

*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. 2So 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.' 3Then 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. 4I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7Then 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.' 8And 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. 9And 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. 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. 11If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13No 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."*

Avon Lake has been in the news, lately and certainly not in a manner that you and I would like to see Avon Lake in the news. People like you and me have slipped into carelessness with right and wrong. Somehow they came to decide that a law wasn't meant for them. In a world where corporate executives legally enrich themselves at the expense of stockholders and customers, right and wrong have become cloudy. Consider congress, banking and postal scandals - consider the thousands whose irresponsibility is costing us billions through the savings and loans scandals - consider laws against copying music or audio tapes or compact discs. Is legal and illegal the same as right and wrong? Next week we will ask ourselves if it is right for a rich man to feast while a beggar starves on his doorstep. Certainly that is legal, but is it right? Is it wrong for me to copy a compact disc onto an audio tape so that I can enjoy the music in my car where I have no disc player? I know it is illegal, but is it wrong?

One way to answer these questions is to simply let our society decide. What is legal is right, what is illegal is wrong, that is that. But for Christians there is a higher court than the United States Supreme Court, for Christians a greater lawgiver than the Congress or Legislature. Our Lord Jesus Christ who was condemned to death alongside of criminals is the

highest authority. The one crucified by the religious and political powers of his day is Lord and Judge.

Jesus teaches us a parable of a manager who was squandering his rich master's property. Since so much of our law is based on property, we already know how we would judge this manager. Like poor people who waste money and with the waste lose their opportunity to escape poverty, this manager deserves none of our sympathy.

Then the manager was called before his master, told to turn in the books. He was fired. But before the books were turned over, he 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."

He altered the books, robbing his master of some of what he would have received. Those who now would pay less were delighted.

In life we know how the story would turn out. The master would discover the plot, throw the scoundrel in jail. Justice would be done.

But in Jesus' story, the master commends the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.

The property squanderer becomes the hero.

Two parables in a row in Luke, the property squanderer becomes the hero for Jesus has just finished the parable of the prodigal son, that devoured the Father's property with prostitutes according to his older brother. That parable ends with the father providing a feast for the waster of property who returned home, and the faithful maintainer of property left outside. Angry.

And the very next parable Jesus will tell is of the rich man who went to Hades. He never squandered his property on the earth. And the poor man who died on his doorstep never had any - the rich man to Hades - the poor man to Abraham's bosom.

In the middle of all of this Jesus says, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

What if we lived in a culture where accumulation was a sign of greed? What if the greatest honor were given to the givers, and not the keepers? Can you imagine such a world? We would never have heard of the man who made billions with computer software. Honored among us would be those people now nameless who give as fast as they receive. Headlines

would no longer be given to the hermit who had tens of thousands in his mattress when he died, but for the one who had nothing left but the gratitude of those who received from him. Can we imagine such a world?

When we do imagine it, we immediately object. If I am generous there will be no end of the giving. They will take and take, until everyone will have more than I and they will still take and take until life itself is drained from me.

I will end up ... like Jesus.

Naked, drained even of life. Not a friend nearby - judged by every witness to be a fool.

We must never forget that it is the crucified one that we worship.

We must never forget that Jesus who gave and gave even his life is our God.

We must never forget, that when every human court and human culture has turned to dust, that the crucified one will be the judge of the living and of the dead.

Jesus said, "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."

Is it any wonder the crowd dwindled, turned on him finally.

I've been devoting my life to proving he is wrong.

Well, maybe today I can start in a little way, with that friend that Paul Culler introduced to us last week. My African friend with whom I will be as generous as I am with myself.

I'll take one of those empty liter bottles in the back, and practice letting go of my wealth for my hungry friend. Though he has no name, no face, when I buy something for myself I will put the same in the bottle for him as if we were with me here, my guest, accompanying me wherever I go - as if he were really a member of my own family.

I will practice being generous with my friend: A cup of coffee for him when I buy one for me, a movie for him when I buy one for me. Then I will send my gifts with all of your gifts to our African friends who do have faces and names and hunger.

In this small way I will make friends for myself. And break some of the chains with which wealth enslaves me, and serve God rather than wealth.

I hope you will join me in this.