

Series: POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE - Feb. 22, 2009

**IT TAKES A THIEF...
Luke 16:1-13**

I. INTRO

A. Do you ever look at your watch and think, “**How did I burn down through so much time?**” You channel surf at home—and before you catch one more TV wave, you happen to look at your watch; or you’re at work, and you’re in the middle of reading and returning emails; or you’re in church...

1. The other day I was at work and made what I thought was going to be a 2 minute call about getting our van fixed right—and it ends up being this 15 minute wrangle over who’s going to pay for the mistake the **doggone repair shop made in fixing the stupid thing in the first place!** When I hung up, I had the vague realization that Jesus loves the guy I was arguing with just as much as He loves me!

-I realized something else. How much time and energy and emotion I put into buying stuff and keeping it going. I later thought, I wonder if I put as **much** thought and ingenuity and emotional energy into **investing** in people as I do in making sure they don’t rip me off. I know, I know—I shouldn’t have been dealing with this stuff while I’m at work. So--dock my pay!

2. **Man** does time go fast! Like I look at my next birthday coming up, and I think, “How did I burn down through 40 years so quickly?” The one growing realization—reality check we have in life—is we are finite people—with limited time, limited opportunities, and limited resources.

-I thought I’d put a tangible reminder of that up here. This hourglass is timed for exactly a half hour. So, as I talk, you don’t even have to try to see your watch in the dark! So—you can time me. Not that it means a **thing**, of course!

B. Into all this confusion about the limited amount of time and money and opportunities we have in life—Jesus drops one of his stories. It’s a very strange story. Jesus, who is considered at the very least, the greatest moral teacher who’s ever walked the planet—makes a manager, who’s crooked as a dog’s hind leg—the **star** of this story. **Very** weird story.

-Now, I need to tell you—I’ve studied this story and read it backwards and forwards—and I’m still puzzled by some parts of it. But one main point is clear; time, opportunities and money are limited. Be wise! Think ahead! Invest in what will last forever.

II. THE STRANGEST STORY IN JESUS’ REPETOIRE

A. As the top end of this series, **Postcards From The Edge**, I told you that the parables Jesus gave are not little Hallmark Channel stories about being a nice person. His stories shake you up. They turn things **right-side up**. When you read one, you sometimes feel like you’ve been sucker-punched.

1. Let me set up this story a little. How many of you are familiar with Jesus parable called, ***The Prodigal Son?*** Jesus told that story in response to being criticized by the religious professionals for hanging out with people they called, ***notorious*** sinners. In a no-holds-barred response, Jesus lets them know how the Father's heart longs for those who are far from home. But in a surprising twist at the end of the story—you find out that the older brother, the one who never left home is the one who, at the end, is lost and alienated from his Dad.

-The shock from this story is still hanging thick in the air, when Jesus turns and tells another one—his critics still listening.

Jesus told this story to his disciples: “There was a certain rich man who had a manager handling his affairs. One day a report came that the manager was wasting his employer’s money. So the employer called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Get your report in order, because you are going to be fired.’

“The manager thought to himself, ‘Now what? My boss has fired me. I don’t have the strength to dig ditches, and I’m too proud to beg. Ah, I know how to ensure that I’ll have plenty of friends who will give me a home when I am fired.’

“So he invited each person who owed money to his employer to come and discuss the situation. He asked the first one, ‘How much do you owe him?’

The man replied, ‘I owe him 800 gallons of olive oil.’ So the manager told him, ‘Take the bill and quickly change it to 400 gallons.’

“‘And how much do you owe my employer?’ he asked the next man. ‘I owe him 1,000 bushels of wheat,’ was the reply. ‘Here,’ the manager said, ‘take the bill and change it to 800 bushels.’

Most religious people would expect Jesus to then say, “The moral of this story is that if you don’t manage honestly—you’ll get caught! So be sure ***you’re*** a wise and honest manager!” But—to our shock—he ***doesn’t!***

“The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with the world around them than are the children of the light. Here’s the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home. (Luke 16:1-9 NLT)

2. Jesus was brilliant—and he ***knew*** a story like this would make people sit up and take notice—and ***think!*** Man, it’s made ***me*** think!
-Some details that may help you in your understanding. First, in 30 AD (CE), Palestine was not a place to go to make your fortune. With the heavy taxation and of both Herod, Rome and the temple—you had to usually be connected with one of them to get rich. ***Or*** you had to be crooked. My point is that this rich guy who catches his manager ripping him off may have, in fact, been ripping everyone off!

3. We aren't told a lot of about how this manager was squandering money—or if he was even guilty. But he loses his job just the same and is told to settle up his accounts before he leaves. Anyone here ever lost a job. It throws you, doesn't it? And this guy isn't some MBA who just needs to shine up his resume and log on to **Monster.ca**. He was very likely a slave who'd worked his way up from the bottom. And he's very realistic about his options; He's not strong enough to dig ditches—and he's too proud to beg. And at that juncture, his **shrewdness** gene kicks in.

-His survival plan, simply put, is to cheat his boss to buy friends who will cushion his future. These are **hefty** bills he's reducing. I did come calculating. Want me to tell you what I found? It would take 35 acres of land to produce 1000 bushels of wheat; and about 1700 olive trees to produce 800 gallons of olive oil?

-Knocking those bills down that way he did involved some **serious** coin! And, of course, the point is to **obligate** these people, "friends" to repay him by helping him like he had helped them.

-The twist in the story is that his boss actually **congratulates** this guy for his **shrewdness** in cheating him the way he did! He still lost his job, mind you—but now, on his resume, he could tell potential employers that he was **highly skilled** at cheating!

- B. What makes this story so hard to get your head around is that it seems like Jesus, the greatest moral teacher who's ever lived—by any standard--is using this crooked guy as a positive example.

Jesus makes the comment that sometimes the people immersed in the world system are more **shrewd** than children of the light—people who love and respect God. How many of you when you hear the word **shrewd**—think **good** things? When I hear the word, I think of someone who knows all the angles—and uses them in sneaky ways to get what he wants.

-But the world **shrewd** actually means clever. Farsighted. Astute. Discerning. Smart. On the ball. By the way, did you know that Jesus tells **his** followers to be shrewd? Let me read it for you. But before Jesus sent his disciples out, he told them: **Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves. (Matthew 10:16 NLT)**

-If I had two boxes up here—a snake in one, a dove in the other—which one would you want me to open? The **dove** box, right? But Jesus combines the two—as shrewd, as wise, as farsighted as **snakes**, but harmless as doves. Now, this guy in Jesus story had the **snake** part down real well—he just didn't have the **dove** part down.

1. Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus—Son of God—would tell his people, **Don't be dumb! Don't be naïve!** Be wise. Think ahead. Use your time, your opportunities, your money **wisely!** Be shrewd—don't be gullible. And sometimes we are!

-Let me give you an example. You need a job. Is it **faith** to throw out a few resumes, and then sit at home and wait for the phone to ring? A person who

uses a lot of God-talk and quotes Bible verses wants you to invest money with them; is it **faith** to say, “Okay!” Actually, it’s naïve!

2. I don’t understand a number of things about this story—but I’ll tell you what I **do** understand—and this is at the very heart of what Jesus is saying.

-This guy, as crooked as he was, knew his time as a manager was limited—and he had one shot at getting ready for the future. And he did it by investing the money he was managing in people.

-If you look at his life like a tombstone, it would read **RIP. Fred. 4 CE – 74 CE.** His frame of reference was the **dash between the dates.** Period. He’s thinking, “I’ve got to take care of my sorry butt until I die—and I don’t care **how** I do it!” Were his actions **consistent** with his frame of reference? They were. If death is the end and then, **Poof!** Your candle goes out. Sianara! **Th-th-th-that’s all folks!** It’s consistent.

3. Jesus calls us **Children of the light.** We have a totally different frame of reference. We believe—we **know** that this life is only the warm-up exercise for eternity. We know that when the top of the hourglass is empty—**that’s not the end—it’s just the beginning!** And Jesus is telling his people—**US**—be shrewd—be far-sighted in the way you live. You’ve only got so much time and money and so many opportunities. Make them count!

-Let me ask you a question: What makes it off this planet when everything is said and done?

*How many of you think money, cars, homes, boats and jewelry makes it off the planet?

*How many of you think awards, titles, positions make it—like they’ll call you Doctor or Professor or President in Heaven?

*How many of you think God allows you to take at least one snazzy outfit with you—you know, the one you wear in the coffin?

*What about golf clubs, fishing rods—or at least your best golf score—or your biggest fish?

*What about **pets?** Let’s clarify that. Dogs? Horses? What about pet **snakes and rats?** Cats? Naahh! Only **nice** pets!

-The **only** thing that makes it off this planet—is **people.** And Jesus is saying, “The only investment that will mean **anything** after the last date on your tombstone is what you’ve invested in people. Jesus made it clear that when we care for people in loving ways in His Name—feed those who need fed, shelter those who need sheltered, give the thirsty something to drink, visit those who are sick and in prison—we are **living out His priorities. We are thinking ahead! We are investing in their redemption! We are loving God in the very act of loving people!**

4. Jesus puts it like this:
Here's the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home. (Luke 16:9 NLT)

-We have a limited amount of time to invest—to do something worthwhile. When we're in our 20's we think we're going to live forever and always land on our feet. But we find out, over time, when a friend gets killed, or we need surgery—life is precious—and limited! And opportunities are finite. You only have so many opportunities to make things right. The biological clock ticks away. The relational clock ticks away. The opportunity to care for your health clock ticks away. And...your opportunity to make an eternal difference ticks away, too. Jesus says, "Be *smart!* Be *shrewd!*"

III. **PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING**

- A. Back to the guy I was having the phone session with about getting the van fixed right. I sometimes forget that God's main priority for me is teaching me to love Him...and the people He loves. Even if they're frustrating me.

-People are his priority here. It's like He can't help Himself—He loves ***every single one of them***. Even the ones who hate Him and flip Him off.

-That's the message of the entire Bible. That God—***all through history***—has been at work on a plan to redeem, buy back everything we've destroyed—including ourselves. God ***so loved*** the world—that He gave what was most precious, most valuable—irreplaceable—His only son.

1. If people are the only things that make it off this planet—then it would make sense to make ***sure***, make ***SURE*** we are investing in their lives and their souls. God's goal is to have a living, loving, forgiving, redeeming relationship with everyone on this planet. He is a ***relational*** God—and offers His friendship.
2. We need to really clear about something. God's obsession with people isn't just about giving them a decent life and a decent opportunity to thrive here—although He'd love that.
 -God wants people to have ***live forever by accepting his offer of life through Jesus***. When we love people in tangible ways, they see God's goodness and want ***Him!*** And ***that's*** the ultimate goal! Jesus didn't die so that there could be water in every faucet and a chicken in every pot and a good roof over every head. He ***loves*** it when people live and thrive and find peace—but He sent His Son so ***no one would perish, but have eternal life!*** Are we clear on that?
3. And maybe Jesus, with this story, is telling us that He even loves scoundrels. Like this crooked manager. In fact, I have a confession to make; *There's a little bit of scoundrel in me*. And there may be in you. Let's just do a mass confession. Wait until I finish before you raise your hand. If you've ever taken something that didn't belong to you, no matter how small, or ever schmoozed people to get something you wanted, or stepped on someone's back to get someplace you wanted to go, or ever made promises to God you didn't keep, or

used God to get what you wanted, or wasted money that was entrusted to you, or lied to get something you wanted—raise your hand real high.

-How many of you would say, “Well, I’ve **never** done something like that, but the person **next** to me sure looks suspicious!”

-The **amazing** news is that the scoundrel in us doesn’t change Jesus’ love for us. And Jesus says, “I’ve accepted you. Go accept others. I’ve given you all you have...now go invest in others. Hurry—cause there’s not much time!”

3. And that kind of investment in people and love for people goes crossgrain to the history of our world. The bottom line in our world is not people—it’s money. Profit. In the job market these days it’s, “**Use** people—**love** money!” And this philosophy has had absolutely **horrendous** effects on humanity. We are called to get it right. And what makes this story so powerful is that Jesus says **so** clearly here: “**Use your money** to love and help people.”

-But that’s not normal. To be honest, we as Jesus’ followers are really almost as likely as **the children of the world**—people without our frame of reference—to make money the big deal. To actually spend pretty much all we have of our time, money and energy on ourselves.

So you and I have to decide, “Will I be a child of the light—or will I act pretty much just like everyone else?”

-It gets into the financial decisions of life. Will I use what God has given me to manage to just keep buying bigger and bigger houses—or will I make a **friend for eternity** by helping someone else have shelter. Will I buy the newer and better version of the car I have now—or will I help someone start a business and feed their family. Money matters when it comes to love. But, see, it ultimately depends on your frame of reference—on where your treasure is: between the dates—or way **beyond** the dates. And it depends on what your treasure is—money and pleasure and stuff—or people!

5. How many of you can think of **someone** who invested in you? Tell me—how did that make you feel? Man, I can think back to a **lot** of people who invested in me. Chuck Thornton, now in his late 80s, loved me and prayed me through my teen years. Andy Ketterer would every so often slip \$100 into an envelope and mail it to me when I was in college—just because....
A professor named Elizabeth Jackson **believed** in me. My Dad invested **hugely** in my life. If I accomplish **anything** with me life—they **all** share in that! For eternity. See, that’s the **cool** part about making **shrewd** investments!

- B. Like it or not, this story Jesus told actually **does** deal specifically with money; how we think about it, and how we invest it. I didn’t put it in there—Jesus did.
-Could he change things, change this world, change others eternities **without** our money? Of course he can! But, from what I can gather, it’s a test. How we handle little things like money—paychecks, refunds, spending—is a test from God to see if He can trust us with bigger, more important things. And He can tell by how we handle

money whether or not we love it—and trust it—more than Him and others. After all, money *is* His biggest competition on this planet.

1. I'm not going to dwell on this—because I talked about this recently—but we really **do** have to plan and budget and think hard about spending if we're going to invest the way Jesus is talking about in this story. Money is this stuff that everyone fights and cheats and gambles and lies to get—and holds onto like it's a life preserver. We have this one life—this one chance to invest it in others.
2. The stuff we make our investments with—time, money and energy—are funny things. It's like they stick to our hands and our lives like magnets to steel. By the way—I have a confession to make. I've sometimes told the story that they catch monkeys by nailing coconuts with holes in them to trees. They put a handful of peanuts in them—and the monkey grabs them—but can't get it's fist out of the hole. And it won't let go, even though it loses it's freedom—and maybe it's life—for a handful of peanuts.

-But—it's not true! Monkeys are smarter than that. But there's life on this planet that's not. Change the bait from peanuts to money—and you'll catch them. They'll hold onto it—and lose their freedom, their chance to make a difference--and sometimes their eternity—but **won't let go!**

-Here's the deal. If you want to have the privilege of building into people's eternities with your money, time and life—you have to figure out how to let go—and invest. You have to **actually** give. And sometimes it feels **uncomfortably affordable**. To be totally honest, giving sometimes **hurts**. And it always takes faith. But it's the only way to send it ahead—and invest in something that is beyond your wildest dreams.

3. Jesus makes a promise at the end of this story—that, I suppose, is also a warning. He says:

“If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own?”

“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Luke 16:10-14 NLT)

Jesus finishes by raising the question: “Is what you're doing with **what you have** evidence that you can be **trusted** with more. Or not?”

-The picture Jesus creates of using your resources to create a welcoming party on the other side of death is amazing. It's a verbal snapshot of taking your final breath here—in some hospital bed, or as you're running your laps around the block, or in some nursing facility waiting in your room for the dinner bell to ring.

-There's this brief moment of pain—and the fading of voices; and **then** there's this moment where you wake up in **unbelievable** light—as a child of the light. Jesus takes you're your face in His hands and says, "Way to go! **WAY TO GO!**" And **then** He says, "There are some people here who are **dying** to meet you—well, maybe not **dying**—but you know what I mean!"

-The crowd is bigger than any crowd you've ever been in. Jesus says, "Meet your friends! They've been anxiously waiting for you to come, you know—not that they wanted you to die! And you say, "But Jesus, I never...!" He says, "Oh, yes you did—in thousands of ways. You touched some—and they touched others—and then **they** touched others. Cool, isn't it? Aren't you glad you **thought ahead?**"

IV. THIS IS OUR CHANCE!

A. In his book, **Schindler's List**, Thomas Keneally tells the story of Oskar Schindler. Schindler was a German industrialist whose original goal was to make a fortune by using cheap labor from the Jewish ghettos to make his enamelware. The story, and the movie, tell how something deep inside him stirred when he saw people being treated worse than animals—then hauled off to concentration camps--and certain death.

-Under the pretense of acquiring cheap labor, Schindler spent his entire fortune buying Jewish prisoners--not as slave labor, but to keep them alive. Edzia Wertheim, who, along with her husband, was saved by Schindler, said that it was only if your name was on Schindler's list of workers that you had a chance for survival. She described it as her **second life!**

- Watch this final scene from the movie as Oskar Schindler gets to meet some of the 1100 lives he saved who've gathered to thank him.

B. No one wants to wait for the other side to see what **might** have been. Time is finite—it **runs out** for you and others. So—let's not wait to invest. Let's do it now. While we can.