

Are You Trustworthy

Luke 16:1-13

¹ 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."

There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and he wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his plea and appears to him. "Sorry, but you can't take your wealth with you." The man implores the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules.

The man continues to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappears and informs the man that God has decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him.

Overjoyed, the man gathers his largest suitcase and fills it with pure gold bars and places it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man dies and shows up at the Gates of Heaven to greet St. Peter. St. Peter seeing the suitcase says, "Hold on, you can't bring that in here!"

But, the man explains to St. Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story

with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checks and comes back saying, "You're right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through."

St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaims, "You brought pavement?!!!"

In our scripture last Sunday and again this Sunday, Jesus talked a great deal about our relationship with money and our stewardship of God's resources. Last week Jesus told parables of God's relationship with a lost sheep or a lost coin, and how we are so important to God that we are sought until we are found. Today's parable is not so easy to understand.

None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like the story of the dishonest steward (or is he better labeled "the shrewd manager" or "the prudent treasurer"?). The story is clearly set in a context in which wealth is of paramount importance. Luke 16 begins with an acknowledgment of a rich man whose manager was accused of "squandering his property" (v. 1). The disciples are warned that they cannot "serve God and wealth" (v. 13). In the midst of the chapter we are told of "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (v. 14) and who sneered at Jesus. The chapter closes with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (vv. 19-31). So the topic clearly has to do with money,

A wealthy man had a financial manager, who was "squandering" or "mismanaging" his resources. When it became obvious that he would lose his job, he said to himself, "I am not strong enough to dig for a living, and I am too ashamed to beg." Clearly a shrewd character, he called in two men, who owed his master olive oil and wheat, and asked each of them to reduce the amount owed the master. Whether the two men had their customary cut reduced, or simply had lowered the amount owed the master, is impossible to tell. In either case, they would have to repay less, and thus the manager had successfully placed them in his debt. Of course, the time of reckoning came when

the wealthy man discovered what his manager had done and, in a shocking dramatic climax, commended him for it.

Jesus then applied the lesson for his disciples, claiming that children of this world deal more shrewdly with their generation than the children of light with theirs. Then he, ironically, concluded by urging the hearers to make friends for themselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into "the eternal homes" (v. 9).

The problem is, What has the manager been up to, and what has he done to earn the praise of the master? Was he a shrewd character, who was cheating his master by reducing the amount of interest on loans his master had made? In doing so, he could have reduced the size of the indebtedness by excluding the interest, which was forbidden according to Deuteronomy 23:19-20. If so, he could have been acting righteously as well as shrewdly. Or could the manager have acted wisely in reducing the indebtedness by the amount that he would have made? If so, he could have forfeited his commission but in the process saved his own face and gained the favor of the debtors. Each of these two options makes it easier to grasp the commendation of the master (v. 8).

The concluding sayings of Jesus in verses 10-13 underscore the relationship between the material possessions we have and what we do with them. Faithfulness and responsibility are the qualities specified. Ironically Jesus asks, How will friends made from dishonest wealth be able to welcome them into the "eternal homes"? "You cannot serve God and wealth" (v. 13).

We acknowledge that the manager responded to a crisis appropriate to his circumstances. As Johnson argues, "In other words, the manager is praised for having the qualities of a manager! It is this quality of responsiveness rather than the possible morality of the action that is the object of praise." The cleverness the children of light are to develop is precisely that they confront and contend with the issues of their own generation, particularly in the matter of material goods. The people of "this age" are

cleverer with respect to the crises facing them than are the children of light with respect to "what is prized" by them (v. 15). It is not clear what specific behaviors Jesus had in mind. What Jesus did instead was reiterate a truth from Israel's history: God knows the hearts of God's people, and what humans prize has become "an abomination in the sight of God" (v. 15).

Verse 13 puts the issue in plain view: "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." I am not saying there is anything basically wrong with having money, but are we trustworthy. Do we use money to the glory of God or is it just about comfort for me and mine! If we are not careful in our motivations, we can quickly find ourselves in trouble. Stewardship can turn to greed. Greed can quickly turned into idolatry, with the result that the basic confession of Israel has been broken (see Exod. 20:1-3; Deut. 6:4-9). A god other than *YHWH* has become the object of Israel's affection. Mammon is served rather than the God who led them out of Egypt. **Charles B. Cousar**

Perhaps Jesus told this parable to call us to disperse wealth as the steward did, but in order to be dispossessed of the desire that our gifting produce the benefit of indebting others to us—indeed, to be dispossessed of the illusion that wealth gives us security and stability. Only as we are freed by our holy squandering are we made able to live the pilgrim life of those nomads who have relinquished the possessions that possess them. As Walter Brueggemann notes, one of the central insights of the gospel is the paradox that "letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose." This parable, in a roundabout way, brings us back to this insight and so reinforces the words of Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." In light of this reading, the call to be "faithful" in 16:10-12 is precisely the call to have faith in the one who provides—enough faith to relinquish our grip on the wealth we think will protect us in order to receive the "true riches" (16:11) of the "unfailing treasure in heaven" (12:33).

Jesus made some things extremely clear: "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."

On Friday and Saturday I watched a program called "Tiny House Nation." The purpose of building a tiny house is to give up the stuff that ties us to our houses. The participants have to downsize their possessions and live in a space that is smaller than a mobile home. Usually there are no interior doors, limited storage space, and the building itself is small enough to move from place to place pulled by a pick-up truck. I believe Jesus would be pleasure with the concept of tiny house nation, because Jesus calls us to be good stewards of the things God has given us, not to horde, but to share and use to God's glory. I am aware there are some opportunities to be trustworthy stewards in the next two weeks. First we can give to our Reconciliation offering, which is designed to break down the sins of racism and classism. We can also make a donation or pledge to Flint CROP Walk with a goal of solving the issues of hunger in Flint and beyond. Third, you can support Cammie as she walks to find a cure for breast cancer! Maybe none of these appeal to you, but remember all the resources you have are given to you by God and the way you use money tells God whether your praise is genuine or just lip-service.

The problem with the unjust steward is not that he "gifted" his master's debtors (even his master commends him for this), but that his gifting was poisoned by the ulterior motive of receiving something back from those to whom he gave. Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the man's scattering of wealth in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange—an "eternity" in God's presence.

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Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C,
Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).