

Who is Your Maser?

Luke 16:1-13

Sometimes the Gospel of Luke shares a story or a parable that just leaves us scratching our heads. None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like this 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. The story begins with an acknowledgment of a rich man whose manager was accused of "squandering his property" (v. 1). The disciples were warned that they cannot "serve God and wealth." In the next verse, not in our reading, we are told of "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" and who sneered at Jesus. The chapter closes with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. So the topic clearly has to do with money, and our use of it.

So the story goes...a wealthy man had a financial manager, who was "squandering" or was he "mismanaging" his resources. When it became obvious that the manager 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." He was unlike the people we see at intersections in major cities holding signs: WILL WORK FOR FOOD. 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, we don't know for sure. In either case, they were to repay less, and thus the manager 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 his hearers to make friends for themselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it was gone, they might welcome you into "the eternal homes" (v. 9).

The problem is: What had the manager been up to, and what had he done to earn the praise of the master? Was he a shrewd character, who was bilking 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 anyway according to Deuteronomy 23:19-20. If so, he could have been acting righteously as well as shrewdly; as Jews were not to gain interest from other Jews. Or maybe the manager acted wisely in reducing the indebtedness by the amount that he would have made for his cut. Then 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 for us to grasp the commendation of the master, and Jesus' advice to the children of light was a warning about them and the use of wealth.

But let's look at this in another way. Another option is that the manager simply acted dishonestly with regard to his master and cut down on the indebtedness of those who owed money to put a feather in his own cap. This makes sense of the details of the story, as we read it, but makes it difficult to understand why the manager was commended by his master. Why then was the "dishonest manager" commended for acting shrewdly, and made an example for us, the "children of light"?

We must acknowledge that the manager responded to a crisis appropriate to his circumstances. As commentator 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 we confront and contend with the issues of our 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. What specific behaviors did Jesus have in mind here? Was it the kind of community of goods the earliest Christian community of Acts would embody? Jesus did not specify. What he 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."

While it is a compelling story, the ending is anything but satisfying, because instead of being defeated, this scoundrel triumphs. His plan succeeds. His former boss, the one whose estate he has previously mismanaged, now praises him for being ingenious. We sigh in disbelief that the manager does not get his due. If we are not careful, the lesson is lost. Adding to the insult, there is still one last surprise. The parable ends by saying: The scoundrel gets it. Believers do not get it!

This "how much more ..." where this manager, this person of questionable character, understood something that "children of light" have had difficulty grasping: dishonest or not, this man understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger goal. Believers, take note! How much more, then, must the children of God understand the riches entrusted to our care?

With the end in mind, the manager redeemed whatever he could about his present situation. He understood that, in order to be where he wanted to be in the future, how he handled today counted. **Helen Montgomery Debevoise**

Although we may not clearly understand all the implications of this parable, the concluding sayings of Jesus underscores the relationship between the material possessions we have and what we do with them. Faithfulness and responsibility are the qualities specified. Ironically Jesus asked: How will friends made from dishonest wealth be able to welcome them into the "eternal homes"? "You cannot serve God and wealth" (v. 13).

Jesus weaves a story in which the main character is a shyster—a lazy, conniving, self-centered manager of someone else's treasure. He is out for personal gain, to save his own skin. We listeners lean forward to the end because we want to see this scoundrel get what is coming to him, and when the master finally speaks, we are shocked.

Our scripture 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." Greed can quickly turn into idolatry, with the result that the basic confession of Israel had been broken. A god other than *YHWH* has become the object of Israel's affection. Mammon was served rather than the God who led them out of Egypt. **Charles B. Cousar**

1 Timothy 6:6-12 tells us about wealth in a slightly different way:

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

So question for us is: who is your master? How do we use the gifts God has given you? Serving God means that loving people is always the bottom line. So Jesus' closing words are certainly an apt summation of what Jesus is so ardently and adamantly trying to get across: you cannot serve God and wealth (v. 13). **G.**

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The wealth we have been given is to be used in God's service. Jesus said we must be faithful with the little to be trusted with more. Giving ourselves first to God will mean that we come with our money, and our talents, and our time. All of these are to be put to use in God's service. God wants to be master. Make God your master!

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