

## “Serve Only God”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 18, 2016  
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:1-7 and Luke 16:1-13

*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.*

*1 Timothy 2:1-7 and Luke 16:1-13*

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other; You cannot serve God and wealth.”*

*Luke 16:1-13*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the mystery and power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that are within us, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have read from scripture and those that you have laid upon my heart to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. Let that word have its way within us,

among us and through us, helping to form us into the people of God, helping to encourage us in our mission and helping us to reach out to those in need. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Did anybody hear that it's stewardship season? Did you? Did you all know that? Anybody hear the last verse of the passage I just read? *You cannot serve God and wealth.* So when you get your stewardship letter or you grab a pledge card out of the pew, I want you to think about the fact that you cannot serve God and wealth. I want you to pray about it and I want you to make a decision. Are you going to go to heaven or hell? Amen.

Shortest sermon ever. Seems like it's about that simple, isn't it? You gotta decide, which is it? Are you gonna go to heaven or are you gonna go to hell? Man wouldn't that be easy for us? Wouldn't that be easy? 'Cause all of you decide that you're gonna go to heaven, right? And you get your pledge letter and you mark it "yes, I'm gonna pledge" or "yes, I'll give a little bit more" because you don't want to go to that eternal fire and damnation place. You want to do the right thing.

And then Jesus, in this passage, talks about honoring a dishonest manager and seems to lift up a scoundrel for us to pay attention to. Every now and then I have my issues with the people who decide what gets read from the pulpit. And today is really one of those days. Because do you know what verse 14 says in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke? It says that now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were nearby. And everything that Jesus is saying to his disciples, to us, during stewardship season, is really intended for the Pharisees who love money and are standing over there and he is talking loud enough for them to hear him and he is telling these stories about people who are acting in ways that are not exactly obviously Christian, but they are kind of worried about losing their jobs and losing their power and losing their prestige. The manager who works for the master has got it pretty sweet until he hears about the accounting and says, "Come here, I want to talk to you." Then he gets afraid that he is going to lose everything and so he starts making deals with people. He says, "How much do you owe him? A hundred jugs of olive oil—make it 50. How much wheat? 100—make it 80."

Anybody in here have any credit card debt? Don't raise your hands, just play along. I don't want to get a coin out and start flipping it. Imagine, though.... how about a mortgage. Imagine getting your mortgage bill. Typically in the month before you owe \$162,000, and your mortgage bill shows up next month and it says you owe \$43,000. And you call the bank and you're like—"uh did you all make a mistake? My mortgage went down over \$120,000. Last month I owed \$162,000. You're not gonna repossess it, are you?" The person is like, "No. You owe \$43,000. That's your new balance." "What?" Or if you have three credit cards that you are trying to pay off and all of a sudden you get the bill in the mail for one of them and it shows a 0 balance. Last month there was \$2500 on it, so you call the bank again, and you're like, "What's the deal?" "There was a payment made, you don't owe that anymore." How would you feel if you were one of those debtors who had that debt forgiven? You're going to feel pretty great. And you are going to feel really good about the person who helped you pay it off or get down to that new level. And for some strange reason—besides the fact that they don't tell us that Jesus isn't talking to his disciples—he's really talking to the Pharisees who love money and power and prestige—they translate this word "dishonest". What a horrible translation of what this manager is doing.

One option is that he is unjustly providing grace. Now because that's not one word, the people who translate our Bible have decided to name it "dishonest". They read the story in context, that's what it sounds like. He's being dishonest, he is in trouble and he's going to get fired. But if you think about it from the point of view of the debtors, what he is doing is he is offering them

unearned grace. And he is giving it to them freely. So maybe this guy who we think is a scoundrel isn't quite so bad after all. Now, Jesus goes on to say other things in the passage and he does conclude with this dichotomy around *you can either love God or you can love money*. As I said earlier, there is part of me every now and then, that says wouldn't it be that simple if we could guilt our way into heaven by telling all of you how much you give and if you give this much you're going to be blessed and if you are blessed you're going to get to heaven and when you get to heaven there's going to be a wide open gate, and if you get to that gate and its open, you are going to be ushered right in on red carpet—but only if you fill out a pledge card. No. That's not what we do.

Thankfully, we are a generous congregation so in this season of stewardship, we get to have a little bit of fun with the whole idea. Most of you are going to respond and you are going to respond generously. Most of you have a history of giving generously to this congregation and to this church and to the ministry that we are called to do together. Year after year, after year, after year...and I won't go into the 50-year member number, but you get the idea. As you heard Stephanie share, there are new families and children that are joining us in this adventure. We don't know what is going to happen to those families, but our prayer is that they become part of who we are and join in with all that we do. There are lots of ways that people have figured out how to try to get you to give money to their cause. Anybody ever see a TV commercial with a child who doesn't look like they've eaten for a while? Or, at least in my family, even worse, there is a dog in a cage. How fast can I change the channel? Because I don't want to see that. I don't want to be hooked that way. I don't want to be guilted into giving.

One of the options that we had today was, rather than Stephanie coming up and giving a minute for Children, Family and Youth, we were going to have the kids all line up, with pledge cards and come to each of you and tell you that if you didn't pledge, they would get to go to LOGOS. And do you know that some nights at LOGOS they have Spagettios? And if you don't increase your pledge, we're not going to get meatballs. So please, please, please.... No. We're not going to do that. Did I hear a “no”? Okay, maybe next year.

The big things you see—this beautiful space, beautiful music, beautiful worship, lights are on, air is on. You hear about children's ministry, outreach is going great. We got 55% of the kids who are coming to the summer program who are not churched here. We've got 30 some percent of the kids who are coming to LOGOS who are brand new. During the week it's fun to see Rob's head start to throb—he's the Director of Children and Youth Ministries—and when I see him doing this, I'm like, “Rob, what's going on?” He said, “I've got two more kids for LOGOS. I don't know where to put them.” I'm like, “That's great news.” He's like, “No seriously, I don't know where to put them. We're almost maxed out.” I said, then don't let Stephanie talk because you're going to get more kids.”

Those are the big things, but I want to share one little thing about why you should give this year for next year. Earlier this week as I was sitting in my study, it was on Monday, my phone buzzed and it was Paula, the receptionist, and she said, “We have a situation out here, can you come?” I don't know about you but when someone gives you that message, my response, is either I need to do karate or jump out the window, I'm not sure which. But something is going on, so I go out and as I'm walking out I look at her and I'm like, “What is it?” She said, “We have a guest here who needs some assistance.” I just want to stop there for a second and I want you to paint the picture of who is sitting in the welcome area waiting for assistance. Okay? I'm like, “What do they need?” “They need some gas money and a little bit of money for food.” I said, “All right, do we have any gas cards?” She's like, “What?” And I'm like, “Okay, never mind. Do we have any

money?" And then I think to myself, "Wait. It's Monday and Jane Meppiel is counting the offering if it's not too late in the day, and maybe there is some cash." And so I walk by Paula and I round the corner and I see Jane sitting at her desk counting green bills. And I let her stop and I said, "Okay, can I have \$40 of that?" "What? What are you going to do with it?" I said, "There is someone here who needs some assistance." "Well, \$40?" "Yeah, of the cash. Can you make it be Pastor's Discretion? Do something in the books, but I need the \$40 right now because we don't have any gas cards." "Well, okay." And she gives me the \$40 and I walk out and she is still talking at me but I don't know what she said. I'm thinking it was probably like, "Don't make this a habit." But I'll let your imaginations run wild. If any of you know Jane, it probably wasn't don't make this a habit.

And so I have the \$40 wadded up in my hand and I go around the corner to help the person who is here needing gas money and food money. I have a cousin named Debbie who is about my age, a little bit younger, and this woman looks just like her, except she is pregnant—big pregnant. I sit down next to this woman and I asked her, "What's going on?" She said, "I have been trying to get into a shelter for the last three weeks. I'm trying to get away from my boyfriend who is not nice to me and if I can get to Potosi before 4 p.m., they'll let me in. I can stay and they'll take care of me." And my question was, "Is 40 bucks enough?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "Are you sure, because I can get you more. I'll get you whatever you need." She said, "No, this is plenty." She asked where the gas station was. I told her it's a block that way. She said where is food? I said it's the other way. She said thank you a thousand times and she walked out the door. My guess is that we will never see her again. But that's why we give. To do good and to change lives. And on behalf of her and everyone else that you never hear "thank you" from, thank you.