

Sermon on 15.November 2008

Luke 16, 1-3

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 account 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.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

There is an English saying: "Change. If not, change will change you." We are living in a very fast changing world. There are many changes in the field of science and technology. It changes sometimes to the extent that we cannot cope with it. Barak Obama is speaking for change in America and in the world. The world leaders are speaking of change because of the collapse of Lehman's Brothers bank in America. The world is shouting for change. The German politicians speak of the saving packet for the finance system. They speak of building trust with the customers of the banks. Do all these people bring the real positive change that our world needs?

In my country, Ethiopia, people are always for change: economical change, change of beliefs, cultural change, political change and so on. In my life time I experienced three changes of governments in Ethiopia. When I was in the elementary school, the majority of Ethiopians shouted for a change of government, and overthrew the emperor in 1974. We hoped for a change for the better in the political system, but the change moved us to the left, to communists who did not care about humanity. People started to shout, saying "we need change again". People have said "Ka Isaat wada ramat" From fire flame to the red charcoal whose heat is stronger ("Out of the frying pan into the fire"). We struggled for change and succeeded in 1991, hoping that a better government would come. We had a year of transition, and it went in the worst direction possible. Then people started to tell a story. There was a beggar who had many wounds on his feet. This beggar sat by the roadside and begged. There were many flies on his wounds, eating his flesh. Those who passed by this beggar chased away the flies from him, and he said: "Stop, I do not need your help." People said: "Why? They are eating your flesh and will kill you soon." But the beggar said: "You have chased away the flies that have been eating me for long time, and are almost satisfied and have become fat. Now they are eating me slowly. I am used to it. If you now chase them away, the new starving flies with new sharp teeth will come and finish me off soon. I do not need a change that will kill, but a change that will heal."

What kind of change is the shrewd world speaking about? Do they really want to bring change or while the change is at the door in a way they did not expect, will they shout to save themselves? The text on which I am going to preach is the most difficult text in the bible, which no preacher likes to speak about. It is difficult because it speaks about a financial issue; it is difficult, because it is a story about a dishonest manager which is always misunderstood. Some preachers focus on the actions of the manager and others on the rich man. Some try to attach a meaning to every detail. Yet others are confused by the text dispute, even its legitimacy, crediting it to one of the disciples or Luke the evangelist instead of Jesus.

Yet, we believe that these Words are God's words, the very utterance of the Holy Spirit for our ears. I think we do not need to make the text too complicated by thinking in the value system of our day's financial value system. For us Christians its meaning is clear and simple. The text is about wealth and its use. For a faithful Christians there is a proper use of wealth given to us by God our father.

## **What does this parable of Jesus teach us?**

In order to know what lesson this text gives, we need to know the context in which the story was told.

### **The Debtors**

Jesus told people this parable in a specific context, in Palestine where the rich Jewish farmers were exploiting the poor farmers in their lease systems. The rich farmers gave loans, got illegal profits and became very rich. The interest rate was very high and there was no way for the poor farmers to get out of debt. When the farmers were in the position of being unable to pay back their debt, the rich farmers took the wives and children of the debtors as slaves, to work for them. The system was such a corrupt system that there was enmity between the managers, the landlords and the normal society. The Bible (Torah) is against illegal interest and it is against God's will. These poor farmers need to be relieved. Jesus speaks in this context.

### **The dishonest manager**

The manager was a dishonest or corrupt manager, who was going to be fired from his job. He knew that he was incapable of doing hard jobs which the poor people did. Carrying heavy things, cleaning toilets, digging the ground, working in the mine were all difficult jobs, which many people did not want to take. Because of his previous misbehaviour towards the ordinary people, he did not have any friends within society. He had no more relations with his Master because he did not do what his master wanted him to do. He did not see any prospects for the future. He felt alone, helpless and hopeless. He realized that his future would be a troubled one. He realized all his past mistakes. He knew the unjust deeds he had committed against the poor. Then he decided to do something unusual. Here was his turning point. He was no longer the same person. He had changed and wanted to change his approach to his fellow people. He wanted to bring change he was able to do it. In the election campaign of America, Obama said: "We can change." And people responded, saying: "Yes we, can."

The dishonest manager approached all the rich man's clients and reduced their debts towards the rich man. One man owed the rich man a hundred jars of olive oil, so manager rewrote the bill, and made it only 50 jars owed. Another man owed the rich man a hundred containers of wheat, so the dishonest manager scratched that figure out and reduced the debt to 80 containers. That is the change he could make.

Now the reason the manger does this is so that when the rich man inevitably fires him, well, the olive oil and the wheat debtors will probably welcome him and give him a job. Is that the honest and ethical behaviour of a manager? No, it is not. Is it

clever, smart thinking? Yes, it is. It is so clever, that even the rich master commends his thief of a manager for his shrewdness.

So what exactly is the lesson here for us, what is Jesus telling us? Does it mean that we can be dishonest as long as we are clever about it? Is it okay to steal so long as we are not stupid about it?

No, Jesus is not commending the dishonesty of the dishonest manager. Instead, Jesus is telling us to be shrewd, clever, and fair, committed to do justice to the poor. Those are the commendable values of the Christian value system. The children of the world are good in their value systems. The dishonest manager prepared; he changed. He committed himself to a course of action to bring positive change for all people. He used all means to correct the evil deeds of illegal interest. According to the Law, earning too much interest is against God's law or illegal. The poor need to be forgiven. This dishonest manager committed himself to this positive and fair change within society.

The manager forgave debts. In the mind of Jesus, it doesn't matter why he forgave the debts. Jesus is interested in his forgiveness. Forgive it all, forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, and forgive it for no reason at all. By forgiving these debts, the manager probably ends up reconciling a community.

Dear brothers and sisters! I would like us to think fair today. Why do the poor always remain poor in our world? Why is the gap between rich and poor always growing? I do not believe that it is God's will to keep the poor where they are. Neither do I believe that the poor are poor because of their laziness, but because of the unfair distribution of wealth in this world. Through Globalization, there is an organized system to keep the poor where they are. Let me localize my thinking to the situation of the unemployment and employment systems in this country. The big companies' managers earn too much at the cost of unemployment. They always think of profit making with paper money and fire many people from their jobs. A few people work more than 70 hours a week, while many educated young people are frustrated at not even having 20 or 30 hours work a week. Many people want to work until the age of 67 when millions of people in their 30s are unemployed. Here is where changes are needed. Think of the issue of the current financial crisis here in Germany. The "Rettungspaket" says that in order to get the advantage of this packet, banks should be ready to reduce the salaries of their managers. Are there Christian managers who really learn from today's text and are ready to change? Or will they come up with the idea of distributing the lost money on taxes so that the poor pay from their poverty? So that the poor will be punished twice for the crime they did not commit? What kind of change will the politicians bring to us?

As Christians we have to ask ourselves today what our roles in this change should be. Do we start from ourselves and live according to a Christian value system? Are

we really committed to Jesus Christ? The heart of the story of the dishonest manager is this: Are we Christians, as people who profess belief in Jesus Christ, are we really committed to God and to God's way? Can we really be committed to follow Jesus and leave out God's purpose for our lives and the life of the world?

What are the evidence or signs we show others that we are committed to Christ's way in today's context? Do we expect change from politicians and from their value systems?

In this parable, Jesus Christ offers us a sign of commitment regarding our faith. He offers us a way that we can measure our commitment to Christ and his work here on earth. What do we do with our money?

Jesus bottom lines it for us at the end of this passage (Luke 16, 13). He said: we cannot serve God and wealth. We cannot have God and wealth as our masters. One must bow down before the other. We must commit and commit fully to one or to the other. Jesus wants us to use our money, whether we have little or a lot, to further God's agenda here in the world.

The Scripture tells us, the Holy Spirit of Jesus tells us that God wants a full commitment from us. God has got a big job here in this world. Our world is suffering from war, terrorism, hunger, disease, dictatorship, refugee problems, injustice, an unfair distribution of wealth and so on. God is concerned for the suffering people whom He created in His own image. When the poor suffer, God himself suffers with them. God challenges us to feed the hungry, to relieve the poor, to comfort the widow, the orphan and the afflicted.

Hatred is growing between different beliefs, world views, ethnic groups, tribes and races. The growing gap between the poor and the rich is a wall of hatred that we need to tear down. We need change that everybody welcomes. We need changes that bring sustainable peace. Sustainable peace can be achieved by starting with forgiveness. It is not easy to forgive, and it is not is to receive forgiveness, either. Forgiveness is not easy, not nice. It is not nice to forgive if we have been injured, if we have been hurt. If what we have to forgive is substantial at all, we will not find forgiveness nice. But it is the only way to reconciliation and peace. Therefore we all need to give forgiveness and receive forgiveness. Christianity is based on receiving and giving forgiveness. God forgave our sins through Jesus Christ. We need to receive God's forgiveness. While God gave us forgiveness, we also have to grant forgiveness.

We all need forgiveness and mercy. We need love, not hatred. The world cries out for justice, equality, for compassion and peace. That is the change we are all longing for. God needs us completely on the job, using whatever time, money and skills we have to continue the work of Jesus Christ.

The dishonest manager was appreciated by the rich man, not because of his dishonesty, but because of his readiness to be changed. He was commended because of his cleverness to prepare a new place for himself. In telling us the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus is calling us to shine as His light in this world. Christ is calling us to commit ourselves to His work, to serve God, to serve our neighbors, with all that we have. May God help us to do His will. Amen.