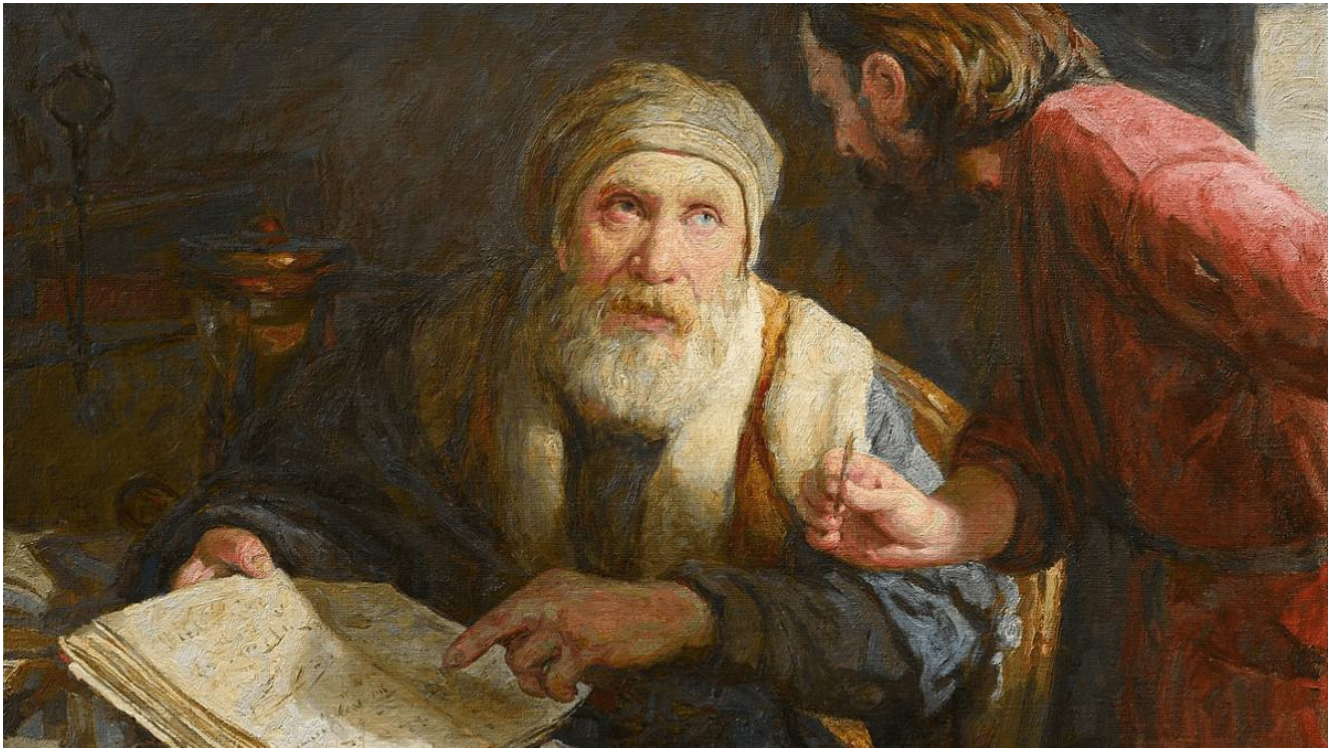


The Dishonest Steward



Parable of the Unjust Steward | A.N. Mironov | Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 4.0

¹ Then he also said to his disciples, “A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. ² He summoned him and said, ‘What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.’ ³ The steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ He called in his master’s debtors one by one. To the first he said, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He replied, ‘One hundred measures of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.’ ⁷ Then to another he said, ‘And you, how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘One hundred kors of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.’ ⁸ And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. “For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. ¹⁰ The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. ¹¹ If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? ¹² If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Luke 16:1-13)

There was a rich man

Swirling in the milieu of our readings are themes of riches, reversals, and hospitality. Chapter 16 of Luke forms an interesting literary grouping. The chapter begins with a parable (the dishonest steward) and ends with a parable (Lazarus and the rich man). Each parable begins with “There was a rich man...” Between the two parables is the identification of the audience, “the Pharisees, who loved

money...” It’s easy to lose the manner in which Jesus has been warning against the lure of possessions:

- renouncing the greed of the Pharisees and the challenge to give alms (11:39-41),
- the rich fool who forfeited his soul for wealth (12:13-21),
- the prudent servant who was praised (12:42-48),
- the warnings of chapter 12 on how to prepare for the final accounting,
- the outcasts called to the great banquet (14:15-42),
- giving up all one’s possessions to be a disciple of Jesus (14:33),
- the prodigal son (15:14-32), and
- now the dishonest steward (16:1-13)

Joel Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 587) also sets this chapter within a larger context:

Many have noted how the opening parable of ch. 16 is related to the parable of 15:11-32 [The Prodigal Son], especially in terms of vocabulary and style. Both, for example, begin with a reference to “a certain person” (15:11; 16:1), have central characters who “squander” property (15:13; 16:3) and encounter life-threatening choices (15:15-17; 16:3), narrate the surprising action of the “certain person” mentioned in the opening verse (15:20-24; 16:8), and so on. More consistently overlooked is the interesting parallel that develops between the younger son of 15:13-24 and Lazarus the beggar in 16:21-23. Although the prior autobiography of Lazarus is missing, both come to be portrayed as inhabitants of the cesspool of social status only to have their lots dramatically reversed. The structural similarities between chs. 15 and 16 remind Luke’s audience that the immediate backdrop of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples in ch. 17 is his portrayal of table fellowship as an appropriate means for including such outsiders as toll collectors and sinners in the community of the lost-but-found. In ch. 16, Jesus grounds this message about table fellowship more fundamentally in his overall teaching about possessions: Wealth should be used to welcome another cluster of outsiders, the poor who are incapable of reciprocating with invitations of their own or of helping to advance one’s own status.

Already in Luke 14 the Pharisees and scribes had been advised to reconsider their cultural understanding of hospitality and replace it with one attuned to the Reign of God. In Luke 15 Jesus teaches about hospitality in God’s kingdom where table fellowship with the marginal is the measure of righteousness. Here in Luke 16 “Jesus weaves together the motifs of almsgiving (and, thus possessions) and friendship in order to demonstrate further the comportment toward the poor expected of” those oriented to the Kingdom of God. Faithfulness to God is demonstrated in hospitality to the poor and the creation of friendships across social boundaries. Such faithfulness is blessed with an eternal home (16:9).

Stewards

Jesus returns to the theme of use of wealth; the chapter begins and ends with parables. The story of the scheming steward has been a problem for interpreters, hence its reputation as one of the most difficult parables to interpret. The root problem is the commendation (v.8) of the steward who is so plainly dishonest.

The figure of the steward has some significance in Christian thinking regarding one’s relationship with God. In the OT, a steward could be a chief slave/servant put in charge of a master’s household or property (Gen 43:16, 19; 44:1, 4; Is 22:15). Joseph was a steward in the house of the Pharaoh (Gen 39:4-5). The earth is the Lord’s house (Ps 24) and Moses is his steward (Num 12:7; Heb 3:1-6). In Jesus’ parables, stewards are expected to invest their talents and when fruitful are given even greater responsibilities (Lk 19:12-27).

Episcopoi are called stewards (Titus 1:5-9) and are expected to possess holy qualities as they manage the household of God. The apostle Paul also saw himself as a steward (1 Cor. 4:1-2) who would have to give an account of his stewardship (1 Cor. 4:3-4; cf. 2 Tim. 4:7-8) as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:2; Gal. 2:7-8; Rom. 1:5-6; 13-15). There is also a sense in which every Christian is a steward entrusted with a divine gift (1 Pet. 4:10).

These are just some of the images of stewards that part of the Christian imagination regarding the understanding of stewards.

Using Wealth to Make Friends

The story begins when charges are brought to the rich man that the steward was squandering the rich man's property. Similar to the rich fool (12:17), the steward begins an internal dialogue: "*What shall I do?*" (See the "Note" on Luke 16:1 below) Clearly the steward does not like his options: *I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg*" (v.3). He thus concocts a plan to be welcomed into another rich man's home once he has been dismissed from his current position. As the parable unfolds we see that the steward quickly decides and acts and goes about reducing an established debt owed to his current employers. The first debtor owes 900 gallons of oil; the second owes a huge amount of grain. These are well beyond household quantities and reflect a commercial operation.

Since the steward is technically still the rich man's agent, the rich man is bound and will not be able to reverse the steward's actions without a loss of face with the debtors. Meanwhile the steward will have acquired a debt of honor and gratitude that hopefully will ensure goodwill toward the steward in the future.

That is the "who" and "what" of the story. The difficulties about the "why" begin to come to the fore when the parable continues: "*And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently*" (v.8). Brian Stoffregen has surveyed the scholarly works and offers several models of interpretation for this notoriously difficult parable:

1. The point of the parable is not the servant's dishonesty, but his wise decision-making in the time of crisis. As Tannehill (Luke) states: "...a distinction is drawn between his dishonesty, which is not being commended, and his shrewdness, which is" (p. 247). His whole future depended on quick thinking and immediate actions. So the servant is presented as an example of decisive thinking and acting to save himself. Thus when even dishonest worldly people know how and when to take decisive action, how much more should those who follow Jesus know and decide such things.

2. The servant is a man of the world, who works and thinks with diligence to protect his interest. What if all people would have the same commitment to the kingdom as they do towards their work or hobbies?

3. The parable may be an irony. The idea that the master would commend this servant for such unjust behavior is so absurd that no one would believe it. It's a story about a cheater who expects to be commended for his dishonest actions. Understood this way, perhaps Jesus is attacking the Sadducees or Pharisees. The Sadducees cheated a little on the Mosaic Law, so that they might fit in better with the Roman government. Do they expect to be praised by God for doing that? The Pharisees made a big show of giving a little money to the poor. Do they expect to be praised by God for making these token contributions? You can't be a nominal Christian. You can't carry the name "Christian," and commit little wrongs here and there and expect God's praise. You are not to act like this steward.

4. There are suggestions that the steward was acting within his legal rights in reducing the debts as he did. Wealthy landowners would sublet their land to men like this steward. The steward would let out the work to other workers. Sometimes the steward would loan the workers money and charge an exorbitant interest. So, in the parable, the steward is canceling his high interest on the note given to the

workers. This becomes a parable against excessive profits. It is the same kind of judgment uttered by Amos in the thematic First Lesson (Amos 8:4-7). People are more important than excessive profits.

In a variation of this idea John Donahue offers that the steward has been required to administer an unjust practice of the owner who requires loaning money and commodities at unjust levels. Thus the steward, realizing his termination is in sight, takes the opportunity, while still able to act as business agent, to undo this wrong. Thus it is for this reason the steward is praised. This idea is tempting but one must deal with the description of the steward as “dishonest” (*ádikos*, unrighteous). One would have to assume that in reducing the debts the steward is in the process of reforming his own life and a prelude to receiving hospitality from one of the debtors.

A corollary of this line of thought, given that the rich in Luke’s gospel have largely not fared well, is it surprising that a “shrewd” owner might well approve of such marginal actions.

5. The parable can be about the right and wrong use of money. If the steward or the master were charging a high rate of interest, money may have been the most important thing in their lives. Jesus says to make friends with your money -- use it rightly. Use it for human services. The steward gains friends by sharing his profits and helping out the poor debtors. He is our example. Our profits should be used in the service of love -- helping to ease the plight of the poor. Otherwise, they can compete with God for our allegiance. This understanding anticipates the parable (Lazarus and the Rich Man) which ends the chapter.

6. Related to the right and wrong use of money, another approach might center on the word for “squander” (*diaskorpizo*). The same word is used concerning the “prodigal son” (15:13). However, the literal meaning of the word is “to scatter” (see Luke 1:51). It is used of “scattering” seed (Mt 25:24, 26). By extension, the word was applied to money -- the “scattering” of money = “wasting” money or perhaps, “throwing it away.” Some have even suggested “failing to make a profit” or “sloppy record keeping.” What makes such “scattering” wasteful? I think it’s because there is no hope of any return on the “investment” -- like scattering seeds where they won’t grow. Perhaps, it is the rich man’s greed -- always wanting to increase his wealth that is a fault and the manager’s shrewd use of money to make friends revealed another use.

7. The use of this life’s goods to secure hospitality in the future. By reducing their loan agreements so generously, the manager has done these debtors a significant favor; because he is still this wealthy man’s manager, moreover, his agreements with these debtors are binding. In this way, the manager has entered into his own patronal relationship with his master’s debtors, apparently themselves also persons of means. He has become their benefactor and, in return, can expect them to reciprocate by extending to him the hospitality of their homes. The manager has thus taken advantage of his now-short-lived status, using the lag time during which he was to make an accounting of his management (v. 2) and his position to arrange for his future. (Green, 592-3).

A Suggestion: As with most parables, there are many layers of meaning – as Stöffregen has shown – but overall, one should always give weight to the simple explanations – in this case, the steward is dishonest and he continues to squander his master’s goods. Yet his actions cast an aura of honesty and goodness on his master and shrewdly provided for his own future. As did the steward, Jesus urges his disciples to be even more vigilant and seize the moment to make provisions for their future before God. The kingdom is at hand!

Lessons

The teaching portion uses parallel opposites – trustworthy/dishonest, dishonest wealth/true wealth, small/great, what belongs to another/what belongs to you. Verse 13 forms a conclusion to the parable formed by an:

- An opening assertion - *No servant can serve two masters*
- Two supporting observations - *He will either hate one and love the other; or be devoted to one and despise the other*
- The conclusion - *You cannot serve God and mammon* [see Note on Luke 16:9 below]

The word translated “serve” in this verse is not the usual word for serve (*diakoneo*), but *douleuo*, which more literally means, “be enslaved to” or “be controlled by.” The same word is used in 15:29 of the older son stating to his father: “*Look, all these years I served you...*” One cannot be controlled by God and *mammon*. We can have only one God – and it shouldn’t be wealth.

As in this world, so in the kingdom: trustworthiness in small things leads to a greater trust; spiritual realities but also concerned with physical stewardship (v. 13). The community of Jesus will have to deal with problems of spiritual and material stewardship as there is always the danger of subordinating the spiritual to the material without realizing that a new master has taken over.

Craddock (*Luke*, 191-2) concludes his comments with:

Verses 10-12 contain sayings all of which are framed on what logicians call an argument *a fortiori*, that is, an argument from the lesser to the greater. The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. The one faithful in today’s nickels and dimes is the one to be trusted with the big account, but it is easy to be indifferent toward small obligations while quite sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters. The realism of these sayings is simply that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor’s cat.

Notes

Luke 16:1 *steward*: In the Roman context a steward has access to his master’s wealth and acted as his agent in business affairs – leading to an enviable social status strongly associated with his master’s standing. The implication of losing such a position pointed to the alternatives of manual labor or begging – and homelessness as well. In other words, the steward is facing life “outside the camp” as a newly marginalized member of that world.

The parable of the dishonest steward has to be understood in the light of the Palestinian custom of agents acting on behalf of their masters and the usurious practices common to such agents. The dishonesty of the steward consisted in the squandering of his master’s property (Luke 16:1) and not in any subsequent graft. The master commends the dishonest steward who has forgone his own usurious commission on the business transaction by having the debtors write new notes that reflected only the real amount owed the master (i.e., minus the steward’s profit). The dishonest steward acts in this way in order to ingratiate himself with the debtors because he knows he is being dismissed from his position (Luke 16:3). The parable, then, teaches the prudent use of one’s material goods in light of an imminent crisis.

Luke 16:6 *One hundred measures*: literally, “one hundred baths.” A bath is a Hebrew unit of liquid measurement equivalent to eight or nine gallons.

Luke 16:7 *One hundred kors*: a *kor* is a Hebrew unit of dry measure for grain or wheat equivalent to ten or twelve bushels.

Luke 16:8 *dishonest steward*: literally, steward of wickedness (*oikonomos tes adikias*)

***acting prudently*:** other translations take the term *phromimos* as “cleverly” as term close to the more common word for prudence (*phronesis*). These are both terms that Aristotle described as a kind of practical wisdom.

***children of this world*:** This could also be translated as “children of this age” thus drawing a parallel to Luke’s use of phrases such as “this generation.”

Luke 16:9 *wealth*: *mamōnās* [wealth, mammon] The Greek *miamōmās* seems to come from an Aramaic noun which most probably derives from the root *’mn* (“that in which one trusts”). The word does not occur in the OT but is used in later Jewish writings in the senses (a) “resources,” (b) “gain” (especially dishonest), and (c) “compensation” or “ransom,” but also “bribe.” In general it has an ignoble sense, is often called unrighteous, and is a target of ethical censure and admonition. In the NT the word occurs only on the lips of Jesus. It denotes “earthly goods,” but always with a stress on their materialistic character. When people trust in it (Lk. 12:15ff.) or give their hearts to it (Mt. 6:21), they cannot love God. Believers, then, must break out of enslavement to it and learn to depend on God (Mt. 6:24).

***eternal dwellings*:** literally, “eternal tents” (*aiōniai skēnai*), possibly echoes the exodus tradition, as it refers to the “tent” (*skēnē*) or tabernacle of God’s presence. The adjective “eternal” clarifies that Jesus refers not to temporary dwellings, but rather to the permanent place where God’s presence dwells.

Luke 16:10-13 Jesus’ sayings about stewardship and wealth describe “a form of stewardship that is firmly rooted in the OT understanding of Yahweh as the true owner and conferrer of all land and property” with the corollary that since property and land are given to God’s people to manage in the horizon of their accountability before God, they are to be used for the good of all, including the poor (Green, 597, cf Gen. 12:7; Exod. 3:8; 32:13; Lev. 20:45; 25; Deut. 7:13).

Luke 16:11 *dishonest wealth*: literally, “mammon of iniquity.” Mammon is the Greek transliteration of a Hebrew or Aramaic word that is usually explained as meaning “that in which one trusts.” The characterization of this wealth as dishonest expresses a tendency of wealth to lead one to dishonesty. Mammon is called unrighteous not because it is inherently evil but because of the unrighteous attitudes the pursuit of money can produce. If money were inherently unrighteous, then all uses of it would be evil. But that is not Jesus’ view (see 19:1-10). The attitude reflected here may be similar to that of 1 Timothy 6:10, where Paul says that the love of money is the root of all evil. Our own experience shows us that money brings out distorted values in people.

***eternal dwellings*:** or, “eternal tents,” i.e., heaven. his opposed to the teachings.

Luke 16:10-12 *The person who is trustworthy in very small matters...*: The second conclusion recommends constant fidelity to those in positions of responsibility.

Luke 16:13 *You cannot serve God and mammon*: The third conclusion is a general statement about the incompatibility of serving God and being a slave to riches. To be dependent upon wealth is opposed to the teachings of Jesus who counseled complete dependence on the Father as one of the characteristics of the Christian disciple (Luke 12:22–39). God and mammon: see the note on Luke 16:9. Mammon is used here as if it were itself a god.

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