

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 22 2019

Luke 16:1-13 (NIV)

16 Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’ ³ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ ⁵ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’ ⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’ ⁸ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Sermon: How Much More . . .

Concerning this parable of the shrewd manager, St. Augustine is said to have remarked, “I can’t believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” Although this story only appears in Luke’s Gospel, no modern scholar doubts it’s an authentic parable of Jesus. However, their many, diverse interpretations show how baffling this story really is. And while we can appreciate the well-known saying, “No one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve both God *and* money,”¹ we, nevertheless, struggle to connect that conclusion with the parable itself.² Sometimes the Bible is like that; experts struggle to make sense of certain passages and there is no consensus in their deliberations. Preachers are often told to avoid such texts! But that’s not very authentic. So, I want to be honest with you and simply mention some of those interpretations today, to show how creative some have been in wrestling with the perplexing meaning of this story. And I want to share an explanation that makes most sense to me and go from there.

Let’s begin by recognising the context. First, this parable is told to Jesus’ *disciples*, in contrast to the previous chapter’s parables which were addressed to the Pharisees and experts in the Jewish Law.³ Nevertheless, we are later told they overheard this story.⁴ Second, this chapter has two parables on money - and the love of it - and both begin with the phrase, “There was a rich man. . . .”⁵ It’s noteworthy that wealth and poverty are persistent themes in Luke.⁶ Third, the story has obvious parallels to the parable of the prodigal son that immediately precedes it.⁷ Both have individuals who squander the goods of the superior person and, in the end, is either welcomed back or commended. But there are some significant differences. In this case, the estate manager is *not* penitent, unlike the young son. And the rich man, unlike the father, does *not* forgive the squandering but *commends* the manager’s shrewdness - and we are left wondering why! Was Jesus *really* praising his ethically murky behaviour?⁸

Let’s now look at the parable itself. In those days, wealthy landowners were often absentee Landlords who employed an estate manger to take care of their interests. This powerful person had the authority to (among other things) set up contracts with the tenants, collect rent, as well as take his own commission. We are told the rich man hears a report that his manager is mismanaging the estate and

¹ Luke 16:13. Money is *not* to become our master or a substitute for God. Materialism enslaves us; God requires exclusive loyalty. As the *Shema* reminded Israel daily, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut 6:5). [Note too that the traditional word “mammon” is a Semitic (Aramaic) word meaning (worldly) money, rather than ill-gotten gains.]

² Indeed, Luke places other sayings of Jesus on wealth in 16:10-13, yet their connection to the parable is also unclear. Some scholars consider the parable to end with verse 8a, with 8b being an additional explanation, yet verse 9 seems to be connected to verse 4 with its mention of “houses”/“tents.”

³ Luke 16:1; 15:1. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Lost-and-Found.pdf>

⁴ Luke 16:14-15.

⁵ Luke 16:1,19. See also 16:14 on the love of money.

⁶ For example, Luke 7:40-43; 11:39-41; 12:13-21, 32-34, 42-48; 14:21 (See also Matt 6:19-21; 16:26; Mark 8:37).

⁷ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf>

⁸ In Luke 11:5-8 there is another parable of a positive nature containing a person of questionable character.

calls him to account.⁹ Based on that hearsay, the estate manager - rightly or wrongly - is about to get fired. Somewhat humorously, we are told the man's honest assessment of his predicament: "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I'm too ashamed to beg."¹⁰ Yet, the estate manager still holds the account books for the moment and so he hatches a clever plan. He ingratiates himself with the tenants so that *when* he is fired, they will be indebted to him and therefore welcome him into their homes.¹¹ So he summons the rich man's tenants, one-by-one, and reduces their debts.¹² Various clever explanations have been proposed to explain his actions. Let me briefly tell you three of them.

First, the estate manager was unscrupulously cooking the books! By reducing the tenants' debts, the actual mismanagement of the estate won't look so bad when he re-writes the accounts.¹³ Put a different way, the estate manager is charged with squandering the Master's money; so, what does he do? He squanders *even more* resources to protect his own self-interest!¹⁴ Second, he was actually reducing the debt by eliminating his own *commission*.¹⁵ In other words, he was prudently sacrificing his own short-term gains for his long-term benefits, since the tenants would then be indebted to him. Third, he was eliminating the wealthy Landowner's *interest* charges. The Mosaic Law took a dim view of charging interest to fellow Israelites,¹⁶ so the manager's act would make the Landowner look good in the eyes of the tenants and the religious leaders.¹⁷ When the rich man eventually turned up, you can imagine the tenants lining the streets to praise him for his unexpected generosity. He then had to risk the tenants' bitterness by reversing his manager's action, or to take the credit himself whatever he really felt privately about the manager's deeds.¹⁸ In this scenario, everyone's a winner – the Landowner, the tenants, *and* the clever manager – who may yet save his job!¹⁹

⁹ Luke 16:1b-2. We do not know from whom he hears the reports; evidently, he considers them reliable and so investigates.

¹⁰ Luke 16:3. The manager is facing ruin, for who would employ him with such a blot on his resume?

¹¹ Luke 16:4.

¹² Luke 16:5-7. The amounts in question underscores the rich man's wealth.

¹³ Others, like William Barclay, sees all three 'characters' as rogues: the rich man, the managers, and the debtors. They are all *complicit* to gain for themselves within an unjust (Roman) economic system. The master, then, admires the skill in which the steward involves the debtors into his scheme and comes out well. However, the parable makes no moral point concerning the landowner or the tenants; I therefore find this explanation dubious.

¹⁴ Kenneth Bailey's somewhat elaborate analysis is worth the read; *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP, 2008) 322-42.

¹⁵ His acts are not illegal, but it is unclear/doubtful as to whether the manager's commission would be included in the official accounts/inventory.

¹⁶ See: Lev 25:36; Deut 23:19-20.

¹⁷ Given that the rich landowner would then be seen as following the Mosaic Law, no doubt the Pharisees would be impressed at such apparent righteousness! Note in a "shame and honour" culture, this made the landowner look good.

¹⁸ Some have pointed out this is very clever management (of this crisis situation) from one accused of mismanagement! This is a highly ingenious interpretation and it may involve more reading between the lines than is probably fair, but one cannot dismiss it.

¹⁹ In the 'shame and honour' system, the landowner can hardly accept the tenants' praise and (instantly) fire the manager!

The parable also tells us the manager reduced the debts of the tenants *quickly*;²⁰ time was not on his side as he was being called to account. And we are told he was “dishonest,”²¹ and yet the master commended him for being shrewd.²² Fiddling the accounts is the only one of those three scenarios that is blatantly dishonest. The other two explanations are not impossible, but they really arise because we are trying to *legitimise* the master’s *commendation* of the manager. It is, however, hard to understand the master’s praise if the manager’s actions were illegal. What, then, are we to make of all this?!

I think the way forward is to recognise that the point of some parables is: “go and do likewise.” However, another common point is: “*how much more . . .*”²³ In this case, if this is what a worldly man would do to get out of ruin, *how much more* diligently should we “children of light”²⁴ do the same? This attitude is echoed in Proverbs 22, “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.”²⁵ In this case, the manager forgave the debts the tenants owed to the master in order to save his own skin. Even though he didn’t have the moral right to do what he did, and his motive was entirely self-serving, the benefits to the tenants were still real. *How much more* real will an honourable person’s forgiveness be worth receiving. Alternatively, the manager is facing an immediate crisis. Rather than simply accept ruin, he prudently and decisively plans for the future. It’s the manager’s *foresight* in recognising his need to secure his long-term future that the master commends, not his cunning method in achieving that goal.²⁶ *How much more* are we, then, to recognise our situation and act decisively to secure long-term goals, even throwing caution to the wind to make that happen?

We should also remember this is a *parable* and not merely a story with a moral, so what might a spiritual interpretation look like? *If* the rich man corresponds to God and the manager to the Jewish religious leaders, who - we are told - overheard the story and also loved money,²⁷ then what *might* the commendation imply? The Pharisees and Scribes were meant to be good stewards and were failing both the people and God in their responsibilities because they were making the Law’s regulations even tighter in an endeavour to make Israel more “holy,” and, in the process, they were excluding the very people that Jesus was reaching. Since their solution wasn’t working, they faced an urgent crisis as in Jesus the kingdom of God had arrived and there was to be a reckoning of accounts.²⁸ Jesus could then be encouraging the religious leaders to secure their long-term future by throwing their lot in with his revolution. In the same way, *how much more* ought followers of Jesus keep an eye on God’s kingdom horizon and live accordingly. Consequently, through the parable, Jesus admonishes his hearers to cast

²⁰ Luke 16:6.

²¹ Luke 16:8.

²² The Greek word for “shrewd” (*phronimos*) can also be translated “prudent” or “wise” (see also Luke 12:42).

²³ See Luke 11:5-13, especially v13 where it says explicitly “how much more . . .”

²⁴ See also John 12:36; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5. The “people of light” are those who have seen the kingdom dawning in Jesus’ deeds and in his call for radical commitment to God as the one who can deliver his people from corruption and oppression.

²⁵ Prov 22:3.

²⁶ Luke 16:8b-9. Alternatively, the commendation is not the manager’s practices but his insight into the connection between resources and relationships in securing his long-term future.

²⁷ Luke 16:14.

²⁸ See also Luke 17:20-21(37).

caution aside, seize the moment of opportunity, and make provisions for the future because the kingdom of God is at hand.

This being the case, what might this parable be saying to us today? One possibility is that “drastic times calls for drastic measures.” The traditional churches in the West are facing a growing crisis in terms of declining numbers and vitality. Its past and present leaders have, in a sense, mismanaged the situation and we have failed to recognised the signs of the times, else we have misunderstood the practical implications of the kingdom of God. We are, in a sense, facing a time of reckoning, a calling to account for ourselves. What are we to do? Like in the parable, we may need to forgo costly short-term losses in order to experience long-term gains. Maybe the time for caution and incremental change has gone and we should try something unconventional and new? If secular businesses have to take stock and restructure themselves in a crisis so they can survive and have the potential to thrive in the future, *how much more* must “children of light” do the same. I don’t know what that means for the Presbyterian Church in Canada or for other denominations, nor do I know precisely what it means for a given local church, like St. Andrew’s. I suggest, however, it’s not a radical reformation of our core beliefs, but of our *practices*. For example, the Book of Forms, the rules that govern our denomination, were good in the heyday but some of them are now unwieldy and unworkable, and holding us captive to a past when times have changed dramatically.²⁹ The Pharisees were rigid rule-keepers too and Jesus critiqued them for it, not because the rules were necessarily wrong, but the religious leaders missed the point of them. But the challenge is more than that because, in the parable, the shrewd manager didn’t wait to be fired but took *decisive* action. What decisive actions might we at St. Andrew’s contemplate? That’s food for thought. I know this is not easy, because in a world of constant change, we like the security and stability that traditional church services are often perceived to provide. These things are reassuring and therefore maintaining constancy is often preferred to change. We can certainly choose to do that, but I don’t think we would be commended for it. Instead, let’s use what resources we have well.³⁰ Let’s be inspired to think creatively, prudently, *and* boldly. If that’s what a secular company would do, scary and uncomfortable though change is, *how much more* can we confidently face these challenges if we are genuinely partnering with God’s Spirit and who wants us to succeed! Amen. Let us pray.

²⁹ See also Luke 5:36–39.

³⁰ Luke 16:10-12.