

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

Luke 16:1-13

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Scripture

For the past few weeks we have been studying chapter 15 in *The Gospel of Luke*. Today we begin studying chapter 16. Luke turned his attention from God's joy over finding lost sinners to another issue of Christian discipleship: possessions. Luke began chapter 16 with the parable of the dishonest manager and the resulting implications about handling possessions generously, faithfully, and for the glory of God.

Let's read the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-13:

¹ He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' ³ And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

¹⁰“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”
(Luke 16:1-13)

Introduction

Commentator Philip Ryken tells the story about basketball star Latrell Sprewell whose view of money was massively flawed. One season Sprewell demanded a bigger contract from the Minnesota Timberwolves. He told the media that he was disgusted with his one-year, \$14.6 million contract. When a reporter asked why he didn’t try to help his team win a NBA championship first and then worry about getting a better contract, Sprewell said, “Why would I want to help them win a title? They’re not doing anything for me. I’m at risk. I have a lot of risk here. I got my family to feed.”¹

Sprewell makes \$40,000 *per day*, which is more than many people make per year! An improper focus on money causes people to get really skewed about the things that are really important – especially of eternal importance.

So, how are Christians to think about money and possessions? That is the very practical matter that Jesus dealt with at the start of Luke 16. Jesus wants his disciples to use possessions generously, faithfully, and for the glory of God.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 168.

Lesson

The parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-13 teaches us about the proper attitude toward possessions.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Interpretation of the Parable (16:1-8)
2. The Implications of the Parable (16:9-13)

I. The Interpretation of the Parable (16:1-8)

First, let's look at the interpretation of the parable.

Commentator Darrell L. Bock is just one of many commentators who notes, "The parable of the 'unjust steward' is one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand."² At a first reading it seems that Jesus is endorsing financial mismanagement. But, clearly that cannot be correct. Jesus would never endorse sinful behavior. So, let's examine the parable carefully.

A. *The Setting (16:1)*

First, notice the setting of the parable.

In Luke 15 Jesus addressed the parable in that chapter to the Pharisees and the scribes (15:2-3). Now, in Luke 16 Jesus told another parable, even though he did not use the term "parable," and **he also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions"** (16:1).

The parable begins with two main characters: **a rich man** who was very wealthy, as can be seen from the enormous amounts owed to him (16:6-7), and his **manager**, who was responsible for managing the rich man's estate.

Apparently, **charges were brought to** the rich man **that**

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1323.

his manager **was wasting his possessions**. It was important for the rich man to act quickly and decisively.

B. The Manager's Firing (16:2)

Second, observe the manager's firing.

The rich man **called his manager and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager"** (16:2).

The rich man believed the report about the manager's mismanagement of his possessions. The manager was guilty because he did not defend himself against the charges. In addition, Jesus also described him as a "dishonest manager" (16:8).

Interestingly, Jesus did not specify what the manager had done wrong, other than to say that he was "dishonest" (16:8).

So the rich man fired his manager. He demanded that his manager turn in **the account of his management**. The manager knew that when he turned over the books the rich man would discover the extent of his financial mismanagement.

C. The Manager's Response (16:3-7)

Third, look at the manager's response.

And the manager said to himself, "What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg" (16:3). The manager found himself with a major problem on his hands. He had lost his desk job, and all that was likely to be available to him was manual labor. He knew that he was **not strong enough to dig**. The alternative was to beg, and he was too **ashamed to beg**. So, what was he to do?

It was then that he came up with a creative scheme. It was like an "Aha!" moment. He said to himself, **"I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management,**

people may receive me into their houses” (16:4).

Knowing that he did not have time on his hands, he summoned **his master’s debtors one by one** (16:5a). Speaking to **his master’s debtors** individually was an important detail because he did not want them to communicate with each other and perhaps discover what was going on. So, **he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?”**

He said, “A hundred measures of oil,” which was about 875 gallons.

He said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty,” thereby cutting the debt in half.

Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?”

He said, “A hundred measures of wheat,” which was between 1,000 and 2,000 bushels.

He said to him, “Take your bill, and write eighty,” (16:5b-7) thereby cutting the debt by twenty percent.

Presumably the manager reduced the debt of each one of his master’s debtors. The debtors would have been very happy to receive a significant reduction of their debt.

The manager was really trying to make sure that when he was out of work, the debtors would be personally indebted to him, and they would treat him well at that time.

So, although it was dishonest, it was certainly shrewd.

D. The Master’s Commendation (16:8)

And fourth, look at the master’s commendation.

Jesus said in verse 8a, **“The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.”** The rich man may have been angry with his manager. But, all his debtors were overjoyed that their debts had been reduced, and the rich man would have created massive ill will if he had gone to the debtors and told them that the reduction of their debts were rein-

stated. No, the rich man had to admire **the dishonest manager for his shrewdness**. As Phil Ryken said,

Though [the rich man] could hardly credit the man for his honesty or integrity, when it came to shrewdness, he had to give the man his due. There is a legitimate moral difference between saying, “I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly,” and saying, “I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly.” The master was saying the latter, not the former, and this is the key to understanding the parable.³

Jesus was not endorsing dishonesty. He was not saying that it was fine to cheat people. He was not approving sin. Instead, Jesus was giving an example of how shrewdly non-Christians can be when they act in their own best interest. That is what Jesus meant when he said in verse 8b, **“For the sons of this world [that is, non-Christians] are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light [that is, Christians].”** As Darrell Bock said,

Jesus’ remark is that those of the world (“the sons of this [world]”) give more foresight to their future, they are more shrewd in their dealings with people than are God’s children (“the sons of light”). God’s children should be shrewd with possessions by being generous. Such acts show charity and foresight.⁴

II. The Implications of the Parable (16:9-13)

And second, let’s examine the implications of the parable.

Jesus then moved from the parable itself to make three additional applications. Let’s note each one briefly.

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 171–172.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, 1332.

A. *Be Generous with Your Money (16:9)*

The first implication is: Be generous with your money.

Jesus said in verse 9, “**And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.**”

Unrighteous wealth refers perhaps to the danger of pursuing wealth for its own sake. Jesus wants his disciples to use **wealth** for eternal purposes. And the **friends** in this passage may refer to the Three Persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, it may also refer to people who have benefitted spiritually because of one’s wealth.

Kent Hughes captures the essence of verse 9:

What is inescapably clear here is that our wealth and possessions are to be used to win eternal friends. This is the proper use of what we have. We must give generously of our money for the furtherance of the gospel. If we are not doing so, we are not making proper use of what God has given us and we are not enhancing eternal friendships. This is an intensely spiritual matter.⁵

J. C. Ryle notes “that a right use of our money in this world, from right motives, will be for our benefit in the world to come. It will not justify us. It will not bear the severity of God’s judgment, any more than other good works. But it shall be an evidence of our grace, which shall befriend our souls.”⁶

B. *Be Faithful in Your Stewardship (16:10-12)*

The second implication is: Be faithful in your stewardship.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 150.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 204.

Jesus stated the principle in verse 10, **“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”** And then he followed with two questions that flesh out the principle in verses 11-12, **“If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”**

Sometimes people say that they would give more to God’s work if they had more money to give. But that is not always so.

Dr. D. James Kennedy told a story of a man who came to Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, with a concern about tithing. He said: “I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn’t too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year.”

Dr. Marshall reflected on this wealthy man’s dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: “Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?”

The man agreed, so Dr. Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. “Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe.”⁷

J. C. Ryle said, “The doctrine is, that he who is dishonest and unfaithful in the discharge of his duties on earth, must not expect to have heavenly treasure, or to be saved.”⁸ With even greater conviction, he said, “Let the disciples remember that unfaithfulness in money transactions, is a sure evidence of a rotten state of soul.”⁹

⁷ Kevin G. Harney, *Seismic Shifts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 200.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2, 204.

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2, 201.

C. *Serve God, Not Money (16:13)*

And the third implication is: Serve God, not money.

Jesus said in verse 13, **“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”**

There is no middle ground here. The note in the *ESV Study Bible* puts it well, “Jesus does not say ‘*should not serve*’ but ‘*cannot serve.*’”¹⁰

We struggle with money because there is a sense in which it is necessary for life and wellbeing. But, money is so alluring and enticing, and if we do not learn how to master our money, it will become our master.

So, let us serve one master, and let that master be God.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke 16:1-13, we should handle possessions generously, faithfully, and for the glory of God.

In January 2012, CNN gave a positive report about young Christians who are fighting against human trafficking. Over 42,000 young people, mostly college students, gathered in Atlanta for an event focused on worship and the abolition of sex trafficking. CNN seemed impressed that these young Christians didn’t just sing praise songs; they also gave money to help end the horrors of human trafficking. The video-version of the article even showed a young person pulling \$50 out of her purse. Another shot displayed a cash register ringing up \$50. It was definitely an impressive scene and overall they were trying to raise one million dollars.

But now let’s imagine two fictitious characters behind the

¹⁰ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1990.

headlines. Let's say the first character is a 27-year-old named Luke. He has a job, but he spends most of his money on Starbucks and new clothes and entertainment. He attended the stadium event, God truly moved in his life, and decided to write a check for 50 bucks. CNN says, "Can you believe that?" and they splash it on the news. After all, it's a great cause and Luke did give \$50.

But now consider a second imaginary character: another 27-year-old named Jason. Jason is also passionate about ending human trafficking, but he wasn't at the big event because he teaches second-grade Kids' World at his church. Jason gives ten percent of his salary to his church. He makes \$36,000 a year, which means that he gives \$3,600 a year to God's work around the world. That's about \$300 a month, or about \$75 a week.

Even though Jason's weekly offering won't make headline news, throughout the year he supports lots of worthy causes. His weekly offering pays the salary for the associate pastor who trains church members to share the gospel with their friends. Jason's offering helps support the church's medical team that is going to Mexico. His offering supports the church's missionaries serving all around the world. His offering also helped pay for the small building expansion so that his church can reach more people with the good news of the gospel.

Jason is never going to be on CNN, but Jason is a hero. Over the long run, Christians who give regularly, generously and faithfully are the folks who really make things happen so churches can meet people's physical and spiritual needs.¹¹

Our use of money does not get us into heaven. But it does show if we are already the recipients of grace. If you are a Christian, you will be generous with money, faithful in your stewardship, and you will serve God, and not money. Amen.

¹¹ See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/december/6121712.html>.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Father, the parable of the dishonest manager teaches us how a disciple of Jesus handles possessions. May we never become slaves to our possessions. Rather, may we manage our possessions as a stewardship on your behalf.

Oh, Father, help each one of us who are disciples of Jesus to be generous with money, to be faithful in our stewardship, and to serve you only, and not money.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!