

This summer we've been looking at the parables Jesus used to teach vital life. We've looked at parables on the Kingdom of God, and about prayer, parables that point to Christ as Messiah, and about what it means to follow Him.

Today we're picking up right where Brian left us last week—looking at another parable that teaches Christ's followers about how they are to steward their money and their material possessions.

This morning, we going to dig into Luke 16:1-13, often titled 'The Parable of Unjust Steward,' 'The Shrewd or Dishonest Manager.' To be sure, this parable focuses on the deceptive, manipulative manager, but the application of Jesus' message is for all His listeners—including us.

We know from verse one that the disciples were being taught, but don't let that make you think there were only 12 people being addressed. There were many other followers who would have been listening and a bunch of Pharisees, too (as verse 14 highlights).

The Steward (v 1-8a)

So, with that little bit of context, let's look at the verses 1-8. Follow along with me while I read. [READ]

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

³"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶"'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

⁷"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

"A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

⁸"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

[STOP]

Accused (v 1-2)

The first thing I need you to know about this parable is that it is not an allegory (where 'this means that). So, resist the temptation to see the steward manager as the people and the Master as God. No! That's not what Jesus is doing. He's telling a story that's going to shake up His listener and, hopefully, get them to think and live differently than they have been.

So, this manager, this steward, gets accused of squandering his Master's possessions. As manager, he spoke with the authority of his master. His decisions were binding as if the master had made them personally. This kind of chief steward role was a desirable role with lots of influence and status in the master's home and community. This guy was supposed to act in the best interests of his master. "The most important thing about a steward is that he serve his master faithfully (1 Cor. 4:2)."¹ But the numbers didn't add up. We don't know if he was just lazy and failed to collect on the accounts or if he was stealing directly or what he was doing but, when the accounts were audited, the steward fell very short. And the steward didn't deny the accusation. He knew what he'd done or failed to do. There was no arguing with that. His boss want to see the books then he's fired.

Now what? (v 3-4)

You can almost hear the steward talking to himself, "Now what do I do?" He's going to lose his job, his status, his home—he's going to lose everything. He knows that he'll never have a steward role again and that he isn't sturdy enough for manual labor and begging is unthinkable.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1* (Victor Books, 1996), 238.

Besides, both those roles would put him way too close to the people that he's used to being admired by.

With time being short, he came up with a brilliant scheme: one that will put him in the good graces of the wealthy, large-scale business associates who are indebted to his boss. Culturally, people were honor bound to repay a generous kindness², and the steward knew that. After he loses his job, at least he'll have some 'friends' he could call on for a place to stay. 'People will welcome me into their houses.' He was preparing to be a long-term couch surfer—moving from one honor bound 'friend' to another.

Deep Discounts (v 5-7)

So, he got to work. He contacted all the business associates and, one by one (the text suggests it's more like, one after another after another, it just keeps going), he pulled them in, found out how much they owed, then gave them a *deep* discount on their original debt. 'You owe 900? Cut it in half! You owe a thousand? Take 20% off! What's money between friends?' Remember: he spoke with the voice of his master. His actions were binding. No one could change what the dishonest manager was doing. The debtors had to be ecstatic!

When you calculate the discounts, using just these two samples from the text, the master lost nearly two years' wages because of the steward's giant markdowns. Think about that for a minute. Can you imagine two years' income because of an employee's dishonesty and manipulation?

Scholarly opinions vary as to why these were the discount amounts. Some think that the steward had commissions or interest added to the debts and that he forgave those commissions, thus dropping the balances. But culturally, there was no precedence for this kind of commission or interest gouging. The numbers were just too great. And, if he'd been collecting

² Nolland, John. *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 9:21-18:34* (Word Books, Dallas, 1993), 800.

giant fees for his services, then he wouldn't have to worry about couch surfing. He could find a place to live and start over.

Other scholars think he was trying to appear magnanimous and gracious by reducing the *burden* on the debtors, using his position to take care of the poor. But he wasn't working with poor people. "None of the people involved are poverty-stricken peasants with average incomes."³ He was working with wealthy men who had contracted to farm the master's land and give him a portion of the produce. 900 gallons of oil required 150 olive trees (or more) and was about equivalent to three years' wages for an average worker. 1000 bushels of wheat would feed 150 people for a year and required more than 100 acres to produce. These weren't small, family plots. These were large operations.

The steward was being shrewd, not benevolent. He was helping those who would later help him. The problem was that his plan was short sighted. Yes, he saw the future, anticipated what was to come and planned wisely for it, using his expertise to 'make friends' for himself. But after the truth comes out about his misconduct, he won't be a hero. And, while he may get to couch surf for a while, that's going to get old quickly. Living out of a suitcase only sounds like fun for those who haven't had to do it.

Well played! (v 8a)

The first part of verse 8 says, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." In other words, '*Well played!*' The master knew he couldn't do anything to undo what the steward had done. He took a financial bath because of this dishonest employee. At the same time, he admired the steward's ruthless business savvy. It probably helped that the steward's scheme actually brought in some resources—finally!—because the new, deep discount bills were paid in full.

How business goes...

³ Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008), 406.

Questionable business deals happen all the time in our society. 'It's business, not personal,' says the person who's just manipulated someone for financial gain. 'It's part of the game. Little white lies, half-truths, that's how business goes!' But not for those in the Kingdom of God. Look at what Jesus says right on the heels of the manager's commendation. Check out verses 8-9. [READ]

Jesus Responds (v 8b-9)

"The master commended the **dishonest** manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Wait a minute! Did Jesus commend the manager's dishonesty? No! The worldly master in the story commended the prudence and the shrewdness of the steward. Remember, this parable is *not* an allegory. The master does not represent Jesus. The dishonesty was never praised. What the steward did was unjust but effective. While we would expect the master to *condemn* the steward for intentionally committing fraud, the audience gets thrown by the master's, 'Well played!'

One scholar writes, "he has used his wits to make friends and thereby feather his own nest in such a way that his master can only marvel at what he has done to save himself from total disaster."⁴ *That's* what was being commended by the master in the parable. And, right on the heels of that, Jesus basically says, 'If only God's people could be as wise in dealing with the things of the Kingdom as the people of the world are at handling their worldly issues!' If only we would see the Kingdom signs and adjust as readily and confidently. Again, Jesus is *not* telling His listeners to be dishonest or to imitate the steward. Instead, He's contrasting how worldly, godless people are paying such close attention to the things they value, exploiting opportunities to pursue them and how the 'children of light' (God's people) don't pay attention or take advantage of a Kingdom

⁴ Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables, Second Edition* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2012), 325.

opportunity. Jesus is highlighting that there are two groups: people of the world (this age) and people of the Kingdom/people of God.

People of the world seem willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen, while the people of the Kingdom often don't. Why? Maybe people of the world are more committed to their pursuits than the people of God. Are the people of God distracted? You tell me! When opportunities for a promotion at work pop up, we're quick to jump at them. But when the chance to expand the Kingdom of God presents itself, we often step back and hope someone else will take care of it. 'I'm only a teenager, what can I do? I'm in college, but once I graduate, I'll be all about whatever Jesus has for me. I just got married. I'm busy raising my family. I just got a new job. I'm about to retire. I just retired. Certainly, somebody else can do it, right?' In the world, there's a 'go get it' that's often missing in the people of the Kingdom. Jesus is doing the compare and contrast.

I think I know part of the reason for this challenge. As Christ followers, we are citizens of Heaven (Philippians 3:20). We are children of God with the Spirit of Jesus living within us, empowering us to live godly and upright lives in the mess that is this world (Titus 2:12). And we look forward to Jesus' return to take us to be with Him (John 14:3). But, until that happens, we still live in this world, even though we no longer belong to it. The problem is: we get distracted by the things of the world. It's easy to get sucked into pursuing possessions, influence, and status because that's what's modeled for us; it's all over the place. And the people who belong to the world, who don't yet know Jesus, go after those things with all the gusto they can muster. It's all they've got—just like the steward. It's all he had.

But, as children of the King it often feels like a one-foot-in-one-foot-out kind of thing. Where do I belong? *I am a citizen of Heaven and, for now, my assignment is here.* Until He takes me home or He returns, this is where He has me, and this is my assignment: to be His ambassador, His representative, to a lost and broken world. 2 Corinthians 5 says that as Christ's ambassadors it's as though God were making his appeal through

us so people can be reconciled to Him. We're the missionaries, we're the ones called to share the Gospel, the Good News, and point people to Jesus. Around here at Foothills we say, "We exist to connect people to Jesus and help them grow to love and serve Him." As a citizen of Heaven, you are Christ's ambassador. Go after your Kingdom assignment just as diligently and intentionally as the citizens of this world chase their money, their toys, and their titles.

Using wealth properly

Jesus drills down on this in verse 9, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." What? It's okay! Jesus is *not* telling His listeners to live in worldly ways or to have worldly pursuits. He's not suggesting that we get money in unrighteous ways. He's saying that, even though it's part of how this broken, unrighteous world functions and even though it can lead you astray if you're not careful, is to be used by the people of God to expand the Kingdom of God. In other words, use your money to invest in people, not just stuff!

Yes, there's a certain amount of necessity that goes with life. You need food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. You want to steward well the body that God has given you. And there's nothing wrong with having nice things. I'm not going to tell you that you shouldn't have a nice car or nice house or whatever because that's not the point that Jesus is making (as we'll see in a minute). What I *am* saying is that there's no greater investment to be made with the resources you're stewarding, than to invest them in the lives of people who need to get connected with Jesus.

There's a baseline expectation in all of this, throughout the Bible, that the people of God take care of each other. So don't ignore brothers or sisters in Christ because they already know Jesus. And take care of your family. Take care of your spouse, your children, your grandkids. But who else needs Jesus? The single mom or dad. The stepdaughter and stepson. Your classmate. You may not know they need Jesus, but you know they need help. And later you find out. Your colleague at work. Your neighbor.

The checker at the grocery store or the clerk at the gas station. The homeless person. The widow. The orphan. The shut-in. The least, the lost, and the lonely. Some of you are thinking, 'I don't have enough money to care for all those people.' I know you don't, but God does, and He's given some to you to steward, and some to others, whether you think it's a little or a lot. And, since He's given it to you, who better to ask how you should invest it? You already know that He wants you to take care of your family, the body of Christ. You already know that He wants you to take care of widows, orphans, and the poor. Take time to pray and ask Him how He wants you to do that [invest]—then do it! He will *never* lead you the wrong way. As His steward, you have the honor of using every provided resource just like He wants you to. And, unlike people who don't yet know Him, who have to go after it in their own strength, He will give you all you need to accomplish the goal.

Jesus is telling His listeners that if they'll invest in others, they'll have friends of the deepest kind, whose lives may be so touched that they become part of the Kingdom of God. [As you invest in others, you may make friends that become part of the Kingdom of God.] And, when the end arrives—whether death or Christ's return—and money is useless, you'll have friends awaiting you as you step into eternity to be forever with God. Jesus' use of 'welcomed into eternal dwellings' (end of v 9) is a callback to the steward's being 'welcomed' into their houses (v 4). The steward's welcome would be temporary. But the welcome extended to those who invest in the lives of others is eternal.

For the sake of clarity: Jesus is not talking about buying your way into Heaven. He's describing the fruit produced in the life of a person who belongs in Heaven. Steward your money with the end in mind. Keep your eyes on the Kingdom. Don't let the things that glitter or go fast distract you from your mission. As God's steward, use what He's given you to do what He wants you to do. Spend with the end in mind.

Little or much (v 10-13)

Jesus concludes with a rapid-fire group of sayings that challenge the hearer to acknowledge that God expects us to handle money, possessions, with the Kingdom in focus. Check out verses 10-13. [READ]

¹⁰“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Do you steward well what God has entrusted to you—whether you think it’s a lot or a little? How you handle your finances, possessions, says a lot about your priorities and values. Jesus is challenging His audience to realize that the Kingdom of God must be in focus as we steward what we’ve been given. Whether you think God’s given you a little or a lot, what have you done with what you’ve been given? Are you Kingdom focused? Hopefully, you’ve used it in alignment with your assignment: to be His ambassador to a lost and broken world. If so, keep going. You already know that there’s never a regret using what God has given you like He wants you to.

But if you’ve been distracted by the stuff that sparkles or you’ve been trying to build bigger barns to accommodate all your goodies, it’s time to reset your focus. Worldly wealth has zero eternal value unless it’s used for Kingdom purposes. God has given all of us some measure of worldly wealth to steward—it’s not really ours. If we can’t handle *that* well, we won’t be able to handle the true riches God has for us in eternity. I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to God’s rewards! So, I want to use what He’s given me now, to prepare myself.

Jesus buttons it up with, “You cannot serve both God and money.” You’re going to worship one of them. The world worships money and all that money offers. But, as citizens of Heaven, as people of the Kingdom, we

worship God. We can't do both. Just like you can't walk in two directions at the same time, you can't serve God *and* money. Just like you can't be an Olympic shot putter (6'7" and 320lbs) *and* an Olympic marathoner (5'11" and 130lbs). You can't do both—you must choose.

And failing to intentionally choose to serve God, with a Kingdom focus, defaults you into serving money because that's the world in which we live. The world is not going to encourage you to pursue the King and His Kingdom. The world is going to encourage you to think about *you* and what *you* can do with *your* money. It's a struggle. It takes practice. It's a moment-by-moment choice to keep your eyes on the King, intentionally deciding to keep Kingdom priorities in our sites as we steward the money, that can so easily distract and corrupt, to complete our assignments as ambassadors of the King.

Wrap

Here's how I'll wrap it up. 1) Everything you have—little or much—is from God; steward it wisely. 2) Use what you've been given with the Kingdom in focus. That means you'll consistently need to check-in with the Lord about how He wants you to invest what you've been given. 3) As a citizen of Heaven, you have an assignment: use what God has given you to make friends and point them to Jesus. As long as you're here, whether young or old, you're on assignment. He doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9) and you can make the difference! 4) Money will always threaten to become your idol. You must intentionally choose to serve God alone.

Close

The steward in this parable saw the end coming and cleverly used every resource at his disposal to secure his future. As children of the light, citizens of Heaven, we are to skillfully and intentionally use the worldly wealth God has entrusted to us to invest in others and advance the Kingdom as the end draws near. We must be Kingdom focused in all we do, including how we use money. It's part of the world we live in and it's tempting to devote ourselves to get more of it to secure our own futures.

But if we'll steward our finances with the Kingdom in focus, our futures are more than secure, and what we have to look forward to far exceeds anything money could ever get us.