

A HIGHER GOOD

Luke 16:1-13

What if I told you that Jesus' toughest parable is actually surprisingly simple? Today's parable of the dishonest manager from Luke 16 is notorious for being difficult to understand, difficult to preach. Parishioners scratch their heads at it. Pastors strategically schedule their vacations to avoid preaching it. And no wonder: the parable appears to praise dishonesty, the master commending the dishonest manager for his shrewdness (v. 8). Jesus says things like, "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into eternal dwellings" (v. 9). What does this mean? Who knows! Good thing there are two other lessons to choose from, amiright?

Part of the problem is that "dishonest" is really a bad translation. The word means "unjust" or "unrighteous." This is an unbeliever we're talking about, since, as the apostle Paul writes, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). And the master doesn't commend him because of his dishonesty. He commends him because of his shrewdness, his prudent behavior. He did a wise thing, summoning his master's debtors one by one and giving them each a significant discount. Rather than continue to waste his master's possessions on himself, he found a way to put them to good use, making friends for himself by means of this "unrighteous wealth."

We're also used to the parables being about, and I hesitate to use this term, "spiritual" things. Most of the parables in Matthew, for example, begin, "The kingdom of heaven is like," and then Jesus proceeds to teach us something about the Word or what will happen on the Last Day. Surely, this must be like that. There must be some deeper meaning to the parable beyond money and the right use of wealth. It can't be that simple. But no, like when you're trying to plug in a USB cable, and you think you've got it upside down, so you turn it over, but it turns out you were right the first time, it really is that simple. The parable of the unbelieving manager is not about mercy or forgiveness.

It's about money.

We know this, first of all, because of how the parable ends. Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money" (v. 13). There you have it. That's what the parable is all about. You cannot serve God and money. You can only serve one, and that one is your master. Jesus will often do this, revealing the punchline of His parables in a nice, tweetable sentence: "So the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16); "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14); "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner

who repents” (Lk. 15:10). If you want to know what a parable is about, here’s a pro tip: skip to the end.

We also know this parable is about money because of how those who heard it reacted to it. In the very next verse (14), we read, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed Him.” Why did they ridicule Jesus? Because they were lovers of money. Why would this parable trigger lovers of money? Because it’s about money.

Consider also where Luke put this parable. At the very beginning of his gospel, he says that he set out to write an orderly account of Jesus’ life. That doesn’t necessarily mean chronological order—that’s something we care about much more than the ancients did—but what Luke in the Holy Spirit has done is to arrange his material thematically, putting passages together in a way that makes sense.

So, what do we find when we look on either side of this parable? The parable of the prodigal son and the rich man and Lazarus. What happened to the prodigal son? He took his share of his father’s possessions and wasted it in reckless living. He spent it all on himself. And when it failed, he found himself in a desperate situation, just like our unbelieving manager. Skip ahead to the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man had great possessions, but he, too, wasted them. For at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. So, when they died, and Lazarus, who served God, went to Abraham’s side, the rich man was not received by him, but went to his eternal dwelling in Hades. The rich man had not behaved shrewdly. He had not made friends with Lazarus, sharing what he had, but clung to his riches all the way to the grave.

It’s about money. And not just money, but mammon, money and possessions. But what about it? What is Jesus teaching us about our wealth?

We are stewards.

A manager is a steward, a caretaker of someone else’s stuff. The only pop culture reference I can think of is from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. There’s a character named Denethor who is 26th steward of the kingdom of Gondor. He sits on a throne, he makes the decisions, he commands the armies, but he’s not the king. He’s a steward. None of that stuff is actually his, he’s just taking care of it while the king is away.

We are stewards. We are not kings, but we have been entrusted with the care of someone else’s possessions. “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof,” writes David in Psalm 24 (v. 1). The LORD, answering Job from the whirlwind, says, “Who has

first given to Me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine” (41:11). Why? Because He made it! As we sing in the Venite, “In His hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry land” (Ps. 95:4-5). The rich man in the parable, the one whose possessions the manager wasted, is God, who is rich beyond measure, because literally everything belongs to Him.

And what does He do with what is His? He shares it. On the sixth day, when God made man, He said, “Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over...all the earth” (Gen. 1:26). In other words, “Let them be stewards.” Each of us has been entrusted with great and many possessions by our Lord and Maker.

Martin Luther put it this way: “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.” Mammon is good. We need these things.

But how is one a faithful steward of them? The unbelieving steward wasted his master’s possessions. He did not use them as they were meant to be used. It’s not until he used his unrighteous wealth to serve others that he was commended. “And I tell you,” says Jesus, “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (v. 9). A faithful steward shares. He does not serve money, clinging to it like it’s his savior. He understands what mammon is: a temporary good. We should fear and love God so that we help our neighbor to improve and protect his possessions and income, not waste ours in reckless living.

Spouses, then, give their worldly goods to each other and honor each other with their bodies. Parents make enormous and countless sacrifices for their children. Students spend their time (and their parents’ money) wisely, applying themselves diligently to wisdom. Christians of all ages and incomes tithe (did you know we’re on Venmo?). We use our Master’s possessions to make friends for ourselves. Because Jesus is right: mammon will fail. There is nothing in this world that moth and rust will not destroy and that thieves will not break in and steal.

Which is why we seek the true riches. As good as mammon is, you see—and it is good—we have

A higher good.

And the way that Jesus speaks of this is interesting: “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is [unfaithful] in a very little is also [unfaithful] in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” In essence, “Take care of the stuff God has given you. Share it. You’ve got something much more valuable. And the way you treat the stuff you’ve been given shows whether or not you believe that.” You see, all the things we hold dear in this life are pennies compared to the true riches. In the words of the hymn we just sang,

We have a higher good,
Content with it I’ll be:
My Jesus is my wealth.
What is the world to me!¹

Jesus is your wealth. More than money, more than property, more than your beauty, brains, or brawn, the most valuable thing in your possession is Christ. He has given Himself to you fully. In addition to all that you need to support this body and life, God has given His Son to die for you, even you, who deserve only punishment. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

And so you are. Mammon will fail, but Christ is eternal. He is the spotless Lamb that was slain for you, His blood accepted as payment for your sin. Covered with Him in your Baptism, He is now your righteousness, your goodness before God. His death is your death, and His life your life. He is your salvation, your strength, and your song. He is your bliss eternally.

Nothing in this world can be that. Nothing is worth throwing that away. You cannot serve God and money, and money cannot save you. Jesus says, “the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light” (v. 8). May it not be so among us. May we be shrewd in dealing with one another, counting everything as loss for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. Seek the true riches. Be faithful in very little. And by the grace of the Master, when we die and all our mammon becomes meaningless, He and the saints who have gone before us will receive us into eternal dwellings.

In ☩ Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹ “What Is the World to Me,” *Lutheran Service Book* 730, st. 3.