

The end justifies the means. Or does it?

What's more important? The goal? Or the way things you do along the way to attaining the goal?

Can you do evil things to attain a good end? Should you cut corners or do something unethical in order to achieve an ethical goal? Do evil means taint and ruin a good goal? We have to constantly make those kinds of choices, at home, at school, at work.

This morning's Gospel lesson helps to deal with such questions. However, the answer is not immediately apparent on the surface. So let's take a good look.

This parable is nicknamed the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, or Unjust Steward.

This parable is widely regarded as Jesus' most difficult parable to understand. Some parables are easy to understand but hard to live out. This one is just plain hard.

The parable begins with 2 characters. There's a rich man. And there's his manager or steward who is squandering the boss's property.

The boss decides to fire him. 'Clean out your desk and give me a copy of all my accounts.'

So the steward has a crisis. He's not strong enough to be a manual laborer, and he's too proud to beg.

But, he has a flash of inspiration. The dishonest steward figures out a way to make people indebted to him, so that they'll take care of him after he's fired.

So he calls together his master's debtors, asks them how much they owe.

Then as they're giving an accounting, he cooks the books, lowering their debts. You owe 100 jugs of olive oil? Let's write down 50. 100 bushels of wheat? Let's make it 80.

Seems he's trying to buy the favor of his master's debtors at the expense of his master himself.

And then, the HUGE surprise. The master commends the dishonest steward. This guy has squandered the master's money. On top of that he lowered the master's accounts receivable. And the master praises him!?!?!?

Actually, if you look closely, he compliments the dishonest steward, not because he's dishonest, but because he acted shrewdly. Because he was clever and used his head.

And at the end Jesus adds the comment that "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."¹

¹ Lk 16:8

The dishonest manager is commended for acting shrewdly, for the secular, worldly-minded are shrewder in their dealings than are the religiously-minded.

And then Jesus follows up in saying that his disciples should use dishonest wealth to make friends for the kingdom.

What does that sound like? On the surface, it sounds like the end justifies the means.

But then, we get the opposite message at the end of the parable. Jesus basically says, 'Those who are faithful in little things are the ones that can be trusted with big things. You've got to be able to handle the small accounts before you'll be entrusted with the big accounts.'²

If you're dishonest with the little things, you can't be trusted with big things either. If you can't be trusted with money, then who will entrust you with what's really of value?³ And if you're not good at taking care of another's possessions, who's going to give you your own stuff to take care of.⁴

And Jesus ends by saying that you can't have divided loyalties. You can't serve both God and Wealth.⁵

The first part of Jesus' teaching sounds like the end justifies the means. The second part sounds like the opposite of the end justifies the means. So how do we make sense of this parable?

Well, it turns out that we've got a 21st century mental and cultural block to what's really going on here. We hear all of these stories and we think in terms of money. And yes, there is a heavy monetary layer here. The steward was wasting money. He reduced debts. Jesus says those who can't take care of small amounts of money shouldn't be trusted with larger amounts.

But there's another layer here that transcends money. In Jesus' world people would immediately recognize another layer, another meaning, another commodity that was far more important than money their culture.

The other layer actually overlays both sections, both the parable, and the teaching after it. It's something we don't worry too much about in our western culture. But it's something that's still very important in Mediterranean, middle eastern, and oriental cultures.

And that is HONOR.

² Lk 16:10

³ Lk 16:11

⁴ Lk 16:12

⁵ Lk 16:13

This is secondarily a parable about money.
This is primarily a parable about honor.

And if you look at this parable through the filter of honor, everything clicks into place.

At first, the steward is recklessly spending the master's money. But by doing so, he is also recklessly spending his master's honor. A rich man who cannot control his steward is probably not someone you want to do business with. The master's standing in the community would take a huge hit because of the steward's behavior.

And yes, the steward's own honor has also taken a huge hit. He can't be trusted. Maintaining his master's honor and standing should have been one of his chief concerns. And yet, he has knocked his master's honor and status down.

So the steward has to do something. And from an honor standpoint, his solution is ingenious.

He forgives part of the debtor's debts to his master. This actually does three things.

1. It makes the debtors happy.
2. More importantly, it makes the master look good. It makes the master look generous. People would assume the steward is doing this on the master's orders. They would assume that the master is forgiving a portion of what is owed him. This is incredible PR. The honor the master will gain will far outweigh any monetary loss. The master would never want to reverse what the steward did--the cost to his honor would be too great.
3. It makes the steward look good. The steward is once again looking out for his master's honor. This is so important, that the master might rehire the steward. But even if he doesn't, he shows other potential employers that he can do the right thing, and protect their honor.

From a strictly monetary standpoint, the steward is out of a job and the master takes a big financial hit. It's a lose/lose scenario.

From an honor standpoint, it's win/win. The master's honor and the steward's honor both go up.

It turns out in this parable is not about the end justifying the means. Instead, it's about how you use what you're given. In this particular case, you use money to increase honor.

And that fits with the rest of what Jesus is saying. If you're honorable about small matters, it follows that you'll be honorable about larger matters.

Handling things like money is important. Our money has been entrusted to us by God. But good stewardship is more than just money.

Seeking honor for your master in the way you handle all your affairs is even more important. The way you use your money. The way you treat other people. The way you use your time and talent. Jesus is challenging us to make our daily decisions in such a way that brings honor to ourselves, and more importantly, honor to God.

As one of my favorite preachers says it this way:

"Life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.'"⁶

The way you use what you've been given is important.

And in the fall of 2016, I'm going to go out on a limb here. One of the most important things that all of us need to use wisely is our right to vote.

I'm certainly not going to tell you WHO to vote for. That's not my job. But I can and do urge you TO vote.

There are many in our country who find our choice of presidential candidates this year to be less than ideal. I can certainly sympathize.

But having to make a difficult choice is NOT an excuse for NOT making a choice, avoiding voting, or skipping this election.

The way you use what you've been given is important. And that includes the right to vote. So be as prayerfully discerning as you can, and then vote your conscience.

And, regardless of who wins the election, we all need to continue to pray. Yes, pray for our country. But also pray for whoever our new president is.

When I first arrived at St. Paul's, we were praying for George our President. For a number of years now, we've been praying for Barack our President. And next year we'll be praying for whoever our new president turns out to be.

After all, in our Epistle lesson today, Paul urges us to pray for our leaders. He says, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions."⁷

⁶ Fred Craddock, *Luke* p192

⁷ 1Tim 2:1-2

And for 21st century Americans, that means we need to pray for all of our leaders, especially our presidents.

It doesn't matter if you voted for them or not. In fact, I would add, it's probably spiritually MORE important to pray for a president whom you did NOT vote versus one whom you did support.

So continue to pray.

And pray for our country, and pray for our election process.

In fact, I would invite you to grab a prayer book and turn with me to page 820. Page 820.

This is a section of prayers for various things. And on page 820 there is a section of "Prayers for National Life." I would commend all of these prayers to you.

Prayer 18. For our Country

Prayer 19. For the President and other leaders.

Prayers 20 and 21. For our legislatures and courts.

Prayer 22. For Sound Government

On the next page, prayer 25. For those in the Armed Forces.

Good prayers.

But I would ask you to look at prayer 24. For an Election.

This would be a great prayer for all of us to pray daily for the next 6 or 7 weeks.

Would you pray it with me now?

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.