

September 22, 2019 “A Bad Man’s Good Example” Luke 16:1-13

The steward was a rogue. He was a slave, but nonetheless in charge of the running of his master’s estate. In Palestine there were many absentee landlords. The master may well have been one of these, and his business may well have been entrusted to his steward’s hands. The steward had followed a career of embezzlement.

The debtors were also rogues. No doubt what they owed was rent. Rent was often paid to a landlord, not in money, but in kind. It was often an agreed proportion of the produce of the part of the estate which had been rented.

A dishonest steward is about to lose his job because he has misspent his employer’s assets. Because he doesn’t want to do manual labor or receive charity, he goes around to all the people who owe his employer money and reduces their debts. He does this so that they will be hospitable to him after he loses his job. To our surprise, the employer commends the dishonest manager for his

shrewdness. Why is he commended? And, why does Luke include this story in his Gospel?

To begin to answer these questions, we can note that this parable serves as a bridge between the stories of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Like the prodigal in the preceding story, our dishonest manager has “squandered” what was entrusted to him. And, like the story that follows, this parable begins with the phrase, “There was a rich man.”

Although our dishonest steward does not repent (like the prodigal) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he nonetheless does something with the rich man’s wealth that reverses the existing order of things.

In Luke, reversals of status are at the heart of what happens when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear. The proud are “scattered” (which translates the same word for “squandered”). The

powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted; the hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty.

But why does the employer commend the dishonest steward for being shrewd? Of course, his commendation could be ironic. But if it's not ironic, then why is the steward being commended? Some have suggested that the manager has reduced his own commission in the debts owed and that this is what is being commended. Yet others have suggested more generally that the employer is simply commending the manager for responding shrewdly to a difficult circumstance. The word for "shrewd" here can also be translated as "prudent" or "wise" (16:8).

The text itself provides four interpretations of the employer's commendation:

First, "the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. In other words, Jesus' disciples -- often referred to as "children of light" -- could learn something about acting prudently from the "children of this world." If only

Christians were as eager and ingenious in their attempt to attain goodness as those with more worldly concerns are in their attempts to obtain and comfort, they would be much better people.

Second, what they could learn from the “children of this world” has to do with “making friends for themselves” by means of “dishonest wealth” so that those new friends might “welcome them into the eternal homes”. Instead of using “dishonest wealth” to exploit others (as the rich do), disciples are to use wealth to “make friends for themselves.”

The lesson is that material possessions should be used to cement the friendships wherein the real and permanent value of life lies. That could be done in two ways:

It could be done as it affects eternity. The Rabbis had a saying “the rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come. True wealth would consist not in what people kept, but in what they gave away. It could be done as it affects this world. Wealth can be used selfishly or to make life easier, not only for

ourselves, but for ourselves, but for our friends and neighbors. How many of us are grateful to a better-off friend who has seen us through some time of need in the most practical way? Possessions are not in themselves a sin, but they are a great responsibility, and those who use them to help friends have gone far to discharge the responsibility.

Third, there's a connection between being faithful (or dishonest) with "very little" and "very much." How one deals with "dishonest wealth" and "what belongs to another" says much about how one will deal with "true riches" and "what is your own". How we use the resources at our disposal in this life -- especially in tight circumstances -- matters, even though our "true riches" can only be found in that place "where no thief can draw near and no moth destroys".

The lesson is that the way of fulfilling a small task is the best proof of fitness or unfitness to be entrusted with a bigger task. That is clearly true of earthly things. No one will be advanced to higher

office until they have given proof of their honesty and ability in a smaller position. But Jesus extends the principle to eternity. He says, ‘Upon earth you are in charge of things which are not really yours. You cannot take them with you when you die. They are only lent to you. You are only a steward over them. They cannot, in nature of things, be permanently yours. On the other hand, in heaven you will get what is really and eternally yours. And what you get in heaven depends on how you use the things on earth. What you will be given as your very own will depend on how you use the things of which you are only the steward.

Finally, the capstone to all this is that “no slave can serve two masters. The master possessed the slave and possessed him exclusively. You cannot serve God and wealth”. Nowadays, it is quite easy to do two jobs and work for two people. But a slave had no spare time; every moment of his day, and every ounce of his energy, belonged to his master. He had no time which was his own. So, serving God can never be a part-time or a spare-job. Once we

choose to serve God every moment of our time and every atom of our energy belongs to God. God is the most exclusive of masters. We either belong to him totally or not at all.

This reiterates a central theme in Luke. The kingdom of God entails giving up all other commitments, including the commitment to economic security. As noted, Luke places great emphasis on how the reign of God reverses the status of the rich and the poor.

In Acts, the Christian community is one where disciples share “all things in common,” distributing “to all, as any had need”. These texts cannot just be spiritualized. Luke is talking about a different way of using wealth. Our wealth belongs to God and is to be used for the purposes of God’s reign among us and not simply for our own interests.

So why is our dishonest steward shrewd? Even though he is still sinner who is looking out for his own interests, he models behavior the disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits

him and others. By reducing other people's debts, he creates a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends.

What this dishonest steward sets in play has analogues with what happens when the reign of God emerges among us. Old hierarchies are overturned and new friendships are established. Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us -- not only in their homes in this life, but even in the "eternal homes".

It is just that simple, it is just that hard!