

This week's Gospel, commonly referred to as "The Parable of the Crooked Steward" is one of the most obscure of all parables and one of the most difficult to interpret. It occurs in a series of parables and sayings of Jesus intended to instruct his followers in the meaning of the new age and the manner in which disciples should make preparations for its coming - in their lives and in the life of the world.

It is incomprehensible to us that Jesus would tell a parable which seems to praise dishonesty. Evidently, people in the early church also had difficulty understanding it. It is the most controversial thing Jesus ever said. Perhaps it is *because* the point or meaning of the parable is not exactly clear that Luke, the Gospel writer, appended four lessons or morals to the parable. For the sake of instruction, I'll call them the four Ts. If those who desire to follow Christ will take them to heart, they will be of great benefit in the process of becoming mature in the faith as advance in the journey of sanctification.

One thing every disciple needs is *ingenuity*. *The people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light.*

The manager in the parable is a thoroughly dishonest rascal. But it's not his dishonesty that is commended. It is his ingenuity. If we want to hang on to our faith and spread our faith, we've got to do so in a manner as ingenious as the person who is hanging on to a business or advertising a product. I just wish the church had an advertising promotion as effective as that of the state lottery - one that would make you want to go to Church and be generous toward God as much as this one makes you want to buy a lottery ticket.

Christians are sometimes known as a dull lot. When change threatens, someone is always available to boldly recite the 7 last words of the church: *WE NEVER DID IT THAT WAY BEFORE*. Or someone repeats some excuse for a lack of generosity. Or someone treats the Church like an exclusive club instead of as the Body of Christ. Sometimes what is needed is all the imagination, all the ingenuity, all the drive, all the cunning and fire of a computer hacker trying to break the code of a bank account that he can dip into freely and not get caught. The world around us cries for Christians to be at least as imaginative and passionately interested (though not as crooked). The world cries for some imaginative solution that we can use to get our world out of the rut-unto-death it's now in. If Christian people can't offer it, I shudder to think about the kind of people who might.

In the play *St. Joan* George Bernard Shaw has a bishop ask as Joan of Arc is burning at the stake, "must a Christ die in every generation because people have a lack of imagination?" How many are lost each day, how many lives destroyed, because the children of light lack the ingenuity required to get the message across that God cares? Every disciple needs ingenuity.

Disciples also need *responsibility*. *Make friends for yourselves with worldly wealth so that when it gives out, you will be welcomed in the eternal home.*

Our sense of responsibility should guide us in the use of our resources today to benefit and undergird those things that are lasting. Misuse of resources on behalf of others was one of the chief accusations of the prophet Amos. The rabbis had a saying: "the rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come." St. Ambrose, commenting on the rich fool who built bigger barns in which to store his wealth, said: "The bosoms of the poor, the houses of widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last forever."

Jesus believed that a person's true wealth consisted not in what a person kept but in what that person gave away. That is why possessions are such a great responsibility.

John Wesley had that attitude. He once said: "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give away all you can. As long as ever you can." Responsibility in stewardship of the resources God has given us is something to be generously exercised by every disciple so that the causes of all the social problems of humanity may be cut at the root.

And, disciples need integrity. *Whoever is faithful in small matters will be faithful in large ones; whoever is dishonest in small matters will be dishonest in large ones. If, then, you have not been faithful in handling worldly wealth, how can you be trusted with true wealth? And, if you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you what belongs to you?*

Another way of putting that is: Success in the hands of a person without integrity becomes an ego trip. And you can't go on an ego trip and expect to end up in the kingdom of God because the way to that place in life is the way of the cross.

If we expect the claims of Christianity to really have an impact on the world, we're going to need all the integrity we can muster. How else will the world believe that we believe what we say we believe? St. Paul said: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all people." If we manage the sacred as well as the material realities entrusted to us in this world with integrity, we will be prepared to handle the inheritance which is ours in the world to come.

The fourth lesson Luke draws from Jesus' parable is that Disciples need fidelity. *No servant can be the slave of two masters; he will either hate the one and love the other or he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*

Wealth always brings with it the danger of idolatry. We don't have the option of being under no master; the question is only which one we will serve. Martin Luther once said: "whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your god." I believe there is only room for one God in anyone's life. Our greatest effort is spent in resisting the One God who can make our life really worth living. Since we have so many substitute gods lying around, we continue to resist the living God. And, he gives us freedom to do so. But, one day we yield. We feel the peace and hope which comes when God has found us at last. If that relationship is to grow and be our source of identity and strength, we must be loyal. Daily we turn to the God of our lives and cling to him and rely on him even in the face of so many other options. God has taken the initiative in reaching out to us, calling us by name, searching for us in some of the most wretched places and painful experiences. And it is our greatest aim to be loyal to him.

Ingenuity, responsibility, integrity, and fidelity - four lessons every disciple needs to learn in life and by precept and example pass along to others.

As a boy, Robert Louis Stevenson was watching an old lamp lighter. He told his nurse that he was watching a man making holes in the darkness. John Ruskin said you ought to be able to see where a Christian has been by the lights left burning.

If we will exert as much time, money, and energy in learning the lessons of ingenuity, responsibility, integrity, and fidelity in regard to our spiritual life as we spend on everything else in our life, we will make many holes in the darkness and leave plenty of lights burning along the way that leads to the abundant and eternal life with God.