

Jesus the Contrarian: THE SHREWD MANAGER

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Luke 16:1-13

This is a troubling parable. Why would Jesus tell such a story? Is He rewarding dishonesty? This manager seems incompetent at best and at worst, a crook. (What does “*wasting his possessions*,” mean?) When he learns he will be fired, he thinks he is too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg. It is commendable that he thinks ahead. He comes up with a plan to curry favor after he is terminated. When the master discovers the manager’s deceptive practice, he does not condemn, but commends. Is Jesus saying the end justify the means? Part of our difficulty in reading Scripture is trying to understand the context, such as a culture with practices far different from our own. Two possible explanations of this story are: First, it could be about the OWNER’S dishonesty. Charging interest (“*usury*”) was forbidden under Jewish law. However, as with Sabbath laws, it could be cleverly bypassed. If the manager’s actions revealed the master’s usury, the master would be put to shame. The only thing he could do to save face was to applaud the manager. Second, it could be that since the manager earned his living by inflating the bill with a commission, he could have simply eliminated his commission. He and the owner would both look generous.

Jesus’ point in the parable is about having a good plan for the use of money. Tithing (one-tenth of one’s income) is the Old Testament model. It started with Abraham’s recognition of “the priest of God,” Melchizedek. At the end of the Old Testament, Malachi asks those who are not tithing, “*Will man rob God?*” The New Testament emphasizes giving generously (2 Corinthians 9:7). A tithe is a great example, but the grace of Jesus far surpasses the Law. We want to follow HIS example.

APPLICATION: Most of us struggle with finances. How foolish/wise are you about money? How stingy/generous are you with the Lord and with others? A good practice is the 10/10/80 plan: 10% goes to the Lord, 10% goes to long term savings (i.e., “I.R.A.”) and 80% to live on. “Automation is our friend.” Using bill pay, even for giving, saves time and money. Next Sunday is our “Commitment Sunday. It seems contrary to give to God first and trust in His provision, but if we seek God’s kingdom first, these other things will be given to us, too (Matthew 6:33). Begin asking the Lord how He would direct you to steward your money.

Today we look at the 2nd of 3 sermons on “Jesus the Contrarian.” This parable is as contrarian as last week’s (the Laborer’s) as Jesus commends a dishonest manager. However, just like last week, let’s look at the context of this parable (Luke 16:1-14 - p 1040).

Luke 15 concerns lost objects: a sheep (99/100 = safe), coin (9/10 are not lost), and a boy (BOTH are lost). Things and people can be lost in different ways. But God’s heart is evident – as

in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, God's heart is redemption – to find that which is lost and bring it to safety.

Luke 16:1-13 (p 1040) *He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money." ¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.*

I hope you've read our notes in the bulletin. Here are two possible explanations.

1) **"USUARY"** was the practice of charging interest. It was forbidden for a Jew to charge interest to another Jew. However, the Jewish people often seemed looking for loopholes. They claimed the law was only to protect those who were destitute. If you had a **little** oil/wheat you weren't destitute, so interest could be charged. Since most everyone had a little oil/wheat, interest could be charged for everyone. Whatever the interest rate was added to the total bill, but you didn't see two separate bills (repayment + interest), it was rolled into one. Maybe the manager deducted the interest from the total bill and was actually putting the owner in a difficult position of having to explain things. The owner couldn't protest the "illegal" actions of the manager when the interest charged was illegal in itself.

2) Jesus commended someone who **TOOK ACTION** in the midst of a crisis. This is not a normal business practice, but this happened during an exceptional event. Jesus didn't commend the man for dishonesty, he complimented him for being shrewd. This guy is a lazy, lying, good-for-nothing servant who has no skills or abilities other than one – he's shrewd. In Matthew 10, Jesus sent out His disciples and told them to be "wise as serpents & harmless as doves." A serpent is an image of the devil, and a dove is an image of the Holy Spirit. Jesus figured out how things worked and tipped the balance in His favor. That's being wise.

v1 Jesus speaks to the disciples, but the Pharisees were listening in (v 14). The storyline is - a manager was accused of “wasting” (same word with the prodigal and what he also did) his master’s possessions. The manager was sloppy or careless in accounting or was actually pilfering & misappropriating funds. The owner fired him. (If you’ve ever been fired, laid off, or downsized, you know it’s difficult.)

v3 The manager had physical limitations and couldn’t dig ditches and was too proud to beg, so he came up with an different plan. The phrase, “*I have decided*” means “Aha! I’ve got it!”

v5 Secrecy = the key. He couldn’t let others know about what was going on. The 1st owed 100 measures of olive oil. That’s about 875 gallons. One commentator said it was about 800 gallons and would be the yield of 146 olive trees. That’s a huge debt. The manager said to cut the bill in half – make it 50.

v7 The 2nd owes 100 measures of wheat –about 1,000 bushels – or the yield from 100 acres. He cut the bill to 80.

v8 The master didn’t seem angry – but he commended the manager for being shrewd. Obviously, he couldn’t like losing money, but his mouth was shut had he been charging usuary, too. If the parable is not about charging interest, then we can interpret it that the master was simply impressed by what the manager had done.

v9 The punch line. Jesus’ followers must use their money for spiritual and eternal purposes as wisely as their secular counterparts are using it for material gain. Jesus tells His disciples to use money for the kingdom of heaven. After all, what good was all that money back then worth now?

v10-13 Jesus #1 topic = “the kingdom of heaven.” His #2 favorite topic = money. Money is a spiritual power that like fire, can either cook our meal or burn down our home.

Our use of money often shapes the direction of our hearts. Finances are a means to an end. It is also a great indicator of how grace is operating in someone’s life. A person who does not give their money is not generous. A person who does not give their money is not responding in an appropriate way to grace. We do not earn grace by giving, but we show that it is in our hearts when we do. Something my mom taught me – “Before you cash the check (for a gift), you write a thank you note.” Giving is not a solicitation for more – it is a response of gratitude for what has been given. To not say “thank you” to the Lord is rude, stingy, and disrespectful. When we say “thank you” to someone who has given to us, it releases joy. It’s almost like receiving the gift twice.

Jesus’ comments about money from this text:

1) **Use it for eternal good** (don’t squander/waste it). “**Our money**” belongs to God not to us. We cannot take it with us when we die. That money will go somewhere. We should use our money to influence others for God’s kingdom. Thank you for supporting our Asbury Seminary satellite. By investing in our students’ theological education, we’ll have 40-50 years of return on investment from them as they minister in churches. That is what money is for!

2) **Be faithful with what you have now.** Be trustworthy even in the “little” things. Next week we’ll look at the story of the widow giving her small coin (“the mite”). Jesus commended an extremely poor woman, not the rich. She was faithful in the little things.

3) **Be devoted to God, not money** (only one can be your master). We can't serve 2 masters. We can't **love** God and money. We cannot be devoted to God AND to money. It is always about the heart. Developing our **affections** includes money & finances. Is the way you are using your money shaping your heart toward God or away? Is God sovereign over your money?

I've given two possible explanations of the story (the owner was guilty of usury and couldn't condemn; or he was pleased that the manager showed initiative, was an innovative and creative problem solver). But maybe there is a third explanation as to what this story was about.

v14-15 Who is lurking around? The **Pharisees** heard the story but didn't like it. Just as the prodigal son parable was about the love of the father for both his sons, so this is the same message. Like the older son, the Pharisees had small and misshapen hearts. They tried to live according to the letter of the law. Their response shows they were not fans. Luke says they were "lovers of money" and they "ridiculed him" (scoffed). Jesus told them: "God knows your hearts." They weren't fooling anybody.

To enter the KOG we must enter in a different way. 2 kingdoms are clashing: Their kingdom = power, prestige, and finance. Jesus' kingdom was about humility, service, generosity.

Jesus is a contrarian. Not that He's grumpy, but that His perspective is different from culture. Secular culture tells us to ignore God, walk over people, and try to grab all we can. Jesus' way is to love God, love others, and learn generosity.

The manager, like the Prodigal, knew he had a problem and **didn't justify** himself. He needed a solution. The father told the prodigal, "**Congratulations** – you figured it out." The owner said "Congratulations – you figured it out." The older brother, like the Pharisees, never understood that they have a problem. In fact, they felt the Father (Jesus) was being absurd and was worthy of ridicule, contempt, and scorn.

Our application? Don't self-justify. There are 2 types of people: Those who justify themselves and those who admit they have a problem. Don't be self-righteous. Recognize our need. We've all come up short. We can deny, argue, or try to self-justify OR we can take action. What action do we need to take? To follow Jesus is to develop our hearts for the kingdom of heaven and for the one who can give true riches.

We learn to live in the righteousness of God in Christ, not in the unrighteousness of the prodigal or the manger; or the self-righteousness of the older brother and the Pharisees. Luke 15 tells us to open our hearts to grace. Luke 16 tells us to use our money to receive and give grace. Jesus said to give.

Next week we have the opportunity to bring a commitment card to the altar. I want to challenge you to become a giver. We must begin somewhere. This is an opportunity to look at our financial giving. Just as the manager investigated his finances, so should we with ours.