

A Better Path
A Sermon on Luke 16:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Our parable from Luke 16 might be the most confusing of all of Jesus' parables. If you read five books commenting on the Gospel of Luke, you might find five different interpretations of the parable, sometimes called the parable of dishonest manager. But I love this parable, because it is so relevant to the challenges we face, and, in a strange way, Jesus uses this parable to guide us to a path of true joy and true strength. I suggest we begin by summarizing the main ideas of the parable and the verses that follow it.

There was a very rich man who had hired a manager to oversee his estate and all of his business dealings. The master of the estate found out that the manager was squandering his property. *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 in charge of my estate or financial dealings any longer.'* So the manager summons those who owe money to the man who owns the estate. One by one he tells each of the debtors to reduce the amount of the money they owe. The owner of the estate found out, and commended the manager for his shrewdness.

Jesus finishes the parable there, leaving many of us puzzled. So Jesus gives his disciples some guidance about the meaning of the parable for them, as disciples of Jesus. Yet some of Jesus' instructions that follow the parable seem to contradict one another, leaving us further confused. Jesus says, *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.* A few verses later he says, *You cannot serve God and wealth.* We cannot follow both of these instructions because they contradict one another. What is Jesus' message, and what can we learn from this passage?

It's easier to grasp the meaning of the passage if we allow ourselves to acknowledge that Jesus was an actual person. Jesus had the full range of emotions like you and me, and he had to deal with the messiness and complexities of human life, the way we do.

One of the ways you and I deal with our frustrations and our strong emotions is to use sarcasm and point out the ironic situations of life. The entire parable is ironic. Jesus is making his point by describing an ironic, real-life situation. The parable describes a realistic situation that ends with an opposite conclusion from what we expect.

In a similar vein, Jesus says, *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.* I would love to hear the tone of Jesus' voice when he said the words 'eternal homes', because he was talking about the homes of shrewd, conniving businessmen. Would you be happy about spending the rest of your life indebted to, and living in the home of a shrewd, conniving businessman, perhaps one who has been convicted of a few white collar crimes? It's easier to hear the meaning of the passage if we acknowledge that Jesus was an actual person, and he had to deal with bizarre, real-life situations like you and me.

It's also easier to grasp the meaning of the passage if we read it in the context of the entire Gospel of Luke. For instance, in the first chapter of Luke, we hear Mary say these words before the birth of Jesus: *God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.* In chapter six, Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount includes this verse: *Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your reward.* In chapter twelve, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool, which is another story of a man who owned an enormous estate. His business is more successful, year after year, and one day he sits in the middle of his enormous, beautiful estate and envisions building many barns to hold all of the crops. But you know what happens next; that very night, the rich man dies.

Each of the Gospels includes stories and teachings found in the other Gospels, such as the story of the crucifixion. Each of the Gospels also includes a set of stories and teachings of Jesus that is found only in that particular Gospel. In the Gospel of Luke, many of the unique stories and teachings point to the idea that earthly riches can be an impediment for our spiritual journey with God.

In the parable of the dishonest manager all of the characters are relatively wealthy. All of the dishonest merchants are wealthy. They buy and sell enormous quantities of olive oil and wheat. They take in enormous amounts of cash and they have large loans. The manager, likewise, is a rich, powerful man. He is powerful enough to summons these wealthy merchants and strike bargains with them. The owner of the estate is the wealthiest person of all. He never needs to work another day of his life. He can lose many thousands of dollars in business transactions and it makes no difference to him. Viewed in this context, our parable from chapter sixteen is yet another cautionary passage about the dangers and limitations of money and power. In this parable, all of the characters are rich and powerful, and none of them are good examples for Jesus' disciples.

But the Gospel of Luke also includes one or two examples of rich people who behave in commendable ways. Today's passage comes from the beginning of chapter sixteen. The story that precedes it, from the end of chapter fifteen, is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is also about a very rich man who owns an enormous estate, but the rich man uses his wealth to rebuild his relationship with his younger son.

It is more challenging for those who have lots of wealth to behave as children of light, but our wealth or poverty does not determine whether or not we are followers of Christ. The way we use what has been given to us reveals who we serve.

This leads to the main idea of the passage. Each day, we make choices about which path we will follow. Jesus concludes the teaching with these words: *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.*

Two paths lie in front of us, and we have to make a choice about which path we will follow. We can tell the truth, or we can bend the truth and tell lies, but we cannot do both things. We can choose the path of following the rules, or we can say the rules are for suckers and losers, but we cannot do both things. We can choose the path of treating other people with honor and respect, or we can be cruel and disrespectful, but we cannot do both. We can choose the path of serving God or we can choose the path of trying to accumulate as much profit and power as possible, but we cannot take both of these paths.

The path of serving God includes a set of behaviors that work together for the health and benefit of God's people. Sometimes we think we can tell lies in our business transactions and still be on God's path, but we cannot, because we serve God when we tell the truth and play by the rules. God gives us a set of behaviors to follow, that includes telling the truth, seeking reconciliation with others, and caring for those who are desperately sick or desperately poor. *You cannot serve God and wealth.* You also cannot serve God and be cruel to God's people. You cannot serve God and tell lies about your enemies. You cannot serve God and cheat on your taxes. Serving God requires a group of closely related behaviors. This is the point of the passage.

We choose whether we will follow God's path by small actions we take every day. Jesus says, *"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.* When we take a few steps down the path of shrewdness, cruelty, and putting the value of money first, we are quickly trapped in our behaviors. We can find ourselves surrounded by people and behaviors that have nothing to do with serving God.

This is what happened to the dishonest manager in the story. He was trapped by his bad behavior. In fact, all of the characters in the parable are trapped in their bad behavior. No one has asked me for my opinion, but I would rename the parable, the parable of people who are trapped in

a vicious circle of shrewd, conniving, dishonest behavior. We can see that the various merchants are being dishonest. Someday their lies will catch up with them.

The rich man who owns the estate is also trapped. From what we can read in the Hebrew Scriptures, most of the wealthy people of Jesus' time accumulated their wealth through dishonest means. They could do this because most of the workers they dealt with were illiterate and desperately poor. So this parable also seems to point to the idea that the owner of the estate was trapped in dishonest business dealings. He had not accumulated his enormous estate through hard work. His manager and other people are aware of his deceitful, conniving ways. He cannot press charges against the dishonest manager because people know he is guilty of the same behavior.

There is one more message in today's Gospel passage that seems especially important for you and me today. Let's pay attention to the idea that the main character's true values are revealed during a time of danger. The manager's livelihood was threatened, and that was the time when we see him turning away from God's path. When the manager was in danger, he turned away from the path of honesty, humility, and respect for others.

We live in a dangerous time, and Jesus lived in a dangerous time. During times when there is lots of uncertainty, when the world seems dangerous, Jesus offers us a path of hope. It is not a path that promises riches. The path of serving God offers us something much better than riches.

During these times of uncertainty and danger, Jesus offers us what we need most. It's a path of getting our strength from God. It's the path of honesty. It's the path of not getting stuck or trapped in our bad behavior.

It's the path of serving the God whose wisdom is so much greater than our wisdom. It's the path of humility, and acknowledging our mistakes. It's the path of acting in trustworthy ways and being able to trust those around us. It's the path of supporting others in ways that feel loving to them. It's the path of true joy. It's the path of serving the God whose love never ends.