

## Parable of the Dishonest Manager/Steward

Luke 16:1-13

I probably ought to start out with an apology. Unfortunately, the person I need to apologize to isn't here. I don't remember now whether it was three years ago or six years ago, the last time I preached through this part of Luke and its parables, but I do remember that I had to be out of town the Sunday that this parable rolled around, so I assigned it to the youth minister. It's a wonder that he didn't quit right then and there.

Normally the parables are fun to teach and preach, but it doesn't take a genius to see that there is nothing 'normal' about this one. It doesn't look anything like the other parables.

- There's no linear story line that leads to a surprising but satisfying resolution – the Good Samaritan is lifted up as the person we should emulate. The Prodigal Son is welcomed home and given a party.
- The characters' real-life counterparts aren't clearly identifiable here, even though the words 'master' or 'lord' and 'steward' are used in the story, and even more challenging, it isn't clear who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. The dishonest steward is applauded for his dishonesty. The master, whom we would have assumed was supposed to represent God, confuses us by appearing to commend someone for shady business dealings.
- Most parables have a surprise twist at the end, a 'gotcha' moment where Jesus shows us how very different our ways are from God's ways, but if you try to apply that same approach in this parable you end up with a questionable take-home message.

And as if all that weren't challenging enough, then Luke goes and tacks on three different interpretive endings to it, none of which helps a whole lot. It was definitely one of Luke's off days.

So Matt or Brian, whichever of you it was I did this to, if you are out there somewhere reading this sermon online, I'm sorry. Really sorry. I hope you find some comfort in knowing that it is payback time. I hope that my efforts this morning are half as good as I heard yours were.

I want to be clear about one thing from the very beginning: anyone who claims they understand exactly what this story is all about isn't to be trusted, myself included. The parable itself is difficult and Luke didn't make matters any easier with his add-ons. Frankly, no one out there seems to be in real agreement as to what Luke and Jesus were getting at. So here's how I would like to go about tackling this. What I'd like to do first is start by clearing the table of the things we need to get out of the way before we can move forward, and then after we've dealt with all of the distractions, and ruled out everything that we can say with some certainty the parable *isn't* about, then we'll try to cobble together some semblance of a message that we *can* take home from it.

The first thing we probably need to address is the tendency of interpreters to want to push the easy button and clean up all those difficulties by offering plausible explanations for the steward's devious dealings. From where we sit it looks like he's compounded earlier accusations of financial mismanagement by cheating his master out of even more money and if that is the case,

than it doesn't make a bit of sense that his master would commend him for it. So some commentators have suggested that what he really did was deduct either his own profit from the bill, or interest they had been charged. He comes out a hero that way. The only problem is that there really isn't anything to back up those suggestions and give them credibility. I'm afraid that this parable is like the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac – there just isn't an easy way out of this one.

Then, shifting gears a bit, here's another thing we can cross off our list when we talk about what this parable is about. I don't think I'm giving anything away if I say that, generally speaking, it is about money. I think that's pretty obvious. The steward's job is to look after his master's property and other resources, and all of the appended sayings at the end of it have to do with wealth and money. But it's not Luke's usual message about money. There's nothing in here about using it to take care of the poor. No one, not the master, not Jesus, not Luke, says anything about money being bad or giving all your money away to be a true disciple. Most of the time Luke is all about the perils of money and how the only thing it does is stand between you and God, but there is none of that here. No talk of the poor, or the dangers of being rich. The preacher who is looking for a good scriptural basis for a sermon on pledging and tithing won't find it in this parable.

So, what *can* we say about this parable and what possible messages it might have for us today, if there is no one clear point? Well, one thing we can say about the parable of the dishonest manager is that, like the other parables around it, it seems to be about what happens to people when they are cornered, when they find themselves in desperate situations. Like the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Rich Fool, this parable has a critical moment of introspection when the title character stops to reflect on his state of affairs and asks himself, "Now what am I going to do? I have bigger problems than I can handle, I'm at the end of my rope. How do I get out of this?"

Some didn't fare so well, like the rich fool who decided that what he should do is build a bigger barn to save it all up for the future. He died that night. But others, like the prodigal son, found redemption when they realized that the only way out was down, to throw themselves on the mercy of others. Neither he nor the steward had any hope of being restored to their former relationships; they never even bothered to ask if they could have their job or old room back. And the steward realized what most of us never do, that money couldn't save him; his only way up and out was through the relationships he had forged. Lots of life lessons there.

But what intrigues me most about this parable is that it comes closer to casting money in a positive light than any other place in the gospels. We've heard all about the perils of it, what will happen if we hoard it or spend it frivolously, and we've heard that we should give a fair amount of what we have to help the poor, but what about what's left over, the part we keep? The 90% or so that's still around.

Well, in this case we've seen that what it can do is buy you friends, a future, redemption. But what if we broadened that? Again, from where we sit it looks like the master has commended the steward for his shifty business practices, but what if he is just commending him for being

shrewd? He understands money. He knows what money can do and can't do. He knows its power and he uses it well. He is financially savvy.

Maybe what Jesus is doing is simply reminding us what a powerful tool money is, and that we Christians would do well to learn to use it well. Money can tempt us down wrong paths, and isolate us from each other behind fancy walls, and make us think we are important, yes, and no, it can't save us or keep us from hitting rock bottom, but it can also do a world of good. Given liberally it can find cures for diseases and build children's hospitals and educate young people who might never have been given a chance otherwise. It can provide clean drinking water and put coats on cold kids and translate Bibles into tribal tongues. Withheld wisely, it can keep privileged children grounded and teach them the importance of hard work and that all good gifts come from God, and ultimately belong to God.

One of the most memorable sermons I've ever heard was preached a number of years ago by the minister I worked with in Kingsport. I even remember the title of it: "What's in a Budget?" It was a stewardship sermon, yes, but not your typical one. What he did was use the sermon to walk the congregation through the numbers of the church budget, numbers that most people probably never looked at, and he showed them that each of those numbers had power, they did something. One of those numbers, \$6,000, built a house for a family living in a trailer. Another one of those numbers helped cure sick people in Pakistan. Another number provided a place for Boy Scouts to meet and illiterate adults to learn to read. It was a congregation that understood what money could do, the power that it had, and when you added together the figures in all of those line items, when you "followed the money," to borrow a term from the Watergate era, you could see just how deep that congregation's faith and commitment to God were.

How financially savvy are we? If we were to go home and take a good hard look at what we do with our money would we get a hearty 'bravo' from Jesus? And I'm not just asking about the portion you set aside to return to God, your tithe, or whatever you want to call it. I'm talking about all of it. If you were to go through your own budgets line by line, would it suggest that you think of money as a tool or as a toy? Does it get frittered away, a few dollars here, a few dollars there, or are you intentional about using it for specific, and of course, good purposes?

I read an article recently about Rick Steves, the owner of the tour company many of you have traveled with in Europe and Asia, and one of the things that impressed me about him is what he's done with his retirement money. He and his wife decided that it could be doing someone some good now. So what they did is use it to buy an apartment building and had it fixed up so it could be used until his retirement as transitional housing for homeless women and their children.

What about you? What are you building or saving or teaching or comforting with your money? Does it have a purpose? Does it have power? You can't serve God and money, true. But if you have money, let it serve God.