

## “WALL STEET CHRISTIANS”

Date: Sept. 30, 2007

Text: Luke 16: 1-13

There has been a great deal of news coverage recently concerning the ups and downs of the stock market, housing foreclosures, what the Feds would do and on and on. In light of all of this concern about the economy suppose a couple of good friends who had invested heavily in the stock market now were suffering some big losses. Debts were beginning to pile up and it seemed as though they might go under. At the last minute a scheme was devised, a little shady and not quite ethical, that enabled them to get out of the woods. Then, imagine when you got to church that Sunday that your pastor praised these individuals and suggested that we all should emulate their questionable behavior!

You would have every right to say to yourself: “What in the world is going on?” That must have been the reaction of Jesus’ listeners when he talked about the praiseworthy behavior of the shrewd businessman. If he wanted to get their attention, he certainly had succeeded.

Some background obviously is needed because this is a particularly difficult part of our Lord’s teaching, isn’t it? What led to this story was our Lord’s concern for depth of faith commitment being displayed in the daily habits of his followers. Before this incident, Luke shares Jesus’ parables of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The point in those stories was that God seeks those who have lost their way and offers to give them a rich treasure. The “amazing grace” of God is wonderful not only for those who have been treated as outcasts but all of us.

The trouble was that as Jesus observed the behavior of those who listened to what he was saying, their response appeared to be extremely casual. Oh, they heard what he was saying and were pleased to know about God’s love but their attitude was like the old song, “I’ll go to work manna but I gotta sleep tonight.” It looked as though they were saying, “Maybe I can get by with just giving a little of myself in return for this divine gift. “ The problem remains the same in 2007, doesn’t it? So many Christians seem quite casual about living out their faith. There was a cartoon one time that showed a young boy standing by his father’s chair as the parent looked over his son’s report card. After a long silence, the father finally commented, “According to this report you are a neat, well-mannered, stupid kid.” Jesus might have had similar feelings about his followers, back then and now. Christians are nice, well-mannered people but the depth of their commitment leaves something to be desired.

Thus, what Jesus lifted up in Luke 16 was the foresight and astuteness of the business manager in dealing with his predicament. Indeed, you can almost sense a certain wistful longing as Jesus observed this man’s shrewdness: “If only my followers would be as shrew and astute in applying their faith to daily life.” I must confess to sharing our Lord’s feelings when as a pastor I have observed how diligently church people have applied themselves to work or sports or other interests in comparison to their approach to their faith commitment. The man had been caught “doctoring” the company books. He pondered his problem, dealt with the realities of his situation and then took action by at least winning the good graces of those whose debts had been reduced.

Of course Jesus was not advocating unethical behavior but he did long to see the same type of attitude as seen in the business world when people labored for the kingdom of God. Actually Jesus was asking himself in telling the story: “Where are the signs that people are pondering faith possibilities, that they are dealing with the realities working for peace and justice that they are acting on their beliefs on Tuesday at work?”

Christian shrewdness. Perhaps there is a better phrase but do you sense where Jesus was coming from? The same attitude that one has for the rest of life needs to be found in our faith commitment. Consider a few concrete situations.

Suppose you were to receive a legacy of \$25,000. You immediately would try to find out how best to utilize this gift. Hours might be spent on the web or reading Money magazine. God has given each of us an even greater legacy, the very gift of life itself. Do we ponder how best to utilize that gift each week?

Let's assume you decide to take up a new hobby. You go on the Web and do some research or attend continuing education classes. You really spend a lot of time pursuing this endeavor. Along the same line, do you approach Bible study with the same diligence?

There are some changes at work and to make sure you stay on top of things you are going in earlier and staying later. What degree of similar diligence are you applying in living out your faith the next 7 days?

Do you begin to see where Jesus was headed with this story? His point was expressed in verse 8: "The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the children of the world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." People interested in financial markets who want to improve their understanding will probably read "The Wall Street Journal." In similar fashion, we need to turn to the resources of our faith, worship, prayer and Bible study, to enhance our spiritual growth.

Now in theory, picking up on Jesus' concern sounds fairly straightforward but in reality it is another matter. You go home and look at the calendar and think of adding 15 minutes of Bible reading or 5 minutes of prayer and may say to yourself, "Oh sure, if I get up at 4:30 a.m. every morning, I will have plenty of time." One of the key emphases of my ministry has been to challenge people to develop a balanced lifestyle and in so doing that requires establishing priorities. All of us do have a multitude of responsibilities and they are important. Hence, the key concern is how do we make room for our allegiance to Christ in the midst of our busy lives? It is important to note that in the New Testament not all of Jesus' followers left their jobs and followed him. The disciples did that but many kept their businesses, their family responsibilities while shaping their use of time and talents and money in keeping with their newfound commitment to Christ.

I heard a story about a 6 year old who told his parents one Sunday morning: "I don't want to go to Sunday School any more." "Why?" they asked. "Because they never do anything new there. It always is 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.' That's all they ever talk about." There are some people who do go overboard about their faith and they talk so much about religion that it becomes almost an obsession. That's an extreme which I don't think has afflicted too many Presbyterians. What Luke 16 calls for is a daily consideration of how best to follow Jesus using the same astuteness and diligence that we seek to bring to the rest of our lives. We don't have to think about Jesus all the time and yet would it be such a bad idea if those words, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," were a more integral part of our daily lives?