

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 4: THAT CONNIVING BUSINESSMAN

(LUKE 16:1-13)

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Luke 16:1-13

THAT CONNIVING BUSINESSMAN

1

LUKE 16:1-13

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.' 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.' And 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.'

2

LUKE 16:1-13

The master commended the dishonest steward 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 mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations. "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, 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 mammon."

3

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS STORY?

1) The story's own logic:

- The master of the story "commends" the dishonest manager! (8a)
- It is calculated that the reduction of liability to each of these characters was about 500 denarii a piece.
- If about 200 denarii was a subsistence wage on which a family of 6 could survive, then . . .
- The owner lost 5 years of such a wage: he was swindled to the tune of \$100,000-150,000.

And he praised his manager?

4

WHAT IS (WRONG WITH THIS STORY?)

2) Jesus' application of the story:

- Jesus uses an act of blatant dishonesty (if it was) in his moral instruction! (8b).
- But how can this dishonest action be a model in Jesus' kingdom of righteousness?

5

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS STORY?

3) Jesus' own application of the parable:

- Making friends with money?! (v. 9). Is that any way to "make friends?"
- Eternal habitations?! Is eternity really secured by money?

6

THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT: INTERPRETIVE PROPOSALS

1. It was not the debt but interest forgiven.
2. It was not the master's debt but the manager's commission foregone.
3. The manager "loosens up" the master from his former austere and respectable ways, such that he learns to take a joke, to laugh in the face of adversity, ultimately to forgive.
4. The steward backed his master into a corner.
5. The master's praise of the manager is sarcastic.

7

IS THERE AN ANSWER?

Yes . . .
. . . the parable is just as bad as it looks.

8

DOES THE COMMENDATION MAKE ANY SENSE?

1. Commendation does not necessarily mean approval. For what is the steward commended?
2. The master grudgingly concedes the manager's shrewdness (8a).
3. Jesus forcefully commends the manager's shrewdness (*phronimos*; 8b-9), while the Lukan context rejects his dishonesty (10-13).

9

THE PARABLE APPLIED: PART 1 (V. 8B)

- What is “shrewdness” (*φρονιμός*, *phronimos*)?
- *phronimos* = cagey wisdom, street smarts, situational savvy; it is not intrinsically shady or morally questionable
- Compare **Matthew 10:16** “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise (*phronimos*) as serpents and innocent as doves.”
- Jesus’ point is that “worldly” folks know what it is to be *phronimos* in that “economy” – but what is *phronimos* in the economy of the kingdom of God?

10

THE PARABLE APPLIED: PART 2 (V. 9)

- “unrighteous wealth” (lit. “unrighteous mammon”) = mere worldly currency
- “when it fails” = when worldly currency has no more value in the age to come
- “make friends for yourselves” = by concrete acts of charity (esp., e.g., Jewish almsgiving)
- “eternal dwellings” = in the age to come (in contrast to mere temporal dwellings of v. 4)

11

THE PARABLE APPLIED: PART 2 (V. 9)

- V. 9 is the key to the interpretation of the parable.
- Notice that it is a clear parallel to the soliloquy of v. 4.
 - The instruction is to be shrewd (not dishonest) with material resources like the dishonest steward.
 - But rather than securing an earthly future, this use of material resources has eternal implications (“eternal habitations”).

12

THE PARABLE APPLIED: PART 3 (10-12)

Luke 16:10-12:

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.¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

13

A THEOLOGY OF MONEY: KINGDOM ECONOMY

Worldly Wealth

very little

unrighteous mammon

another's

Eschatological Reward

much

true riches

your own

14

THE PARABLE APPLIED

Thus, together, vv. 8b-12 teach us to be "shrewd" (though not dishonest)

V. 9 applies that lesson specifically to material resources.

- If money is merely temporal . . .
- If eternity (for someone) hangs in the balance . . .
- The shrewd thing to do with our money is . . .
to get rid of it!

15

THE PUNCHLINE

The shrewdest thing to do with money is to spend someone else's to secure our own future!

- The unjust steward spent his master's money to secure his future.
- The disciple of Jesus spent the Lord's money toward eternal consequences.

16

CAN WE BUY OUR WAY TO HEAVEN?!

No!

- But our use of money is one of the most reliable indicators of the authenticity of our faith.
- Radical generosity with temporal resources is one of the surest indicators of genuine trust in God.
- A life committed to acquisition and hoarding and indifference to the poor is a life of practical atheism.

17

CAN WE BUY OUR WAY TO HEAVEN?!

John Wesley:

- “Make as much as you can.”
- “Save as much as you can.”
- “Give as much as you can.”

18

THE PARABLE APPLIED: PART 4 (V. 13)

¹³ 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.

Mammon and God = The Great "Either/Or"
