

TOUGH PASSAGE
Luke 16:1-13

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This is one of the most difficult texts in all of the New Testament. Preachers purposely avoid it like the plague. I remember when I first started seminary that one of my cousins, a registered nurse – a very bright young lady, challenged me, “When you figure out Luke 16:1-13, let me know what that’s about, because I just don’t get it.”

Well, my cousin isn’t the only one curious about this tough text. The story of this steward has stumped exegetes for ages. Over a hundred years ago, Plummer pronounced, “The literature on this subject is voluminous and unrepaying.” (Alfred Plummer, *Luke*, 381) And Topel recently said, “The literature dealing with this parable is staggering, and, after all the effort expended, the meaning of this story still eludes us.” (John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 216). Commentator Creed, after studying the story, simply concluded, “It is an unedifying story.” (John Martin Creed, *Luke*, 203).

The story is so difficult, that fourth century Roman emperor Julian the Apostate and others cited this text in an attempt to discredit Christianity as a religion of scoundrels. One noted scholar read every interpretation possible and called them “a jungle of explanations.” (For a good review of the literature, see Dennis J. Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 51 [1989], 293-318.)

Listen to the less-than-lovely story of Luke 16.

It starts out with, “There was a certain rich man who had a steward.” Put plainly, there was a blueblood – filthy rich, who made his money by casting a burden on the backs of the working class. You never read “There was a certain rich man” that it doesn’t have a negative connotation – at least not in Luke. Look over at verse 19. The next parable starts, “There was a certain rich man...” The rich man in verse 19 is a callous character, and, therefore, we can also conclude that the rich man in verse 1 is, likewise, several notches below noble. Or even Luke’s rich young ruler (18:18) chooses gold over God, leading our Lord to say, “How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom.”

Parables were quick stories. They depend upon stock characters with familiar themes. The rich man, the “certain rich man,” is never, ever the good guy.

Back to verse 1, “...who had a steward.” The bad guy had a worse worker. A steward, in those days, would be someone who had control over the books and the business. A power of attorney, a manager for the absentee landlord, the certain rich man. Word got around – it always gets around – that the steward was squandering the rich man’s money.

“I don’t like what I hear,” says the rich man to the steward (v. 2). “Open up the books. We’re looking for a cook. Give an account of my money.”

The charges against the agent were that he is squandering the master’s property. The verb “squandered” is the same verb that is used to describe the sin of the prodigal son (15:13). As the prodigal son wasted his dad’s money on wine, women, and song, the unrighteous steward wasted the rich man’s possessions. The folly of this fraud made his master look like a fool. He had to act quickly to save his reputation.

The modern reader – that is, we – are well familiar with creative “book cooking”: Enron, Tyco, WorldCom – all with scandals led to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 which calls for accurate and enhanced standards for keeping up with the cash. Put another way, it called for corporations to quit manipulating the money. It’s easy enough to withhold the recording of expenses and hasten the recording of revenues in such a way as to produce all sorts of bonuses and benefits for top management, all the while pulling the wool over the eyes of investors and customers. And we all know that Bernie Madoff (made off) with the money!

“I want to know,” said the certain rich man. “What happened to my money? Where have all my goods gone? Explain yourself, steward. And, finally, you’re fired” (v. 2).

The certain rich man was usually bright and erudite, but on this particular occasion he left a window of opportunity for the fraud to fool him again and again and again. For the moment, he was still manager over the rich man’s goods, and he began to scheme.

“What am I going to do? You know, my back’s not good. I can’t dig. And I am way too proud to panhandle.”

He wasn’t willing to become part of the people that toiled and sweated to earn a living. Most of the people in Jesus’ peasant audience would have been manual laborers, and it wouldn’t have made the steward look any better than the rich man to say he was unsympathetic to their lot in life. Interestingly enough, the prodigal son, who was faced with the same crisis of poverty, was willing to go back – you remember Luke 15 – and be his father’s hired hand. After his squandering, he was willing to work. But not so with the unjust steward. He had another way out.

In 16:4, he has an a-ha moment. “I’ve got it! I know what I’ll do. I can face the future smelling like a rose if I act fast and furious.” He schemes to shave the amounts owed by his master’s debtors. “One by one,” the text says (v. 5) he asks, “How much do you owe my master?”

“Oh, a hundred measures of oil.” And he said to him, “Quick, change the bill. Write down fifty.” Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” And he said, “A hundred measures of wheat.” And he said, “No, no, no. Let’s change that. Write down eighty.”

You get the picture – the cooking of the books continues until he has a myriad of his master’s customers now indebted to him forever. For the moment, he was still acting on behalf of the master. He had the authority and the power to reduce the debt now for a payback later.

All of this is understandable until we get to verse 8, when Jesus says – by the way, verse 8 does not say “master”; it says “the Lord” – “and the Lord praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

Time out. I was doing okay with the bad rich guy and the cheating steward until Jesus shows up at the end of the story and says, “Be like him. Follow the fraud” – says the One who once said to the disciples on the shore, “Follow Me.”

Now you know why commentators have been perplexed by this parable. And now you know why no preacher pounces on this passage!

You would think Americans would love this particular parable. There is nothing more American than cheating. Pick up the Wall Street Journal on any given day and read about some scoundrel squandering the money, some cheater cutting the corners. Enron. WorldCom. Tyco. Away we go. From the snake oil salesmen of the 19th century to the stock manipulators of the 1920s to the spitballers of modern baseball, bracelet-selling bikers doping to win the Tour, and teachers from Philadelphia to Atlanta fixing standardized tests. America is full of frauds.

So prevalent is the cooking of books in our culture that David Callahan wrote a book called *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*.

The American way of cheating knows no boundaries. From the Air Force Academy to the hallowed halls of Harvard, the headlines scream scandal.

August 31, 2012: Administrators at Harvard accused 125 students of cheating on a final exam, an allegation that Harvard graduate and author Eric Kester said reflects a “culture of cheating” at the school. In fact, Harvard’s own newspaper reported that 42 percent of the Ivy League institution’s freshmen admitted to cheating. (nbcnews.com, “Survey: 42 Percent of Harvard’s incoming freshman class cheated on homework”)

In the midst of all this, Jesus walks up, points to the scoundrel, the fraud, the book-cooker, and says, “Be like him.”

Four quick words to make this parable plausible.

I. Shrewd (v. 8)

“And the Lord praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.”

The word is shrewd. It wasn’t his dishonesty that Jesus commends, but his shrewdness.

Lloyd Ogilvie, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, tells the story of visiting with one of America's most successful businessmen on a cross-country flight. He had risen from a very humble background to immense wealth. The chaplain said, "I asked this great businessman the secret of his success. His response was very interesting.

" 'Shrewdness!' One word. 'Shrewdness.'

" 'I was shocked by his frankness,' said the chaplain. 'He went on to say that he spent every waking hour thinking, scheming, planning, developing and putting deals together. In it all, he had tried to be completely honest in all his affairs!'"

Shrewdness. Single-mindedness. Purposefulness.

"This businessman left nothing to chance. He worked hard to achieve his goals. All the power of his intellect, the strength of his seemingly limitless energies, the determination of his iron will, and the resources of his calculated discernment of people were employed to accomplish his goal. The chaplain asked, 'What would happen if the people of God put the same sort of "shrewdness" to work for the kingdom of God?'" (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Autobiography of God*, 199)

It reminds us of Jesus in Matthew 10:16. "Be wise as serpents." Now a serpent is no more an attractive example for wisdom than the dishonest agent here, but both represent the essential characteristic a disciple should have – prudence – which the challenge of the hour demands.

You see the listeners of the parable (that includes us) are in the same situation as the dishonest steward. We, too, are threatened with the imminent disaster of our futures. The difference is our very souls are at risk. And we, like this steward, should take everything into our own hands to act quickly, wisely, and diligently to shape the course of our future. When everything was at stake, the agent staked everything on his daring course of action. And if worldlings such as this foolish fellow can act astutely to protect their self-interest in this world, should not the disciples seize the moment and act astutely to ensure their interest in the world to come, which is eternal?

II. Temporary (v. 9)

"And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings."

Call somebody up this afternoon and ask them to turn to Luke 16:9 and read it. Then ask them, "What does that mean?"

It means the word "temporary." The wealth of this world should be used generously so that when the resources are gone, that disciple will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Monetary resources that possess the power to distort values should be put to generous and serving use so that heaven will be pleased to accept the one who has been generous. When the end comes and there is no more money available, the one who has seen into the future and acted shrewdly

will have handled the resources and stewardship that God has given him wisely. Zaccheus will be an example in chapter 19.

The problem with this parable is that you can't simply read it on its own. It comes between the prodigal son, who also squandered his father's estate, and the rich man and Lazarus in verse 19. And even beyond that, the rich young ruler of chapter 18.

The rich man, in the parable of Lazarus, had no mercy on the poor. I know you don't want to hear me say it, but the meaning of this parable is in the money and the use thereof. One interpreter claimed (though I have not counted) that of Jesus' 38 parables, nineteen of them deal with the handling of money or possessions. Jesus is not commending the man's cheating; He's commending his shrewdness. And if he's that serious about his temporal future, how could the children of the kingdom not be more shrewd about their eternal destiny? A shrewdness seen in their wise use of money.

III. Little (v. 10)

“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.”

The way one uses his money in this world – a testing ground – will determine what one will receive in the next world. Who can entrust people with significant things, eternal things, if they cannot handle worldly wealth?

In verse 11, he repeats it again. If you are not trustworthy in the use of unrighteous mammon – that is, money – then who is going to give you the stuff that really matters in the kingdom?

And if he hadn't been clear enough, in verse 12 he says, “If you have not been faithful with that which belongs to another, then who will give you something that is really your own?”

Jesus presumes that one's wealth on this earth doesn't really belong to the one who is the steward of the wealth. It all belongs to God. Anything you have in your hand is a temporary loan from God. You're a fool if you think it's yours. Don't spend it as if it's yours. God allows us to steward wealth for the good of His kingdom. Be faithful in the “little” – that is, today's money – that God will bless you in the “much” – that is, tomorrow's eternity.

IV. Master (v. 13)

You can't have two masters. If you live your life serving money and materialism, you cannot serve God. It's impossible to love both. You can have money and love God; you can't serve money and love God.

Money is a great servant. It is a terrible master.

So there you have it: Shrewd. Temporary. Little. Master. Four words for the wise from the parable of the unjust steward.

I used to avoid this parable because I didn't understand what it meant. This "lord" praising the shrewdness of the cheat. I understand it now – but I still don't like it. Now I think I don't like it because I do understand it. I understand that Jesus is saying that my worldly goods are not mine – they've always been His. And He really measures how I use my money. How I use my mammon makes not only a temporary difference, but it makes an eternal difference. For if He can't trust me with the little things here on earth, He certainly won't trust me with a big eternity.

I don't like that much, either. But that's what it says – whether I like it or not.