

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Power: Investing in the Future"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 19:11-27
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 3, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Those of you who attend church regularly know that we've had a lot of different things going on in worship over the past month and a half or so. We've had several different guest preachers, we've reported on Annual and General Conference, and we've celebrated Vacation Bible School and the youth mission trip. Now that all those things are done, I thought it would be good for us to settle into the month of July with a sermon series from the Gospel of Luke. I'm calling this series "Parables of Power," and today we begin with this story in Luke 19 about a nobleman and his slaves. Let's take some time this morning to consider how they increased their power by investing in the future.

1—THE NOBLEMAN

The first character in Jesus' parable is the nobleman who gained royal power. As a nobleman, he began with a powerful status. You could say he was born with silver spoon in his mouth. But he didn't rest on his laurels or sit at home waiting for more benefits to come his way. Instead, he maximized his power even further by investing in his own future. He put out the effort to travel to a distant country. We can assume that he sought the higher royal position. The parable doesn't spell out the details, but we see that somehow he overcame the citizen opposition raised against him. Apparently he was able to persuade the higher authority that he would be a good ruler. In other words, the nobleman actively pursued this opportunity.

We can also see that the nobleman made careful plans. He didn't just leave on a whim. Before embarking on his trip, he took the time to summon ten of his slaves, to give them each an amount of money, and to instruct them to carry out his business in his absence. He empowered them with resources and delegated responsibility to them, so that, upon his return, the future would be improved

for both himself and his slaves. After he returned, the nobleman continued investing in the future by holding his slaves and citizens accountable for what they had done. The nobleman planned for the next period of time by adjusting the people's level of responsibilities, benefits, and punishments according to their level of performance. In each action he took, the nobleman increased his power by investing in the future.

2—SLAVES

The next characters in Jesus' parable are the slaves. At first, Jesus says there were 10, but then he simplifies the story to just three. Two of the slaves invested in the future by doing exactly as their nobleman master told them to do. They obediently, resourcefully, and responsibly used his money to do his business. The nobleman had given each of them a "pound," which was equivalent to three months' wages for a laborer. With that "pound," the first slave gained 10 more pounds, and the second slave gained five. Their positive efforts brought about financial increase for their master, and earned them each a significant job promotion, wherein they would, respectively, rule over 10 cities and five.

The parable tells us that the third slave wasn't so resourceful or efficient. Instead of putting his pound to good use, the third slave wrapped up his pound in a piece of cloth and held onto it. If we give him the benefit of the doubt, we might say he was risk-averse and that he believed the best way to invest in the future was to be extremely cautious. But that isn't what Jesus' parable tells us. The slave didn't report that he was afraid of a stock market crash. Instead, he reported that he was afraid that the nobleman would take away what he might earn. He was worried that his efforts would be of no value *to himself*. So, he rebelled by not earning anything. He simply shut down and refused to work. Maybe he thought three months' wages was a lot of money, and he could loaf for a while. Or maybe he was like a disillusioned voter who doesn't think there's any point in going to the polls. Or maybe he simply had a disobedient nature. Whatever his perspective, instead of investing in the future, the third slave did nothing to improve his lot in life and severely limited his future potential.

3—CITIZEN PROTESTORS

The third group of characters in the story are the citizens who protested against the nobleman. Like their soon-to-be ruler, they did put forth some energy travelling to the distant country to raise their objections. I'm sure they thought they were investing in their future. At least they gave the situation their best shot. Unfortunately for them, they were on the wrong side of history. By becoming enemies of their ruler, they cut their futures even shorter than the slave who didn't work.

4—US

If you think we've run out of characters, you forgot that we now need to apply this parable to us. Where do we fit into this story? How can this parable of power help us invest in the future? Maybe you've already thought of an application of this story to your life situation. If you have, that's great. The purpose of a sermon isn't just for the preacher to talk. A sermon is intended to stimulate your brain cells so God's Holy Spirit can help you connect the dots in a way that's relevant and meaningful to you. So, if you've got some ideas stirring around in your head, that's great. Keep it up. Meanwhile, I'll tell you about some other "investing in the future" ideas.

One of the ideas that comes to my mind is the "Shared Futures" project of the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences. At our June annual conference meetings, each of the two groups voted positively to pursue the possibilities of a union. Those affirmative votes will be noted at the Western Jurisdictional Conference later this month, and it will then be quite likely that United Methodists of Utah, Colorado, and southern Wyoming will be given permission to take further steps toward combining with the United Methodists of Montana and northern Wyoming. As you can guess, there are some underlying critical problems that are motivating this conversation. But we aren't just focusing on the troubles. We're also considering this as a positive opportunity to implement new structures and new goals. We're hoping that we can eliminate some redundancies and become more nimble in our

administration. We're hoping that the thoughtful creation of a new conference will open up new possibilities so our churches in every state can be more vital and our existing ministries can be more effective and strong. We want our new conference to be more powerful in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. We hope to be more effective at changing people's lives for the better. We want our new conference to generate new and different kinds of ministries to reach new and different kinds of people. No one can guarantee that these things will happen, but they sure won't happen if we wrap up our "pound" in a cloth and hide it away. Only if we put forth some effort and take some risk will we be able to find out whether we'll be able to increase the spiritual resources in our care.

Another idea about investing in the future is right here in our First United Methodist children and youth ministries. A number of you commented after church last Sunday about how great it was to have so many young people involved in the worship service. You appreciated the great reports about Vacation Bible School and the Youth Mission Trip. A couple of you said you wished that every Sunday's worship service could have that kind of upbeat youthful energy. That's a tall order, but we could come closer to that ideal if we had more volunteers who were interested in supporting our kids in Sunday School and youth group. Our big events are now over, and our leaders deserve and need some rest. But if we had more members who were willing to give of their time to our young people, if we had more folks who felt called to teach and share, if we had more volunteers whose hearts long to connect kids with Christ, then we could, in fact, have more youthful energy in our church year-round. Do you hear what I'm saying? One of the best ways to put power in our ministry is to invest in the future of our kids through our Christian education program. Is it a risk? Of course it is. But maybe it's a risk that will generate great gains.

So, what else have you thought of? Are you thinking of how you can powerfully invest in the future of your family? Have you thought of ways you can powerfully invest in your business or career? Have you thought of ways you can invest in your home and property? Have you thought about how you

might need to invest more powerfully in your retirement savings? How about investing in your education or in your spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and worship? We all have been given a pound of something we can work with. Now it's time to claim that power and invest in the future.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes Christians get the idea that power is evil. But that's only power that is used for evil purposes. I believe that God wants us to be powerful agents of positive change in our world. In this parable in Luke 19, Jesus never says that power is bad. In fact, in verse 11, we read that Jesus told this parable because the people supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. They were expecting it to happen somehow by magic, or by Jesus heading up the hill to the big city of Jerusalem.

But Jesus' parable indicated that the nobleman couldn't do all these things on his own. He had to have servants who would carry out his will. He had to have people who would cooperate with his vision and plan. He had to have workers who would take initiative and claim their responsibility in the organization. In one of the Spider Man movies, we heard the line that "with great power comes great responsibility." But I would also say that, with great responsibility comes great power. When we invest our time, talent, and treasure in anything—when we take responsibility for the outcome—then we grow in power to influence the future. I think that's what Jesus was talking about here in Luke 19. Sure, we can take what we've been given and hide it away in a cloth where it will depreciate in value. Or we can increase our impact and our power by investing in the future.