

SCRIPTURE

Luke 16:1–13

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position 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 dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

¹⁰ “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

MESSAGE - Dishonest manager

Over the summertime I was blessed with quite a bit of time off. Even when I came back into the pulpit we had some guest preachers so in the past two months I haven’t written very many sermons at all. Now some of it I’ve really missed – there were some really good Hebrew Testament scriptures that I would have loved to preach on throughout August.

It appears as though the books are about to get balanced though – after all my idyllic rest I resume the pulpit on the week of Jesus’ most confusing and challenging parable.

It is referred to as the parable of the shrewd manager, or the dishonest steward. In this parable the main character is a shyster – a lazy, conniving, self-centred manager of someone else’s treasure. He’s making his profits by mucking around with and manipulating somebody else’s money – not unlike a fund manager or those other Bay St types that many of us don’t really understand and therefore look upon with a great deal of suspicion.

Of the qualities that make a man respectable or likeable, this man has none. He hasn’t done an honest day’s labour in his life – he can’t dig, can’t sweat, isn’t able to do anything physical.

I'm not trying to denigrate folks who work with their brains rather than their bodies – after all, I'm up here in a nice suit this morning rather than mud-caked workboots. But should the occasion call for it, the suit easily gets swapped for a pair of jeans.

I don't have any qualms about unplugging a blocked toilet, rolling up my sleeves to clean out the youth room, carrying bbq's, catching bats, or climbing up into the scary pigeon infested tower. And if the day comes that I no longer have the opportunity to wear this suit to work then I will return to the factories from which I came.

The problem with the manager in this parable is not that he did mental work instead of muscle work. The problem is that he thought he was above muscle work. He was a snob. He looked down upon the tradespeople that he dealt with. Even when he was faced with losing his position and power he could not bring himself to join the ranks of men and women who come home at the end of a work day dirty and tired.

His pride is evident because not only did he forswear physical labour, but also begging. Now I think a lot of us can empathize with this – many folks find the idea of asking for help abhorrent. Our culture values independence and self-sufficiency. We don't want to appear as though we can't take care of ourselves and our families.

But sometimes it is necessary – it's a big world out there and we will come up against problems bigger than ourselves. That's when we have to have the humility and wisdom to turn to family and friends and ask for help.

This man cannot bring himself to ask for help, nor can he help himself by taking a job. He's prideful and snobbish. He is also dishonest. The text tells us that he is about to lose his job because he's been squandering his employers wealth.

I don't know exactly what squandering means in this context – he may have been embezzling, padding the books – I don't know. It is clear though that he has been serving his own interests at the expense of the rich man that he was working for.

So, not only is he dishonest, self-serving, and snobbish, when karma finally catches up with him and he's about to be tossed to the curb he doubles down on his dubious dealings and he starts even more blatantly ripping off his employer to curry favour with those very tradespeople that he disdains. He doesn't learn – when his unscrupulousness is exposed he simply continues doing the same thing, only harder and faster. Can you believe this guy?

In this parable Jesus paints a picture of a man who is despicable – a debased dirt bag, degraded, deplorable, depraved, disgusting, disreputable, and detestable. As we hear more about him we get ever more righteous and we sit on the edge of our seats waiting for him to get his comeuppance. We want him to get what he deserves.

When his master commends him for his duplicity, we're confused. It doesn't make sense. Is the rich man that immoral that he respects and is impressed by the methods of a clever scammer even when he is the victim? Does he admire the ruthless audacity of this steward who simply won't back down?

It's confusing, but then Jesus starts his commentary and interpretation of the situation and we think 'finally we'll get some satisfaction. Jesus will condemn both the manager and the rich man as both being completely terrible people, our view of reality will be reinforced and we can settle back into our righteous complacency.'

Except Jesus doesn't do that. Jesus said 'make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone they may welcome you into their eternal homes.'

So there you go. Rob Peter to pay Paul. It's in the bible.

But we know that can't be what Jesus is saying either. Surely we're not called to cheat people out of money to make friends for ourselves.

There have been a number of ways over the centuries that theologians and preachers have tried to make sense of this – often by trying to make this dodgy character seem not so bad after all.

One school of thought postulates that since charging interest was forbidden under Mosaic law that the manager was hiding interest payments by modifying the ledger. So instead of writing 'Simeon owes me 80 containers of wheat at 25% interest,' he writes down 'Simeon owes me 100 containers of wheat' but only gives him 80. Thus, when he calls in his clients and decreases their debt he is actually trying to do the right thing and make recompense for past wrongs – maybe a little like the tax collector Zacchaeus who swore to repay all the extra taxes he collected.

Some even go so far as to paint this manager as some kind of social hero who is using ethically questionable methods to help break down a financial system that was built to oppress the common people. A bit of a Wall Street Robin Hood. This is a bit of a stretch though, as the text itself tells us that his aim was not to set free all those people who were indebted to his master. Rather, by reducing their debt to the master he was trying to put them in debt to himself so that he could come and collect at a later date when he was down and out. His motivation was not altruism, but self-interest.

I don't think we can make this parable easier by trying to portray this man as a good guy in disguise. That's not what Jesus tells us about him – I think we are stuck with viewing him as a conniving man out for his own benefit.

So what is our lesson? If the lesson isn't to cheat rich folks to make friends then what is the lesson? What are we to take away?

I do have an observation. Both the rich man and his manager are like the rich fool in another of Jesus' parables. They both trust in wealth to shelter them in an uncertain future. Lots of money, lots of possessions, and lots of favours bought with that money – this is how these men seek to build homes for themselves. They are building strongholds that will protect them and their possessions. In verse four Jesus uses the Greek word *oikos* to describe such dwellings; *oikos* refers to a house, a dwelling place, or a household.

Later on, as Jesus summed up his lesson he said that those who use unrighteous wealth righteously would be welcomed into eternal homes. But this time he used a different word for home. Rather than using *oikos* which refers to an established house, he used the word *skene*. *Skene* is more properly translated as tent, tabernacle, or booth – a temporary dwelling. Yet he described these tents as eternal.

This is odd – and certainly worth investigating. One would think the words should be reversed – that our earthly homes are tents and our eternal home is a house. But it's quite clearly written the other way. Jesus is asking us to leave our constructed houses to live in tents. What could this possibly mean?

Clearly, one significant difference between a house and a tent is mobility. Houses don't move. Houses are the homes of people who have possessions and security. Even if you don't consider yourself rich, take some time to look around the house or apartment in which you live and see how much stuff you have accumulated. Every corner and every nook is crammed with things, and each of those things promises us some form of security, some element of being in control, stable, grounded.

A tent, on the other hand, is the abode of the explorer, the wanderer, or the refugee whose mobility requires the dispossession of goods. When you are on the move, you have to reassess whether the things you accumulate and carry are a benefit or a burden.

My older sons and I go camping, and when we do we camp rough. We don't rent a campsite and drive in with a big SUV full of gear – instead we strap everything on our backs and walk into the wild in search of adventure. After the first couple trips struggling in and out of snowy ravines with sixty pounds on my back I learned that a mobile lifestyle requires me to rethink what I really need.

This is a recurring theme of Jesus' teaching. Stop relying on stuff. Don't be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Stop striving and seeking after the things of this world and instead seek after God's kingdom. God knows what you need and He will provide.

It's a call to faith – a call to trust in the one who created and continues to create. We are called to exercise enough faith that we relinquish our grip on the wealth that we think will protect us in order that we would receive the true riches of treasure in heaven.

Now, we want to respond by saying 'I can't just give things away – that would be irresponsible. I have to take care of myself, you know.' But that would mean that we still don't get the lesson.

The manager spent his life screwing people out of money to line his own pockets. When he realized that the jig was up and the free ride was over he tried to buy favour with those other people.

How well do you think that worked for him? Do you suppose when he later went to collect on his favours that those people eagerly gave him money or a place to stay? Or do you think that they realized he was powerless to hold them to account and so turned him away? You can't live a life in which you take advantage of people and then think you can buy their loyalty. Worldly treasure has no lasting value.

If however, instead of relying on our wealth we hold it loosely, spending it when needed to help those around us, we store up heavenly wealth. We build character; we become generous and grow further in God's image. We learn that relationships are much more valuable than gold. When we fall on hard times, which inevitably we will, those that we have helped will freely and willingly help us. They will want to help us.

The treasures of character, relationships, and trust, though they seem intangible, are much more substantial than gold. A storm can level your house and everything in it. But your tent filled with earthly treasures moves with you. Your eternal dwelling place is dynamic, always in motion, just like the Holy Spirit.

In this somewhat odd and confusing parable Jesus is encouraging us to relinquish the possessions that possess us. He is calling us to a lifestyle of holy squandering, a lifestyle of scattering wealth rather than hoarding it, a lifestyle marked by a generosity that can only come through trust in the one who provides.

I don't preach about who you ought to give support to. That's between you and God. I'm not asking for money. You might give to a registered charity, your church, a family down the street. It could be local or on the other side of the world. It doesn't really matter.

The point of giving is to free others from their difficulties, and to free ourselves from slavery to wealth. We can't serve both God and money – the bible is so clear on that point. We need to learn to give away wealth, and that amount will be different for each of us. The test to determine if you are giving away wealth or pocket change is whether or not you will miss what you give away. If what you give doesn't make a difference to you and your life, then you can be sure that it won't make a difference to you and your life.

Whether or not we are willing to make a generous gift to someone who needs it will let us know where our loyalties lie. This is a difficult lesson and a hard revelation for some people,

but this is something that Jesus expects us to engage with. He speaks of our relationship with money more than any other topic in the New Testament.

You can serve this present age and love its treasures, or you can love God and serve him in this present age. You cannot do both. One leads to death, the other leads to life.

Jesus wants to trade in your temporary oikos for an eternal skene, a heavenly tent in which you are received not into a settled domain but into a triune life that is eternally on the move with God. The question then, is 'Whom will you serve?'