

THE STRANGEST STORY JESUS EVER TOLD

Luke 16:1-13 The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

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.”

MESSAGE:

The story of the dishonest manager has long been considered the strangest parable Jesus ever told. A man acts fraudulently yet he is held up as a good example. He deceives his employer and his employer praises him for it. He lies and is merely called “shrewd.” So what is Jesus trying to teach us in this strange story? Let’s take it verse by verse and see what we can make of it. This will be an expository sermon and you’re welcome to follow along in your bulletins.

“Jesus told his disciples: ‘There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.’” (Luke 16:1) What’s happening here? A man has been employed to

manage an owner's business. He is given the authority to act as his deputized agent—to receive payment from his clients and keep account of the owner's money. In short, he has been entrusted with the stewardship of the owner's business. He fits the definition of a chief financial officer of a modern corporation.

But something has gone wrong. Someone has gone to the owner of the business and accused his manager of dereliction of duty. According to this unidentified person, the manager has been wasting the owner's resources. "Wasting" may refer to anything from "squandering" to "embezzling." Probably the best synonym would be "mis-using."

Does this manager remind you of anyone else in the Bible? How about Adam, who succumbed to the temptations of Satan and forfeited his stewardship of the Garden of Eden? If so, then the unidentified person who brought the charges against the manager could represent Satan, whose name means "the accuser." The problem is that even though Adam's sin did lead to the loss of paradise, his sin wasn't primarily the sin of wasting God's possessions—it was the sin of pride which drove him to crave the knowledge of evil.

More likely the manager represents us—the sons of Adam who have been redeemed by God and called to serve as stewards of His Kingdom, yet often misuse God's resources to serve ourselves. Jesus said, *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."* (Matthew 6:19-21) *But we often say, "Let's store up for ourselves treasures on earth and let the moths and rust and thieves have their day."* So let's proceed on the assumption that the wasteful manager is "Joe Christian"—i.e., you and me.

"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.'" (Luke 16:2) So the owner relieves the manager of his responsibilities and revokes his authority to act as his representative. *"Clean out your desk and get out—you're fired."* But—and this is important—he does not prosecute the dishonest manager—as the ancient law of the Mishna prescribed. He did not have him tossed into prison for malfeasance but tempered his judgment with mercy and let him go free. The only penalty would be the loss of his job.

"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...'" (Luke 16:3) Separated from his master, the man realizes that he is in a predicament. He can't continue to support himself with the gifts and talents he is accustomed to using and the only alternatives he can imagine are digging or begging. And he's too weak to dig and too proud to beg. Apart from his master he is trapped in his own weakness and pride and falls into despair: *"What can I do?"*

"What can I do?" Have you ever found yourself saying these words? When you've reached your wits' end and every path you can imagine taking leads to a brick wall? When all of your talents and skills seem useless? When you feel too weak to climb out of a pit

you've dug for yourself and too proud to ask anyone else for help. Have you not found yourself saying, "*What can I do?*"

There is a term for this: it's called "hitting bottom." And God allows us to hit bottom at times in our lives—sometimes he even gives us a shove. He doesn't do this because he is cruel and takes pleasure in our suffering—He does it out of love because when we have hit bottom—***that is when we are the most open to receiving God's grace!*** When we can't even lift up our eyes to heaven but can only cry out, "*O God, what can I do?*"—then and only then are we ready to let God's plan for our lives replace our own. He breaks our will so that we can discern His will. The Greek poet Aeschylus put it this way: "*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.*"

The dishonest manager has hit bottom and he knows it. Then a plan forms in his mind.

"I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred. 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.'" (Luke 16:4-7) As soon as he confronts his own helplessness—almost as soon as the words are out of his mouth—a plan occurs to him whereby he can maintain his status in the community and protect his reputation. He needs only to seize the opportunity and act quickly and decisively.

This is the part of the parable which has bothered people so much. The manager is acting fraudulently, pretending to an authority he no longer possesses. He is using it to gain favor for himself by committing the owner to acts of generosity toward his clients which the owner has not authorized. Calling in his master's debtors one by one, he substantially reduces the amounts they owe in order to ingratiate himself with them so that later they will feel charitably disposed toward him.

But here is where he makes a mistake, for who is glorified in this process? The manager? No—it's the owner who is absorbing the loss! The clients assume that the manager is still authorized to act on the owner's behalf so it's the owner's generosity that will be appreciated and praised. Despite his selfish intentions, the manager has glorified his master. But he has also placed his master in the position of either allowing his unintended generosity to stand, or revoking it, and he knows full well that revoking it is not really an option. People who have received generous gifts do **not** like to give them back. One of the first jobs I had in the business world was as personnel manager of a small manufacturing plant in Milwaukee. There was an hourly employee there named Harry Hudy who was one of the nicest and most cheerful people you could ever meet. When it came time for Harry to retire, on his last day at the plant we gave him a \$500 U. S. Savings Bond as a retirement gift. Harry was delighted, but two days later he came back furious because he found out that his bond would not be worth \$500 for ten years and was worth only \$375 at present. The way he looked at it, we hadn't given him \$375 we had robbed

him of \$125. People don't like to give back what they think they've received. The owner knew that and had no real choice but to let the deals his manager had made stand because His good name was at stake.

So the manager gambled everything on His master's concern for his good name—and won. Having no resources of his own left, he drew from his master's resources to embark upon a new life.

Then comes the biggest surprise of all: his master praises him for what he did!

“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.” (Luke 16:8) The manager and the owner were people of the world and share the same worldly values. Business acumen, shrewdness, getting the better of the deal—these are the values that drive economic competition. In the eyes of the owner, even though his manager had cost him a lot of money he admired his shrewdness. They both played by the same rules of the same game—big boy rules.

But where's the parabolic meaning? How is this supposed to apply to us?

“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” (Luke 16:9)

Instead of using whatever worldly wealth God has given you to impress your neighbor and practice “one-upmanship” upon him, use it to befriend your neighbor and act charitably toward him—in other words, *to serve him in Christian love*. To let the light of Christ shine through you so that when he sees your good deeds, he will glorify your Father who is in heaven and be drawn to His kingdom. Then when you leave this world behind, your neighbor will welcome you into heaven.

That's the instructive meaning—the law meaning. But there's Gospel here too! When we spend resources in the Master's Name, even when our motives are tainted with selfishness others will know that the resources are the Master's—and they will glorify Him and not us.

Jesus summarizes the meaning of the parable: *“No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.” (Luke 16:13)* Let your friends know that Christ is your Master and as long as you do things in His Name—He will be glorified. In this parable Jesus is inviting us to bet everything on God so that God will be glorified, no matter how much we stumble and fall.

And that's the Gospel truth!

Amen.