Sunday, September 24, 1989
AT LEAST DO SOMETHING!
Luke 16:1-9

Most of you are familiar with the television series called Dallas, even though you might not watch the program very often. The central character in that series, J.R. Ewing, reminds me of one of the characters in a parable Jesus told; the one that was read to you earlier.

The story Jesus told was about a very wealthy individual who had an executive vice-president running his business, and reports kept coming to this rich man that his chief executive officer was not doing the job he was supposed to do. The charges in general were that he was wasting the owner's goods. One guess is that he was not following through on collecting the rent and managing the business. In accounting language, the "Accounts Receivable" were too high. Perhaps he was both sloppy in his work and lazy.

Incidentally, the parable does not say whether these charges were true or not. The original text simply leaves this open. It is possible even to find in it a hint that the manager had not mismanaged the owner's property at all.

At any rate, the owner called the man in, told him about the charges against him, and said, "Turn in your account books and, by the way, you're fired."

The owner did not investigate the charges before he fired the manager. He appears not to have considered the possibility that the accounting records might even prove the manager's innocence. The manager is summarily fired on the basis of the accusations.

As he is cleaning out his office, he realizes that he has several alternatives.

One possibility is to do everything in his power to help the owner collect all the outstanding debts and to be as tough and demanding as possible, even foreclosing on their property if necessary.

But then he considers another alternative. He thinks to himself, "It's better to make friends with as many of the debtors as possible so as to secure my own future. If I reduce the amount that these people owe and collect maybe fifty cents on the dollar, some of these people might even give me a place to live. Most of these people are behind on their payments anyway, and fifty cents on the dollar is better than nothing at all." Perhaps he even thinks, "After all, my employer seems to be an unscrupulous individual. He fired me without even giving me a chance to defend myself."

"The only other alternative that is left for me is to do physical labor or go begging." He was frank enough to admit that neither suited him. His age and his state of health would not allow him to do physical labor. And begging is something he certainly did not want to do. It would be embarrassing and damaging to his social prestige, not to mention his self-esteem.

So he carried out his plan. He went to the debtors one by one and made a deal with each one of them. If each would pay immediately, he would discount what they owed.

When he reported what he had done to the owner, it didn't save his job, but he was commended for his actions. Why? Because he acted decisively and prudently in the face of a

crisis situation. He saw the ax beginning to fall, and instead of giving up and saying, “Oh poor me, look what’s going to happen. I’ll never be able to survive this,” he immediately acted in a bold and clever way. He was praised because at least he did something.

This individual had only one opportunity to get out of the situation. His “smarts,” shrewdness, and a certain amount of practical wisdom are necessary for living in this world. He told his disciples, for example, “To be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” It reminds me of the old saying, “Trust everyone, but cut the cards.”

In other words, Jesus never suggested that religious people are to be naive about the complex actions and motivations of human beings.

That’s why I said in the beginning of this sermon that the man in the parable who acted so cleverly reminds me of J.R. Ewing in Dallas. J.R. acts out of a clear recognition of what kind of game he is playing; crises may set him back for a few minutes of deliberation, but he always seems to recover in some way.

We admire such cleverness from a distance. We would not really want to be in J.R.'s situation, but we would like to have his ability to get out of the lesser scrapes and crises in which we find ourselves.

So there are several very practical things which Jesus wants to remind us of by using the parable. First of all, use your cleverness and creativity to further the work of God in this world, and if you can’t do everything, at least do something. The manager knew he couldn’t collect all the money owed to his employer, but at least he did something.

Not too many years ago, a man named Millard Fuller was a millionaire attorney and a very clever, creative individual. He used his creativeness and ingenuity to make a lot of money. He had everything that a lot of people dream of one day having: big houses, expensive cars, a cabin cruiser, and more. But he was unhappy. His marriage was in a shambles. The meaning of his life had eroded. It was a crisis, and he acted. He and his wife went away on a lengthy religious retreat to reevaluate their lives and their life together.

After much thought and prayer, they left all their treasures behind and began an organization called “Habitat for Humanity.” Now in hundreds of places around the world, thousands of volunteers are building good, solid, low-cost housing for poor people. Whenever possible, the people who will buy the house with no-interest loans also help to work on their house. Mr. and Mrs. Fuller knew they couldn’t solve the housing problem completely. They couldn’t do everything, but at least they could do something.

A second very practical thing this parable reminds us to do is to look ahead and plan for the future. I remember a cartoon I saw years ago which showed two men looking enviously at a young gentleman riding by in a handsome carriage pulled by a team of horses. One man said to the other, “He’ll never have to worry. His family owns the biggest horse carriage business in the area.”

In spite of this cartoon, there are many people who are good at looking ahead in their own businesses or professions, but when it comes to their spiritual lives, they are still in the horse and buggy days. They seem unable to make the decisive and crucial spiritual decisions that are so important.

Thirdly, the manager in this parable was resourceful, and I think that's another reason he was praised. He had a good imagination. Why should the church or the individual Christian be any less resourceful? We need to remember that piety is not equivalent to dullness.

But there's more to the meaning of this parable than even these practical suggestions of how to live in God's world. The central theme of the story is money, or as Jesus calls money in this parable—"unrighteous mammon." By calling money "unrighteous mammon," Jesus is saying that for too many people, money is "god," or the "lord of an unrighteous world." He is saying that many people believe that money rules the world and live their lives as if that were so.

But Jesus, surprisingly, does not tell us to abstain from the use of money. He tells us to take this "unrighteous mammon" into our hands and do something with it. The manager in the parable, with all of his corruptness and cunning, is intended to show us by means of a negative image what money is really for.

This man at least used money and possessions for something; they were not an end in themselves. I think Jesus was making the point that if a purely materialistic individual of this world can manage on his level to compel money to serve his ends and thus give it its relative importance, how much more — and at the same time — should those of us who claim to follow the way of Jesus be able to do so on our level.

How many people are there in today's world who are devoted to their possessions (their clothes, their investments, their bank accounts, their homes, their cars)—devoted to them as "gods." Such people no longer own their money; their money owns them.

Strange as the actions of this manager in the parable may seem to us, remember that he did not simply worship money; he did something with it. He has only a few days left. Soon all the money and property he has managed will be taken from him. And one day it will all be taken from us as well. I once had an individual say to me, a person who was the most giving and generous that I have ever known, "What I give away, no one can ever take from me." And he was continually giving money away.

The manager in this story used money to perform a service. At least he did something with it — and it is for that reason that he is commended. The money will one day forsake him. If money is our "god," it is a "god" that will one day fail us.

That's why Jesus said at the end of the parable, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails (and 'it' refers to unrighteous mammon as failing us) so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal habitations."

Jesus is saying here also, "Just as this man used money to help ensure his own future, you who are my followers are to use your money to further God's work in this creation."

The parable is reminding us that we can make "unrighteous mammon" holy. It's all in how we use the money and the property that is ours to manage. Above all, we are to use money and not let money use us.

Who knows what crises each one of us will face in the future? In this parable, Jesus is also reminding us that when the crisis comes, to act decisively, creatively, to not sit on our hands — to at least do something. Amen.