



Sermon of October 31, 1999



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"THE MODEL OF SUCCESS"

Galatians 5:13-26

Luke 16:1-13

As most of you know, we purchased the two buildings to the east of us about two years ago. At that time we tried, but were unable, to purchase the land on which the buildings sit. The land is owned by a different party, and over these two years we have negotiated with that party. Finally, I am very happy to announce, that we opened escrow last Monday. When we close escrow on the 24th of this month, we will own both the buildings and the land. Which means we can now begin the renovation of the first floor of that building next door for a Youth Center.

Some of you have also known that the church is involved inevitably in matters of business. In some churches, particularly smaller churches, the ministers take a very important role in administering the business side of the church. This church decided not to do that with its minister. Its business affairs are managed by the Board of Trustees and the Finance Committee.

They have done a wonderful job, and I congratulate them. And thanks to you for your constant stewardship which has made the possibility for the purchase of that land this next month.

I am not allowed to manage the business affairs of the church, but I am still interested in what makes a business a success. I have discovered there is a lot written about it. You can go across the street and find an awful lot in the bookstores over there. Perhaps you didn't know that there is a tradition in American Literature dealing with business. It began with Horatio Alger, over a hundred years ago, who wrote books for boys on how to be successful in business.

Alger believed that success comes from being lucky, from being in the right place at the right time. I know many of you have discovered that same lesson. His advice to boys was to take advantage of the opportunity when it comes to you by being prepared. Being prepared meant: have good work habits, be punctual, be neat, be hard-working, be non-complaining, be courteous, be disciplined, and, most of all, be patient, because your time will come. Be patient. That really was his lesson.

But Horatio Alger wasn't the only one who was writing about business in those days. Even more popular was George Horace Lorimer, who was the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*. He became the editor of the *Post* at the turn of the century when it had 3,000 subscribers. By the time he left that position in the 1920s, there were three million subscribers to the *Post*. It was an amazing success story.

Lorimer wrote a column each month for the *Post*. It was one of the more popular features of the magazine. The column was entitled, "Letters from a Self-Made Merchant." It was in the form of a hypothetical letter from a meat packer to his son at Harvard. The fictional meat packer was based on the life of Philip Armour, the meat packer from Chicago, with whom Lorimer worked for some years after graduating as a young man from Yale. This fictional father writes to his son on how to be a success in business.

His first counsel is to warn him about the uselessness of a college education, especially a Harvard education. He said there are two parts to an education: that part you learn in the classroom from the professors, and the part you learn outside of the classroom from the boys. That's the most important part. The first part, he said, can make you a scholar, which is totally useless to you. The second part can make you a man, which is an indispensable ingredient for success.

Chief among the advice that he gave in his column was, take advantage of opportunities. Just like Horatio Alger. Only it was different. Horatio Alger said to wait patiently for opportunity. But Lorimer said to seize the day, be aggressive, make your own opportunities.

Which sounds an awful lot like the steward in the parable that was read to us as the gospel lesson for this morning. An employee, probably a manager of an estate, cheats his employer. The employer finds out about it, fires the guy. So far, so good. This meets our expectation. We are in favor of this.

Only Jesus then gives us a surprise. He said that before the word got out about what had happened, the steward goes to the clients of his master, those who owe him some money, and

he offers to reduce their indebtedness by up to fifty percent. These creditors are thrilled. They seize this opportunity to pay off their debts to the master with a discount. The clients, those who are indebted to the master, think that it is the master who has initiated this generosity. So they rush to his house, surround his house, sing his praises, thank him for what he has done for them. That is when he discovers what the steward has done.

Now he has two choices. He can tell these people it's all a mistake, the steward wasn't authorized to forgive you your debts. Besides that, he is no longer in my employ. Or, he can be quiet, receive their praise, and thus have the certainty of their good will in business in the future.

He decides that it is better for business to be quiet. So when he sees the steward again, instead of condemning him, he praises him, as one businessman to another, for his shrewdness, his cleverness.

Then comes the lesson. "The sons of the world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."

Now a quick caveat. This is called a "How Much More" parable. This is not a "Go Thou and Do Likewise" parable. Every time I preach one of these parables, I am afraid I am going to read in the newspaper that somebody has gone to jail, screaming, "Rev. Trotter told me in a sermon that I could cheat." So please, this is not a "Go Thou and Do Likewise" parable. This is a "How Much More" parable.

If a dishonest steward can insure his future with shrewdness, how much more should Christians be shrewd insuring their future?

Or, we could put it this way. If in the secular world cleverness, ingenuity, aggressiveness, risk taking, are the ingredients of success, how much more should those committed to the Kingdom of God be creative, aggressive, willing to take risks, in advancing the cause of God in this world?

If in a world it is axiomatic for success that the more you invest the richer you get, how much more in the Kingdom, the more you invest the greater the return for you, and for everyone?

The title of this sermon is, "A Model Of Success." The parable is told to make the point that the Christians are to be as concerned about insuring the success of those things that they know are important, as those who invest only to increase their own wealth.

And that is brought home with the last sentence in the text, the one that is familiar to us. "You cannot serve God and Mammon." "Mammon" means "money." So it means that there are two kinds of people in this world, according to this text. There are those who worship wealth and will do whatever is necessary in order to gain it, and those who worship God, who ought to be as committed and dedicated in pursuing what they know is important, as those who pursue their own selfish interests.

The suggestion is that it is by that standard that we are going to be judged. Jesus suggests that when he says that we should be as shrewd in insuring our future, as those in the world insuring

their future.

In another parable he just lays it out unequivocally. It's called the Parable of the Talents. The master goes away. He leaves money to his three stewards. To one he gives five talents. To a second he gives two. To the third one he gives one. We have interpreted that parable to mean a "talent" is something like playing the piano, or tap dancing. That is the English understanding of "talent."

But "talent" in Jesus' time was a denomination of money. The master, in other words, gave each steward some money. Two of the stewards invested it, and earned more money. The third steward buried what he was given, and earned nothing. The master returns. He praises the two who invested their money. He condemns the one who did nothing.

The one who did nothing protests. What he said is worth noting. He said, "I wanted to keep what you gave me safe, because I knew that you were a stern master." That is to say, he knew that there would be a judgment. He is concerned about the judgment. He assumed that those who play it safe are the ones who will be rewarded. He assumed that to be faithful to God means you don't take risks, you play it safe.

He was wrong. The stewards who are risk-takers, willing to lose everything in order to gain more, are the ones who are praised and rewarded. They apply the lesson of the shrewd stewards. They take risks. They have seen the model of success in this world, how you become a success, and they apply it to the Kingdom.

I would say investing in the Kingdom is a risk. There is no certainty that the teachings of Jesus will be received gladly in this world. As I look around, I see little evidence that right is going to triumph over wrong. I look around, I see little evidence that the way of peace will triumph in this world. I look around, I see that policies that should be established to bring justice in this world, to eradicate hunger and poverty, are not going to happen.

So the Kingdom of God is a gamble. If you invest your money in it, you'll be taking a risk. But wouldn't it be exciting.

I have just returned from a mission in Mexico, sponsored by Mercy Hospital, here in San Diego, and by Rotary International. Thirteen doctors from this city, and twice that number of nurses and other support staff, total of about fifty-five persons, paid their own way to go down as a surgical team to minister to poor children in Tehuacan, in the southern part of Mexico.

The call went out through the Rotary Club in that city for all those who do not have the means for medical attention to bring children with birth defects and crippling diseases to the clinic.

It was amazing. They came by the hundreds, mostly the very, very poor, carrying their children. Some teenagers, as well, some of whom have spent their life with their hand held over their face because they were ashamed of the way they looked. Some had been hidden by their parents because they did not want their neighbors to see what they believed was a curse upon their family. After an hour, or less, in surgery their appearance was changed, and they received new hope and a new life.

If you are hard-headed, you might conclude that the thousands of dollars that were spent last week in Tehuacan was just a drop in the bucket. It's not going to make any difference. I mean, the enormous suffering in this world, just wave after wave. It's not going to make any difference.

I talked to one of those Rotarians in Tehuacan who spent two years setting up this project. It's a complex business establishing this kind of a clinic in Mexico. I said, "Why did you do it?" He said, "We believe that we can change the world, and we are going to start right here."

It sounds naive. It is naive, when you compare it with the problems that exist, even the problems in his own state. But you are confronted with a choice in this life. That's the point of these parables. You are confronted with a choice. You can do nothing, and play it safe. Or, you can take a risk.

I read about a group of Christians who decided they would start changing the world by investing their money in things that they believed in. They realized that they could not make much of a dent in this world as single contributors, but if they pulled their resources, came together, then they could do something important. So in the manner of investment clubs, which are so popular now, they got together, tithed their income and put it into a pool, invested it so that there would be an income. Then they studied the issues in their community and in the world, and make decisions on how they would invest. As a result they are making changes in this world. And they are having a sense of fulfillment in their life that they are contributing to the Kingdom.

There is another wonderful organization, entitled "Your Money or Your Life." It is a clever interpretation of Jesus' warning, "You cannot serve God and Mammon."

These are people who believe that the greatest threat to the future of this society, indeed to the future of this planet, is the ethic of consumerism: buying and buying, more and more things. We are raising children in that ethic. Do you realize that? I heard the other day that there is now a web site that children can use to buy things.

These people see in that a terrible danger to human life and society, so they have organized to change it. The way they are doing it is to buy less and give more. Thus the title, "Your Money or Your Life."

The original investment club was the Methodist Society. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, began preaching to the poor in England. In one generation Wesley converted them by the gospel of grace that is our heritage in the Reformation. He organized them into societies, they were called Methodist Societies, in which they acquired the personal habits and industriousness of disciplined people. In other words, he taught them what Horatio Alger taught 19th century Americans about success: be on time, work hard, and be sober.

And they did. The result was that the Methodists moved from poverty to the middle class in one generation. They accumulated capital. Now it became a problem. What do you do as a Christian with all of this money? Wesley wrote a famous sermon called, "The Use of Money," to teach the Methodists a sense of Christian stewardship. Interestingly, he used for that sermon the same parable that was used this morning as the text for this sermon, "The Dishonest Steward."

Wesley interpreted the parable much the way you heard it interpreted this morning, for which he is to be congratulated. Then he applied it to the question the newly prosperous Methodists were faced with, "How do you live a Christian life in a capitalist society?"

Wesley's advice was as follows. First, earn all you can. Take advantage of every opportunity. It is a direct application of the parable's message, seize the day. If it is there for the taking, take it. Of course he warned that there are some businesses that Christian should not participate in. But with those exceptions, he said, earn all you can.

The second lesson he gave them was, save all you can. This was the Puritan side of Wesley. He lists the things that you should not waste your money on, including those things that are pleasurable to the eye and to the palate. I wish he hadn't said that, but it's there. Besides that, and more importantly from my point of view, he says you shouldn't invest in those things simply that are there to gratify the desire to gain the admiration of other people. We call that "status symbols" today. Christians don't do that. Furthermore Wesley made it clear that there is not much that we spend our money on that does us much good. Most things that we spend our money on we can do without. And if you do without, then you can save a whole lot of money.

So the first two lessons are: earn all you can, and save all you can. The third piece of advice is, give all you can. I've noticed that most Methodists find obeying Wesley harder the farther down you go on that list. Earn all you can. Save all you can. Okay, no problem. Give all you can is much harder to understand.

But this is why he says it. It is based on the simple understanding of the New Testament. This stuff doesn't belong to us, not ultimately. We are stewards of what we have. We are here to serve God, and we should be as serious about it, as committed about it, as willing to take risks in doing it, as those who worship mammon.

There is a minister in Columbus, Ohio. He has a friend who works downtown. The friend is something of an enigma to the minister, because he grows hot and cold about the Church and religion. But they are good friends. They have a good relationship. They get together often, have lunch together. On this occasion he went to his office to meet him for lunch. He sat down to talk before they went out. The man looked out his office window, and said, "Barry, I think I've got it figured out now. The big guy is going to ask two questions when we get up to the gate. I'm serious now. I'm not kidding. I really mean this. The first question will be, 'What did you do with what I gave you?' Then he is going to ask, 'Who did you do it for?'"¹

1 From Bill Ritter

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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