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Luke 16:1–4, NRSVue.

16 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. ² 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.’ ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

The Kingdom of the parables.

We’ve looked at the parables, noting that a couple of them are explained in detail by Jesus, others by the Gospel writers, and some are not explained at all. Jesus told the Apostles that the parables are meant to be understood by his followers:

*10 Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”
11 He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’*

Indeed, we saw that the parables on one hand are sometimes simple and obvious. But more often, there is a lot of truth to Jesus’ statement about the hidden meaning in the parables, with understandings that only deep and learned believers will fully catch on to. You must be open to God’s word to grasp the deeper truth that a parable often conveys. Today, we’re going to start by looking at what many people

call the most difficult parable to understand. It is commonly called the Parable of the Fired Steward. It is told only in the Gospel of Luke.

The parable goes like this: Jesus says that there was a rich man who had a manager working for him. The manager is accused of squandering or wasting the rich man's assets. So, the rich man tells the manager that he is going to have to account for what he has done with the money, and in fact, he is going to be fired. The manager, fearful for his future, comes up with a seemingly very dishonest plan: he approaches multiple people who are indebted to his boss, giving them each a discount. His goal is to make friends for the future, so that he can get another job. Interestingly, Jesus says this: *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.* ⁹ *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.* This is confusing, Jesus seemingly complimenting the dishonest manager. There are multiple interpretations of this parable, and this is what makes it so interesting. Some say that it is simply meant to urge people to prepare for the moral crises that will confront all of us in life with the same zeal that this manager directed toward his worldly problems. We need to live our lives fervidly focused on day-to-day righteousness.

Others say that the point is that Jesus is saying that rather than using our wealth to advance us on Earth, we should be using it to advance us in God's eyes. We should be generous with what we have and give to others. If we emulate the dishonest manager, but do it for the right reason, and that is to help others and not ourselves, then we will be *welcomed into our eternal homes*. In other words, we should be using our assets that we gather in life to advance other people, to pass on the grace that God gives us. Notice that Jesus goes on in this parable to say this:

¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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.

This seems to suggest that in truth, the rich man has been carrying on immoral or dishonest business dealings. The manager has not *been faithful with the dishonest wealth*. But Jesus, while acknowledging that this manager is smart and telling us to apply ourselves toward our spiritual lives and not our earthly lives, does acknowledge that this manager cannot be trusted. He is likely to be just as dishonest morally as he is financially. Jesus concludes by saying that we need to make a decision in life. Are we like the rich man and his manager, simply trying to get rich on Earth? Or are we serving the true master, and that is God? We see that

in the end, the correct way to interpret a parable often has to do with keeping in mind that Jesus' main focus in his ministry isn't on proving our faith through our acts, or on how cultures should treat individuals – although he does preach about these things. We have seen this in recent messages, and we see it again in this parable: Jesus' main focus is on the Kingdom of God, on introducing it to us and on leading us there. You cannot serve God and wealth. Wealth is the Kingdom of people; it corrupts us and it is a very temporary place to live. God's Kingdom is what matters, and it is permanent. To see this more clearly, consider the next chapter of Luke, 17, verses 20 and 21:

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

This is why Jesus is so focused on conveying the truths of the Kingdom of God in his parables, why we see repeatedly that Jesus, when he sums up his message in colorful, compelling stories, it's almost always about the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is here and now: that is his message. It's not something that will come when we die or at the end of time. It is now – and we can live in the Kingdom on Earth and we can live there for all of eternity. This is a big, new message to the people of the ancient world. In Luke 13, Jesus tells two quick parables:

¹⁸ He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

²⁰ And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Jesus makes it very clear what is mission on Earth is all about. The parables are the way he summarizes his most important lessons. In the first little parable, about the mustard seed, the parable is told differently than in Matthew. But the lesson is the same. The Kingdom of God is going to give us comfort, shade, a place to live and rest, right here on Earth. In the second one, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like yeast. Yeast works in a mysterious way – remember that they did not know how yeast worked chemically, like we do now. Equally mysteriously, the Kingdom gives us refuge everywhere, even when we seem to be alone and abandoned. Jesus leverages everyday situations and concepts, like farming, household finances, justice, and greed, things that people could easily relate to. He uses these to ground his major message: the Kingdom of God is here. Why would Jesus be so concerned with repeatedly and colorfully - and in a grounded fashion - making this point?

Keep in mind that Jesus is doing something that people are going to find difficult to accept. On one hand, the Jewish people, the Israelites, his people, had historically expected God to come to Earth and rescue the People of God. Now he's

saying that this isn't true. His Kingdom is an eternal one. It also isn't some cosmic, otherworldly, end of the universe thing. The new Kingdom of God isn't going to consist of a real-world dynasty, where the Romans will be overthrown and the many centuries old pattern of one colonial empire after another conquering them will finally end. And yet, that Kingdom has already begun, right here on Earth. What does that mean? That is what Jesus is teaching in the parables.

In the New Testament, the parables are only in the Gospels. Although it was probably written after the Gospel of Mark, Matthew is the first Gospel in the Bible. Jesus turns to preaching largely in parables in Chapter 13. Here is what happens at the tail end of Chapter 12, just before he tells the parable of the Sower:

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Jesus is not denying his family here. He's not saying I don't care about my mother and siblings. He's saying that his family has been extended: with the coming of the new Kingdom of God on Earth, there is a new notion of family, a more encompassing one. Another thing to keep in mind is that Jesus might have become a liability to his family. If the Pharisees and Sadducees want him dead, they are

likely to have canceled his family, isolated them socially, perhaps even threatened their lives. We could imagine that Jesus is doing something here that he often does, craftily saying two things at once: that yes, his disciples and followers are part of his new family, and also, that he wants to distance himself from his family to protect them. He is also making a point that he makes elsewhere in the Gospels: the commitment to your faith, to God, to your fellow believers is nothing to take lightly. This could be a poetic way of warning folks that becoming a follower of Christ is a big deal, and you need to take it very seriously.

After telling us the reality of committing to entering the Kingdom of God, Jesus launches into a period of preaching dominated by parables. Here is something that the author of the Gospel of Matthew tells us near the end of the series of parables. It is just before the execution of John the Baptist:

³⁴ Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

*“I will open my mouth to speak in parables;
I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.”*

This last part is a reference to Psalm 78, verse 2, which reads:

² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old.

Once again, a reference to the Old Testament, to the Hebrew Bible, a reference his listeners would certainly have recognized, is a reminder that Jesus is here to fulfill

Old Testament prophecies. He is indeed the long-awaited Messiah, here to bring about the new Kingdom of God. But by quoting this Psalm while talking about his use of parables, the Gospel author is telling us that his bottom-line teaching, the words of Jesus' that matter the most, the focused summary of Jesus' ministry's lessons is conveyed in his parables. We need to pay very close attention to them.

Indeed, the parables are important for a couple of reasons. First, the authors of Mathew, Mark, and Luke were probably working from second-hand material, from other written documents, but largely from oral reports of the life of Jesus. The parables, since they are stories and they are compact and artful, were likely to be remembered when other things that Jesus said were forgotten. Thus, Jesus uses parables in part because he knows they will indeed be remembered, that they will be a good long-term way of conveying truths about the Kingdom of God. And second, Jesus uses the parables to summarize his most critical teaching: the nature of the Kingdom of God. He wants us to know that this is his primary concern, to prepare us for the new kingdom, for a spiritual kingdom that begins now and continues for all of eternity. He isn't primarily concerned with temporal - meaning earthly - or temporary issues, not with human rights, or how to live a happy earthly life, or how to make sure our acts reflect our faith. These are important things, and Jesus does indeed discuss them. But the big issue is introducing the Kingdom to us.

Let's finish with a very revealing parable, one that is a bit scary. It's from the end of Chapter 18 of Matthew. I have edited this for brevity:

²³ "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison. ³¹ Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.' ³² And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³³ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

This is about more than forgiveness, about the need for us to forgive if we want God to forgive us. There is a deeper meaning. It is – you guessed it - about the Kingdom of God. This parable is about the price that Jesus paid so that we could enter the Kingdom of the New Covenant. He offered himself symbolically, allowed himself to be sacrificed, so that we would be forgiven. We need to remember that warning about the Kingdom. If we want to enter, it's a huge commitment. We cannot live for the things of this world. They always corrupt us. Like the slave who should have given another slave time to pay off a debt, we must – in return for the price of entering the Kingdom – walk away from the corrupting assets of this life.

The parables are about the one thing that Jesus is most concerned with. They are his summary statements. They are about the Kingdom. I would urge you to read them, but make sure you consult a commentary before you decide that you understand fully any given parable. They are the heart of what Jesus teaches us. They are well-honed, poetic truths. They tell us everything we need to know about the message of Jesus. It's all about the Kingdom. Never forget that. Celebrate it. Live for it. Let yourself live a radiant life, here and for eternity in the Kingdom of God. It's all yours, and the parables will tell you just what the Kingdom can be for you. The parables also clue us into two other things. First, there is a strong conflict between the Kingdom and worldly riches, worldly pride, and worldly power. Second, everything else that Jesus teaches, about loving all people, forgiving others, living a life of service, putting your total trust in God, learning to pray directly to God, studying Scripture - all of these result from walking in the Kingdom. It's not that they are second to this. They are all a natural extension of choosing to live your life, starting right now, in the new Kingdom. So, I suggest that when you read the Gospels focus on the Kingdom of the parables. Please pray with me.

God, thank you for the parables of Jesus. We deeply appreciate the simple, direct, colorful way in which Jesus made sure that we would understand what really matters in this life. And that is simply that we step into the Kingdom. Amen.