

*Means to One End*  
Scripture Lesson: Luke 16:1-13

“This parable has baffled readers since the beginning of time.” Since Jesus told it about 2000 years ago, the statement may have some exaggeration, but the story does baffle us. The dishonest manager is no surprise.

Our problem is that Jesus gives a dishonest person a pat on the back and a big “atta boy!” Jesus pretty plainly says he was dishonest. We know that the way we see the story cannot be right. What we see does not add up to what we see in Jesus. Maybe we ought to be paying more attention to the Master than the manager in the telling of the story.

Question 1: Remember, parable stories are just illustrations. The important thing about them is that they are like good children’s sermons. They only make ONE point. They don’t fill us with all kinds of detailed puzzle pieces to sort out. We moderns are always looking for the truth in the details, even when we say “the devil is always in the details.” Maybe the truth is always in the big picture? So, what is the one point?

Question 2: Is the illustration about the shrewdness of the manager or about the incredibly generous master/rich man? Remember the parable/illustrations that come right before this one? Are they about the lost sheep, coins, sons? Or about the persistent finders? What about the one about the two sons and the loving father? More about the father? Maybe this illustration would fit better if we focus on the master more than on the manager? What a surprise for the Master not to punish the manager for his failure? Does that remind you of anyone?

Question 3: Have you ever noticed how often there is some kind of statement Jesus gives after he tells an illustration, ...some one sentence summary that tells us the lesson and points us to the one point in the parable? What about Jesus’ lesson statement at the end of the illustration here?

Jesus says, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ... You cannot serve God and money.” Is Jesus really telling us to do whatever we have to do – dishonest or not – in order to insure that we have friends who will take us in when you run out of money?

The short answer to that question is YES! But as usual, Jesus is really saying something very unusual, and we need to listen differently to anything Jesus is saying.

Let’s be honest about why we focus on the manager. We are just slightly less motivated by self-preservation than this conniving example of pure self-interest. We have met this guy, and he is us! He is the pre-historic example of American initiative and “enlightened self-interest” to quote Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the American genius. This guy is not incompetent. He is, ...well, “a creative problem-solver.” Here is the guy who “looked out for number 1.” He’s the “rugged individualist.” What better example could there be of “doing whatever you have to do to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps.” Most of us might publically frown on his means, but we will privately tip our hats to his success. We would all want his end, and we almost envy his creativity. Even Jesus pats him on the back. Who wouldn’t want that?

This lesson from Jesus gives us a perfect match for every illustration of the end justifying the means that we could pull from the newspaper, or from business schools, or from public policy planners, or from criminal defense attorneys – or from our own rationalizations for doing whatever we have to do to get something we want.

“The end justifies the means.” What else does? The end is the reason there is a means in the first place. The “end” is the “why” that is always behind the “what.”

The end is the child’s maddening question that is born into our DNA? Little children learn to say “NO” just before they learn to ask “WHY?” From then to now, all of us evaluate our actions in terms of how well they get us toward a goal, or solve a problem, or move us in the direction we want to go. When we are committed to some end, we are willing to change the means as soon as we see we are going in the wrong direction. We have serious doubts about our friends or our family or our employers or our governments or our cultures when they rush down a road that is the wrong direction. They have the wrong end. We yell, “Stop! Turn around! You’ll never get there going that way.”

Of course, we seem to be able to predict the end of other’s means a lot better than we do our own. At least, there is a lot of evidence that we must be blind to means determining the end, because we all keep doing things we know are sending us in the wrong direction. Einstein’s quotation has been very popular lately: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.”

Why are we insane? Why would we be so committed to the “means” when we know they will not get us to the “end” we want? Remember? Only the end justifies the means, and the means determine the end. Could it be that we say we have one end, but we are really pointing to another. We have some hidden end that makes us choose the means. We have some secret desire or goal or habit or value that really determines the means. Others look at us and say, “Stop! Turn around! You are going the wrong way.” But you know exactly where you are headed. The reason you do the “what” is it gets you closer to the “why.” They warn us to change our means, but you have to be honest about the “end” that you value before you can do much about the means.

I know we have the “traditional ice cream social” tonight, so let’s admit that the best illustration of pursuing “means” to a bad end is a problem most of us have – me included. Let’s confess that the fastest growing threat in our culture is not terrorism. It is bad health and what we put into our bodies that we know is bad for us. Ice cream, Mexican food, too much sugar, too much fat, too much salt, too much smoke.

We live in denial, so we will rationalize our behaviors any way we can. How many times have you heard someone say, “It’s a free country” – as long as someone else is paying the bill. “Well, you’ve got to die of something.” ..but why not something less expensive. Einstein is right. We have to be insane to want something so badly that we will hasten our own death. What justifying end are we trying to hide from ourselves so badly that we will not stop and turn around from a very expensive, long and miserable end of life? Can’t we be more shrewd than to give up our lives to “comfort food”? Why not find some help to choose a new end and turn around?

The only help we have is to find an “end” that is worth enough to make us change the “means” we are pursuing toward a bad end. We have to find some way to change the real end of our lives before we get to the end that the means we choose have determined. Everybody here

knows that ice cream and Mexican food are a deadly combination. Actually, it's the "...too much" that is deadly. But we can't get enough because we have chosen some empty, vague value we can't even name as the justification for trying to fill ourselves up. A clear vision of a worthwhile end makes saying "yes" to different things much easier. Change your "end," ...and you will choose different means that change your end.

I have spent most of my life in the questions of "what" and "why." My academic training is in ethics and morals – how they are different, and the way they relate to each other. My distinguished professor in Divinity School was careful to distinguish between Christian ethics and moral theology. I was trained in moral theology. As he taught me, it is all about the ends – how we define them best we can, and how we then determine the means to try best we can to get to the end.

Most of the arguments in a home, the big debates in a society, the personal battles we fight in the dark nights of our souls are over the means; we fight about the "whats" and seldom talk about the "whys" behind them. We fight about abortion or prayer in the schools, about money or time spent in the wrong ways. We fight about "whats" because we do not want to face the "whys" – the ends. We need to go back to the first questions in our DNA, and do some honest asking about the "whys" behind the "whats." Always ask first where you are trying to go and where you are really headed. Only then can you evaluate where you are in the road of "whats" and what direction you need to take – and "why".

Look at the manager. He is the perfect illustration of ends and means. He is losing his job and may lose his home. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He is back to food and shelter. So he looks at his end of a house, and he decides that his best resource is friends who may let him into their homes. He marks down debts to make friends. His problem was pretty simple. His end was obvious. His means were creative, risky, but his means are determined by his end. He is determined to achieve his end. Jesus tells the story to illustrate the power of clarity of defining the end.

...and then Jesus gives the lesson, and tells us that only one end is worthy of the means. Only one end has the power to shape the means in the right direction. Only one "why" leads us to the right "what" for right living. Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ... You cannot serve God and money."

The point is not the dishonest wealth. Money as an end always leads to a bad end. The end is the "eternal home." The only end is the one that lasts. Make friends with the one who owns that home by any means you can, and be a faithful friend to that one who is really the best friend you have got and the only one who can open an eternal home to you. Make friends with God by whatever means you can, and you will have an eternal home. God will shape your means and determine your end. You cannot serve God and ice cream.

Make God alone your chief end. It's about the Master you choose, and why wouldn't you choose the Master who is far more generous and wise than you are in all your craftiness. After all, "If you being evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will God give good things to you.

What can you do? It is easier – and harder – than you may think. Let your “chief end” determine your means. Let your one why decide your whats. Begin each day with the one end in mind. Ask yourself, “Does this thing serve the God I see in Jesus Christ?” Ask when you talk with a friend, when you do business with a colleague, when you sit down in front of the computer or TV, ...before you put something in your mouth. Let Christ be the one end of your lesser goals and your daily means. See how saying “yes” the one end changes your means and points you in God’s direction toward the one end that has no end.