trying. Realising it's an issue, a matter of importance is the first major step. We don't want to get so caught up with something that we end up hating it. How do we do this? Start by committing to memory the very wise words from the writer of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes: *There is a time for every purpose under heaven*. Ask God to make you sensitive to the

signs that the scales are tipping too far to one side and to prompt you to get the balance right.

Like all his parables Jesus is giving us clues, even advice, on how to live as faithful followers and to live the very best lives we can. Isn't that what we all want? AMEN
