

## “The Parable of the Unjust Steward”

Luke 16:1-13

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 22, 2019

If you did a double-take when you heard that parable from Luke’s gospel – if you found yourself thinking, “Wait a sec, did Jesus just *commend* that dude for being *dishonest*?” – well, join the club. This parable has puzzled good Christians for twenty centuries now. It’s one of those that make me pull out my most trusted commentaries, the biblical interpreters who have proven time and again to be helpful when I’m staring at a passage and trying to figure out its meaning. What was Jesus trying to say, *really*?

So – just to be clear – who was Jesus taking to? A bunch of people who were hungry for the kingdom of God. People who were trying to learn from him, people trying to figure out how to live a good, faithful life. *People like us*. Had we been born in the right place at the right time, we could have been there, when Jesus said these words. God wanted folks like *us* to hear *these* words.

So ... there’s a message here, right? There’s something we’re supposed to *learn* from this, right? You bet there is. Several things, actually, because just as Jesus wraps up the parable, he offers a few bits of teaching. The parable *leads into* lessons about moral living, upright living, *faithful Christian* living.

In the parable we have a rich man, maybe an absentee landlord. He’s called “the master.” Then there’s the manager (steward), the guy that the master has put in charge of his household. Technically speaking he’s a slave to the master; he can’t just quit and leave if he feels like it. He does his master’s bidding; in return, the master gives him a place to live, food on the table, and enough money to live on. He has been entrusted with an enormous responsibility – and the master *expects* him to do a good job. Then there are a few people who owe the master some money – or, more accurately, people who owe the master some produce of the land. One owes the master a hundred jugs of olive oil. Another owes a hundred containers of wheat. The passage implies that these are just two out of several, perhaps many, people who are in the master’s debt. Maybe they borrowed money from the master, or maybe they are renting some of the master’s land, it doesn’t really matter which; the point is, they each owe the master a specific amount of *something*. One of the manager’s jobs is to keep records of who owes what.

Somebody comes to the master, claiming that the manager is guilty of mis-handling the master’s money. Embezzlement, we would call it today. The master asks the manager for an accounting of the books. An audit, if you will. If the master finds evidence of wrongdoing, then the manager is going to be in a whole lot of trouble. At the very least, he will lose his position, his livelihood, and his home.

The manager is clearly guilty. He *knows* he's about to be found out. So he concocts a plan that will endear him to the various people who are in the master's debt. He summons them, one by one, reviews their bills with them, and tells each of them to *reduce* the amount that they owe. So the guy who owes the master a hundred jugs of olive oil – well, now he just owes fifty. The guy who owes a hundred containers of wheat – now he just owes eighty. The manager does this with every single one of the debtors. Imagine if you owed \$100,000 in student loans, and the loan officer calls you privately into the office and says, "Let's change the records in the system, so that it says you only owe \$50,000!" You would have a choice to make – are you going to go along with this? How much is *integrity* worth to you?

Well, evidently, every single one of the debtors went along with the manager's scheme. He may have been skilled in the art of persuasion. All those people are effectively now in *his* debt, so that when he gets canned, some of them might be willing to take him in. If I were them, I wouldn't put this guy in charge of anything financial – but surely there are other tasks a shrewd and savvy guy could do.

To be clear: the manager has now committed *two* crimes. First, the initial embezzlement; second, this doctoring of records. Sooner or later the master finds out about this second crime. You would think that the master would condemn him for his dishonesty. But no – the master *commends* him for his *shrewdness*. He knows what the guy did, no question. He's kicking the guy out of his house, to be sure. But what the manager did at the end was *he secured a future for himself*. He could have just been canned, and have nowhere to go. But what he did results in him getting canned *and* having someplace to go. The master does not commend him for his dishonesty – don't get misled about that – the master commends him for his *cleverness*. For finding a clever way out of a really sticky situation.

Now that's the end of the parable. But Jesus tacks on it several lessons for folks like us. First: "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Jesus is drawing a contrast between the *folks who care about God* and the folks who don't. His point: *the people "out there" are more clever than you are!* No surprise, really, when you stop to think about it; think of all the scams we hear about in the news, and the scams that never make the news because they were so carefully carried out that the bad guys got away with them. Jesus is saying, "Be careful. There are people out there who will take advantage of you if you let them." In another place, he tells his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." That is, *do the right thing*, but be aware that there are all kinds of people out there who *don't* do the right thing. Just because *you* are good and honest doesn't mean you should be naïve and think that everyone else is too.

Second: "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." This is the line that really gets to people. Is Jesus saying that *we should be dishonest, like that dishonest manager was?* No. What he's saying here has to do with the dishonest manager's success in finding a *home* to go to after he no longer had a home. *We need to be concerned that we will have a home to go to when we no longer have a home.* That is – when we no longer have a home here on earth, when our day of death comes, *do we have an eternal home to go to? A home in heaven?* The manager knew that he had created a situation (through his dishonest wealth) that put his future in *serious* jeopardy. It was at that critical moment that he *made friends with the right people*. There come those critical moments in our lives when we need to make friends with the

right people. Those moments when someone who is lost or homeless (maybe because of dishonest wealth) makes a new friend – a *Christian* friend – who can lead them towards an eternal home with God. Now I realize the details here seem different – those guys who owed the master money were perfectly happy to be dishonest themselves – but the basic point is: *you need to be concerned about having an eternal home to go to. Make friends with people who can lead you closer towards God.*

The third lesson is this: “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.” This one is more straightforward. How you handle the *little* things is an indicator of how you handle the *big* things. Does your desire to be faithful and honest apply to the *whole* of your life, or just *parts* of it? Do you *say* you believe in God, come to church, praise God’s name, and yet all the while are lying or stealing or violating any of God’s other commandments regularly in your daily, private life at home? God cares about the *details* of our lives. If we can get the little details of our life in good order, then the bigger ones are going to fall into place. Jesus says, “If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” If you can’t even manage things you have gained dishonestly, why would God want to entrust you with the *real* reward? “And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” If you can’t take care of other people’s property that has been entrusted to you, why would God want to give you the eternal inheritance that Jesus bought for you?

Fourth, and finally: “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.” This has to do with being *all-in* for God, especially where our money is concerned. We all need housing, clothes, food, a basic income. But sometimes, when people come into wealth, a selfish tendency can creep in. We spend more and more on ourselves, and give a proportionally smaller amount back to God. You make a hundred thousand dollars a year? How much of that are you giving away? You make a *million*? How much of *that* are you giving away? The tithe is the *minimum* amount that any of us should be giving back to God – the ten percent that God asks for. The first check we should write every month. Offerings are on top of the tithe – additional money you give away. If you’re bringing in fifty thousand dollars a year, five thousand is the *minimum* you should be giving. *Find a way to make your budget work!* You may have to make some cuts that feel like sacrifices. Listen, those sacrifices are nothing compared to the sacrifice Jesus made for you. He’s not asking you to sacrifice your *life* – just some *comforts* that you don’t really *need*. Nearly half of the world’s population lives on less than \$2,000 a year. Seventy percent lives on less than \$10 a day. There is no reason why *anyone* who earns even just \$10,000 a year shouldn’t be figuring out a way to give a tenth of it back to God. Even *that* person is wealthy compared to most of the world! Everything that we possess – every single dollar that we bring in, whether through income or investments – *comes as a gift from God*. He asks us to use it *responsibly*. Not greedily. Not selfishly. God invites us to cultivate a *spirit of generosity*. It feels *good* to give! There is absolutely nothing wrong with being *wealthy*. But there is *everything* wrong with being *greedy*. Start with a tithe. Increase from there as you are able and feel moved. Don’t think that you’re serving God faithfully if you’re not following God’s principles when it comes to money. You cannot serve *both* the idol called “greed” *and* the God who calls you to be generous. “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

© 2019 Rev. Bill Pinches