

***Salvation by Any Means is Still Salvation***

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Luke 16:1-13

*“...children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”*

Imagine this, outside, in the park, the preacher mounts the soapbox, and looks long and hard at the gathered people. His face tightens up, and then explodes with his sermon.

*Are you saved? Are you made clean? Are you a changed person? Because lets face it folks, unless you are saved, unless you are changed, unless you have been set free from your sinful, evil ways, then you are not one with Christ, and you know where you are headed! Have you left your thoughts and actions of impurity, have you abandoned your ill intents, have you given up all that separates you from God? Because if you haven't, well then you know where you'll end up! Let go of your worldly ways! Let go of your sinful pursuits! Let go of your lustful desires for power, for money, and for... well you know what else you need to let go of! Jesus says go and sin no more and I call all of you to that challenge – SIN NO MORE. When you have entered those baptismal waters, you come out of them clean, without sin, with your life pardoned. You are challenged to hold to that life. No, it is demanded that you hold to that life. So go and sin no more!*

Give me a break! Let's be realistic about ourselves, and our nature. Any who is without sin, right now, any who has never sinned after their baptism can stop listening to this sermon. Heck, you can leave right now, because I did not write a sermon for perfect people. But, those of you who are realistic about yourself, and who you are, I have a message for you about Christianity. It is not a message of undue hardships. Nor is it a message of high expectations or lofty demands. We aspire, but how often do we achieve? When I was at Oberlin there were these two soap-box preachers, Brother Paul and Brother Jed, who believed that once you were saved then you could no longer sin if you wanted to maintain your salvation. They preached in the way I dramatized at the beginning of this message, condemning clothing, lifestyle, speech, and anything else that hinted towards sin. All the way back to the beginning of Christianity, in the preaching and writings of Turtullian, this expectation was held. The expectation was so strong that some would not be baptized until end of their life so that they could say that they lived without sin as Christians. And it is a pressure that is still felt today. The expectation is still there. It is as if we are all expected to be “Ned Flanders” to the rest of the world. If you are a Christian, than you aren't supposed to drink, smoke, swear, get angry, chew gum, listen to music, wear certain clothing, etc., etc. When I was helping the movers unload the many, many, many boxes from the truck into our house, they freely used a colorful dialectic ripe with choice cusses, curses, and explicative phrases. But when they learned my profession, and thus my Christian leanings, they quickly apologized for their actions, as if I had never heard those words before, as if my ears were somehow pure and clean. I went to public school. I have taken the bus. I have heard and seen a lot (and have said some of my own choice words as well). Yet for some reason, we feel that the Christian is not supposed to be a person living a real, earthly life. For some reason there is an expectation that Christians are these prim, proper, pious people who never think, speak or act a sin. The pastor's puritanical pontification which acts as a mouthpiece for Christian expectations holds power and persuasion especially in American Christianity, and creates a considerable amount of strain and pressure on us all. And it makes us seem almost alien to the rest of the world. They can't relate, are turned off, and end up walking away.

Well, a testimony is one of the best ways to tell the Good News, so I'm going to testify – I am a sinner. I have sinned before, I will sin again. I am not proud of it, but I accept that this is who I am. Yes, I went into the baptismal pool a sinner and came out clean – but for some reason I found myself rolling in the dirt again before the water had a chance to dry. Don't get me wrong, I try. I try to live according to the path Jesus has shown us. I try to keep my heart with God. I try to do the Lord's will, but sometimes I get angry. Sometimes I get lazy. Sometimes I get just plain selfish. Can anyone relate to my testimony, or am I the only sinner in this church? If so, can you let me in on your secret of perfection? There is a popular prayer that goes, "God, with your help I have made it today without sin, evil thoughts, idle actions, or any wrong doings. It has been a day without sin. But I'm going to get out of bed and have breakfast now..." Do you get the tension that I am setting up? We cannot be perfect, we cannot be without sin. This is the very issue that Martin Luther was dealing with before he picked a fight with the Roman Catholic Church. He wanted to be perfect, he tried and tried, but he just could not be perfect, and the disappointment was driving him and his confessor crazy. So let's get real, let's talk about our faith, and let's see how we can deal with our earthly, sinful nature that is still with us after we are baptized.

So as you wonder how it is that we are "supposed" to be Christians when we again and again fall into sin, let's muddle our minds more and look at the passage from Luke.

Luke 16:1-13, the parable of the unjust steward, offers a cryptic and perhaps a bit confusing picture of good works and reward. We have a steward or manager who is not being completely honest with the books, and when confronted with his dishonesty, the steward protects himself, insures that he will have a roof over his head with shrewd actions. He puts himself in the favor of others by decreasing the bill owed by the master's debtors. One way of understanding this action is that it makes the master look good because he may be seen as generous in the eyes of the debtors. But if the master takes back the actions of the steward, then he is shamed, and the steward looks good because he at least tried to be generous to the debtors. The master recognized the "shrewd" or "prudent" actions of the steward, and commends him, offers him praise and grace. Then, as if to add to the confusion, Jesus also seems to praise prudent, shrewd actions claiming that children of the light are not as prudent or shrewd as children of this time, of the here and now. Now have I lost you? The biblical scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer claims that this passage is a praise of prudence, but what does that mean? And you may have noticed that I haven't addressed the final sayings of Jesus in this passage. What does it mean to be prudent, or shrewd, and how will such actions lead towards a welcoming in the "eternal heaven?" This passage from the Gospel is cryptic, and can be misread. Should we all embezzle and engage in unlawful financial practices? Or is there something greater, deeper about this passage? Indeed it is a difficult, cryptic passage to understand.

So I have created for you tension that exists between the expectations of the Christian, and the reality of our human selves. Then I have offered to you a vague and confusing passage where the deceitful actions of a steward are praised. What are some of the connecting ideas, what is the theme, what is it that I am going to preach from these passages?

For starters, I see a lot of ambiguity in both points. There is ambiguity concerning the steward – was he wrong, or did his quick action save himself and offer his master honor as well? What exactly was the master praising? There is a lot of ambiguity in that passage.

But then look at Christians today. We have a standard that we would like to live by – read James, the Letters from Paul, and other parts of the Bible. Yet few of us ever truly reach that standard. Is there more to Christianity than living a good life based on Kantian moral

imperatives? Are we only to think of things in a dialectic way – a good and a bad, and apply it categorically to our lives? Ambiguity is a part of life; it is a part of our daily experience. Let me give you an example.

It was ambiguity that made it so hard for Bonhoeffer to decide to be a part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. His Christian beliefs dictated that killing was a sin. Yet to stand by and allow Hitler to massacre so many innocents was also a sin. So in the ambiguity, knowing that no choice was the “right” choice, Bonhoeffer made a choice based on shrewdness, prudence, and wisdom with his eyes on the cross.

It is ambiguity that makes so many of our social debates so difficult. From the death penalty, to war, to abortion, to all of the other debates that are occurring inside and outside of the church ambiguity muddles the argument, removes the dichotomy, and makes the decision that much more difficult. One can rarely be for or against a specific issue, and to force people into camps removes any chance for dialogue, growth, and reconciliation. I recently read in a journal (*The Christian Century*) of the “maverick” Baptist preacher Will Campbell who had befriended Sam Bowers, a former Imperial Wizard of the KKK, and the deceased Vernon Dahmer’s widow. Vernon Dahmer was murdered by Bowers and others in 1966 for allowing blacks to pay their poll taxes in his store. When asked how he could befriend both, Campbell (who is known for his colorful language) replied, “Because I’m a Christian, G-dammit!” (*Christian Century*, Sept. 7, 2004 referring to T. Long book *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*). Do you see the ambiguity Campbell faced – was he to befriend one and hate the other? But then how could he stay true to his friendships of both at the same time? Do you think that maybe through Campbell, reconciliation would someday be possible? Was Campbell being prudent as a Christian? Yes, because he was befriending those who need Jesus the most. We do face the ambiguity of our faith.

How do we address the ambiguity?

Live honestly. Be who you are, and be shrewd in sharing your Christianity. Think about it, do you want people to know Christ through a perfect, puritanical, pious example (which is almost unattainable), or through the example of one who is accepting, loving, and forgiving (which is who Christ is). When I was helping the movers, I did all that I could to ease their discomfort by sharing a choice phrase of my own from time to time. All of a sudden I was a person to them! All of a sudden I was approachable, and accepting, and I had an opportunity to share Jesus Christ with them. All of a sudden they saw me as someone no better than they were, but someone who was loved by Christ none-the-less. Did I sin when I swore? Maybe, on one level it was a sin. But did I act shrewdly in sharing the Gospel – I think so. This is what I think the gospel passage is getting at – this is the prudence and the wisdom. It means that we are honest with ourselves and with others in our speech and our actions. It means we be real with others as Christians. That is a part of who I am, someone who lets loose from time to time – and that is when I do some very powerful ministry. Have you ever worked with people on the street? One of the things that many of them hate is being treated as if they were less than someone else. Moral superiority, piety, perfection all are walls which keep them from knowing Jesus. But honesty, authenticity, and yearning to know them will open many doors.

But let’s take this shrewdness a little farther. You know that you are going to sin from time to time. You know you have grace and are forgiven, but wouldn’t it be prudent to take care of yourself, and plant seeds for others? You know what I’m talking about, simple deeds of kindness, small acts of love, and unseen showings of hospitality. Don’t tell anyone, don’t let anyone know but take care of others every chance you get. Eventually, people will begin to

wonder about you. They will see you as a good person who does good things from time to time, and judge you based on those actions. This is what makes the Godfather in the classic movies so difficult to hate or love. He is a villain who murders, manipulates, cheats, steals and lies. Yet he takes care of people, goes out of his way for them, and in many ways is a good man. These acts of goodness are prudent in his Machiavellian eyes for he is focused on gaining power and money. But they are also prudent in our Christian eyes if we are focused on the cross.

Aha! Now the end of the passage can be brought into the picture. In all that you do, stay focused on the cross, stay true to God, stay true to Christ. Perform your acts of kindness because it is what Christ calls you to do. Befriend the oppressed and the oppressor because it is the prudent, Christian behavior. Befriend someone, if only so that you can share Christ with them in time. Yes, it would be good if the friendship was authentic, and based on Christ, it eventually will be. God knows, and God will commend your shrewd actions.

So let us drop our pious expectations and ask for authentic relations. Let us drop our airs of sinlessness and look for honest humanity. Let us be honest with each other and with God, so that others will feel welcome and will welcome Christ into their hearts. Let us stand in front of the church as say, this is who we are, a broken people who get messy and sin, but we want to accept you and love you into this community. Let's go into the world, taking the chance to engage in sin, but for the glory and the honor of God.

AMEN