

**Luke 16:1-17****The Dishonest Manager****Recorded 10/19/20, Preached Live 10/25/20**

We are going to Luke 16 today, starting in verse 1.

This parable of Jesus that we are going to read here is widely considered one of the most difficult to understand and apply, so we have our work cut out for us today. I'll read the first section and I think some of the difficulties will be obvious:

**Luke 16:1 He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' 3 And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.**

So as we read through this, we initially will wonder, "What is Jesus talking about?" He tells a story of a guy who rips off his boss and then says, "Be like that guy." Which doesn't seem very Jesusy.

Then he also tells us how to make friends in verse 9. How do we make friends? With money. Also doesn't seem to be the most Jesusy thing for Jesus to say. He should be more like Jesus.

But trusting that this is God's word, that it is perfect and inerrant and has been preserved perfectly for us, and trusting that Jesus is true and just and right in all He affirms, and that He only teaches things for our good, let's walk through it to try to figure out what's going on.

Remember the context here is that Jesus is at a dinner party with his disciples and the Pharisees, the religious leaders and rulers of the synagogues. He has spoken some harsh words against the Pharisees, most recently the story of the prodigal son where the Pharisees are accused of being outside of the grace of the father because they think they're good on their own. The religious leaders in Israel were missing out on Jesus and all the good He was coming to bring, and so He challenged them in the parable of the prodigal son to do what the older brother should have done at the end of the story, which is to enter into the joy of the Father.

So this story starts in verse 1 with Jesus speaking to the disciples in the presence of the Pharisees. We know the Pharisees are still listening because in verse 14 it says they are hearing and ridiculing the things Jesus is saying. So something Jesus says here is perceived by the Pharisees to be a shot at them.

They say that if you throw a rock into a pack of wolves, the one who yelps is the one you hit. And the Pharisees yelp at the end of this story, so we know Jesus hits them with whatever he's saying here. That's an important part of interpreting it.

So Jesus introduces a rich guy as the main character. Rich guys are the main characters in the parables in this chapter. And rich people in Israel were usually landowners who got their income by renting their land to workers, people who would farm the land, and hope to turn some profit after paying rent to the rich man.

Now this rich man hires a manager to run the property business, because he'd rather golf and be out on the lake than spend his time collecting rent and dealing with tenants.

The manager, or steward, of an estate, was the person who was totally in charge. He could make deals on behalf of the owner, he could hire and fire, he had power of attorney so that he could call all of the shots and run this business. And his job was to

make a profit for the rich owner. The owner wanted to be able to sit by the pool, log into his account, and see his balance go up because he left a good manager in charge.

But this manager is bad at it.

The rich man hears that his manager (verse 1) has been wasting his possessions. (It's the same word Jesus used earlier to describe what the prodigal son did - he wasted the father's possessions.) So he's not managing the business profitably, but instead the thing is poorly run and losing money under his management. So this guy is bad at his job.

But it's more than just not being cut out for the job, what he is doing is evil and wasteful like the prodigal son. He is squandering the wealth immorally. He isn't faithful, he isn't trying his best but failing, he's evil and failing. Failing in part because he's slimy in how he does business.

So, verse 2, the rich man calls the manager in and says, "I need to see the books - if they confirm that you are indeed running my estate poorly, you're gonna lose your job."

So while the rich man is reviewing the books, the manager says to himself, verse 3, **"What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg."**

The manager knows that what the rich man finds in those books isn't gonna lead to his continued employment. He's going to lose his job, and he doesn't know what he could ever do.

He says, "I don't have any skills. I basically type for a living. Which has made me scrawny and I couldn't even get a minimum wage job as a ditch digger because my muscles have atrophied from sitting at this desk for a decade. So I could go below the minimum wage job and become a beggar. But I'm a little too proud for that. The C-suite has been comfortable."

So what do I do? I'm gonna be unemployed. Also I live here on the estate, and that's gonna go away, too. I'm in a world of trouble, at a career crisis, facing abject poverty, total ruin, and I'm gonna be employed here for maybe a few more hours. And then I'm broke and homeless.

**So the manager faces a moment of crisis and reckoning.**

So he hatches a shady plan.

**4 I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7 Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.**

So, while he still has the keys for the office, he rushes in and gets on the phone and starts calling all of the people who owe massive debts to the rich man - the people who rent the land from him to produce wheat and oil. Remember, the manager can do what he wants with the rich man's business. So he calls the debtors, and one by one, and forgives massive amounts of debt that they owe to the rich man.

Some of these figures and amounts add up to years' worth of wages, and he's cancelling and reducing the debts of the debtors one by one.

Which is still unrighteous management, he is ripping off the owner. These aren't his resources that he's giving away here.

But, he knows how to make friends!

All of these people who have other businesses that are indebted to the rich man LOVE this guy. They're all getting massive debts forgiven. Imagine someone calls you and says, "I'm wiping out half of your mortgage," or "Let's cut your student debt in half." You like that guy! He has you as a friend for life. You're gonna send him Christmas cards, if he calls you're gonna pick up, and if he calls you in need, you're gonna try to use every connection you have to help him out. Because he forgave a life-changing amount of debt for you.

So the shady manager, who is about to lose his job for wasting the rich man's possessions, starts REALLY wasting them - he is burning this guys assets left and right to make some friends so that when he loses his job in a couple of hours, all of these friends that he just made will be open to hiring him and (verse 4) giving him a place to live.

The owner learns what he has done, and you would expect him to be enraged. But instead:

### **8 The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.**

The rich man says, "Well played, shady manager."

He says, "You're a crook, but I gotta hand it to you. This is the first time I saw you do anything remotely creative or resourceful in the ten years you've been working for me. I couldn't get you to work at all, but all of a sudden, here you are calling all my clients and getting stuff done. You're planning, you're acting, you're on the phone making moves - if only I could have gotten you to do that stuff before! Now get your stuff and leave."

So he doesn't commend him for the part of what he did that was crooked, he commends him for using his brain. For using the resources he had wisely.

It's not that Jesus is holding out this wicked manager as an example in all areas of virtuous Christian living. But some of what He did can be appreciated and learned from, without saying all of what he did was good.

And I think we can have assessments of people that are mixed like this. I remember once having a conversation with someone about a guy that we knew was a drug dealer, but who worked really hard at it. And we both agreed, dealing drugs is bad, but the guy still had a work ethic. He should apply that work ethic he has to a more righteous endeavor and he could be successful morally.

Or maybe if you're a parent you've had moments with little kids where they needed to be corrected for something they did, but at the same time, what they did was really funny. And you had to do the stern mom or dad face while talking to them, but then laughed hysterically and said, "But I gotta hand it to them - the comedy was top notch."

And as Jesus tells the story, he commends this manager too. Not for his dishonesty - he is unrighteous. But for his shrewdness in the use of money with the long game in mind:

### **8b For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.**

This word “shrewd” that Jesus uses here is usually translated “wise.” He says that sometimes, a shady unrighteous unbelieving manager is more wise with resources than Christians are. He knew what money was for - to be used with the long game in mind.

He knew what Christians should know: that the purpose of our money, our time, our energy, is not so we can hoard those things. The purpose is to give those things away, recognizing that we aren’t going to have them for long anyways, and to give them away strategically to secure with them the best possible future for ourselves. Which is an idea that needs more unpacking. So stick with me.

So we are called to be like the unrighteous manager by using our resources wisely, with the long game in mind.

How do we do that? Jesus goes on...

**9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.**

Just like the unrighteous manager made an awful lot of friends for himself with the use of the resources he had, we are to do the same thing.

So how do we use our resources wisely so that what Jesus commended in the manager can be commended in us? (This means that this portion of the sermon is about money, and if you think it is awkward to talk about money in church, I’ll relieve the tension next week when the passage addresses divorce!)

1) We have to recognize that **we are the managers, not the owners**, of all of our stuff. Everything we have, as much as we like to believe we own it, is owned by God and given to us to manage well.

We are called to be faithful managers of money for the *profit* of the owner.

God has given us resources, and we are called to use them so that He is pleased with the outcome. Everything we have is for the glory of God, the spreading of his kingdom, and the flourishing of humanity. And in the few minutes we have before it all fails, we are supposed to wisely use it for good.

So we use our resources wisely if we recognize we are not the owners, and secondly if we recognize that all of our wealth will fail:

2) We have to recognize that **wealth will fail**. He says “when wealth fails”, not “if wealth fails” or “in case wealth fails.”

All earthly wealth will fail. It may fail, or go away, in this life, but it will certainly go away when we die. It isn't permanent. So if we're wondering, “Will I ever run out of money?” The answer is yes - because one day all money runs out. If you're wondering, “Do I have enough to secure my future,” the answer is “No.” Because the future is an infinite amount of time and money can't secure it. Given enough time, our money will run out and fail us.

So, like that manager, knowing this money is about to fail, we do something wise with it now. With the long-game in mind. But that long game should be primarily the really long game of eternity.

So we righteously use resources by recognizing we are not the owners, by recognizing wealth will fail, and thirdly, but using our resources to accomplish the most lasting and permanent good.

3. The good that we are trying to accomplish with our wealth should be the most lasting and permanent, **most future oriented good**. Jesus says we should make friends with it who will welcome us into *eternal dwellings*.

So this is not just a call for us to be shrewd with money so we can make more money - there are proverbs about that that do call us to use money productively and prudently. (I'm all for doing what John Wesley commended, which was to make as much money as you can (morally) and give as much money as you can.) But this here isn't just a call to stay out of debt, to invest well, to be responsible, as much as those things are commended by scripture.

This is a call to use resources with an even farther horizon in mind, the horizon of eternity.

He is saying that the ultimate failure of wealth that's coming is the failure of wealth when we die, and we should use it wisely with that day in mind. And there's a way to use it wisely so that the friends we make with it will not just be people willing to give us a job and let us live at their place, but people who will welcome us in eternity.

Peter Leithart writes, “*The steward, wicked as he was (v. 8), is shrewd because he knows what money is for. Money is not a lord or a god who is to be served (16:13). Money is to be used to “make friends” through giving. The only question is what friends we are trying to make. Are we trying to make friends of the world, or are we using our money in a way that makes us friends with God? Are we using our resources and wealth to buy connections with the wealthy, powerful, and famous, so that we can bask in the glory of their fame, so that we can get invitations and benefits from them? Or are we using our wealth in order to honor God and seek a reward in the resurrection of the just?*”<sup>1</sup>

So if we’re going to use money wisely and if we’re going to make friends with it, the longest-game and the wisest thinking and the truest friendships are all eternal.

We should use the resources God has given us to do all kinds of good and solve all kinds of problems in the world. But the ultimate problem facing all people is the problem of sin and being under God’s judgment, and the ultimate problem we want to give ourselves to solving is the alienation that people are experiencing from God. So that, when our money fails, they’ll receive us into eternal dwellings.

We’re called to give our money generously mainly, though not only, with eternity in mind.

This sentiment is falling out of favor in our day, even in the church community.

One popular false teacher today wrote a book about how one of the main problems with the church is the distracting emphasis on eternity and the waste of time that is. He laments the fact that “*fortunes are spent saving people from the imaginary dangers of imaginary places.*” He writes that, “*If the Church were Christian, we would do what Jesus did—equip one another to live better in this world and stop fretting about the next one.*”<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus was incredibly concerned with the next one, with the eternal dwellings.

Remember what Jesus said in **Luke 12:5: “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart\\_post/unjust-steward/](https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/unjust-steward/)

<sup>2</sup> Philip Gulley, *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2010). 175, 176, 184.

Just as the manager generously gave away resources to be prepared for his life after the career, we are called to give away resources in such a way that shows that we are most concerned with life after this life. We use our money in a way to make eternal friends.

For all the good we can and should do with our money for the here and now, the emphasis in our generous use of resources should be on the spread of the Gospel, the only thing that can make eternal friends.

Now I know that today this sounds like utter foolishness to those who don't believe the Gospel. Which should be expected. We are told in 1 Corinthians that the Gospel is foolishness to those that are perishing.

**1 Corinthians 1:18 “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

This message seems foolish, it seems like a waste, it seems like a lack of appropriate focus for the church to those who have eyes only to see this life. But the word of the cross is the only power of God that makes eternal friends.

So in case you're unfamiliar with it, or like all of us need to have it refreshed again and again, the word of the cross is this:

- 1) Our biggest problem is not what we think. The biggest problem of the world around us is not what we think. It is sin and alienation from God.
- 2) The solution for that big problem isn't in us. It isn't in humanity. It is in a savior.
- 3) Jesus Christ is that Savior. He was sent by His Father, perfectly obeyed God's commands, and though He was righteous in all that He did and in that way wasn't like the unrighteous manager, He spent His days giving away all that the Father had given to Him.

And he gave so fully that He gave even his life when He died on the cross for our sins.

And He did so to forgive our debts. He is the true and better version of the manager in this story, who by his death not only forgives our debts in part, but forgives them in full. He wipes them out, makes all of our immense debts of sin

show zero in the books. The cross purchases total debt forgiveness for all the sins of those who would trust in Him.

- 4) Which makes the word of the cross a great offer. Scripture promises that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. We are invited to turn from sin and unbelief and trust in Him for forgiveness and salvation. And all who turn to Him in faith are forgiven.
- 5) Which leaves a call on Christians to spend our lives spreading that message.

The greatest need people have is to be saved, to learn of the Gospel and believe it and be forgiven, to be received by God in eternal dwellings.

Then Jesus draws out a few more applications from this story:

**10 "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?"**

On the surface here there's an important application: faithfulness with small things, like all of our earthly wealth, shows that we can be entrusted to something better.

So our wealth here is like a practice account for eternity.

In school we had a project in economics class where the teacher gave us a fictional amount of money, we had to pick some stocks (we used the newspapers to do this in those days), invest the practice account, to see if we could turn a profit in the market.

And that practice account demonstrated to us whether we could do OK with real money.

And Jesus says our resources here are like that - temporary fleeting dollars, almost monopoly money when it comes to lasting value, but how we use them shows our trustworthiness.

And there is coming a day, when this wealth fails, that we will be entrusted with true wealth, eternal wealth.

So that's one application of this. On top of that, there's some proverbial wisdom that people who can be entrusted with big responsibilities show themselves faithful in how they carry little responsibilities.

But there's even more going on here. One more application first:

**13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."**

This is a huge application - we will serve God or money and we can't do both. Both God and money want to be our master.

And either God will be the tool we use to get money, our ultimate goal (which is what the prosperity Gospel says - use God to get rich...)

Or money will be a tool we use wisely to honor God.

Both money and God want to be our master, and we can't serve both - we have to choose.

But remember what was going on here - Jesus says these things, Jesus tosses this rock of convicting teaching into the crowd at the dinner party, and the Pharisees yelp:

**14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. 15 And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."**

Everyone thought these Pharisees were the good guys in Israel, they loved God, and taught others to love God. But their religion was just a facade covering up their greed, they weren't serving God, but money.

They taught the law in Israel, and many of their extrapolations of the law demanded that people made payments in the temple. Which enriched them. The religious leaders were getting rich by making unbiblical demands on the faithful poor people in Israel.

**Luke 20:45-47 “45 And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."**

The religious leaders made a religious show, but bound burdens on widows to devour their houses. So, for example, they would rightly teach that people should tithe - people with income should start by giving ten percent of it away to the kingdom. Good so far. But then they'd go to the home of the widow, people without income, owning only what was left by their late husbands, and instead of saying, "We should be helping you out with the tithe," they would say, "You could give 10% of your furniture. Or of what's in your cupboard. Or of your wardrobe..."

And that seemed like they were demanding holiness, but in reality, they were motivated by greed and didn't care for the widow at all.

They were the shepherds of Israel, and the people they were supposed to protect were instead people that they preyed upon. And Jesus promised them judgement for such a lack of faithfulness with the resources God had given them.

They had been given an important position and role in Israel, to teach and to shepherd. But they oppressed and destroyed. They had been given the words of God's law and God's prophets to faithfully steward and distribute to the people.

But they had been unfaithful with it.

And now, true riches were here in the presence of Jesus. And their failure to be faithful in the little things of the law and the prophets would disqualify them for being shepherds who distribute the true eternal riches of the Gospel.

Jesus is saying that He is the master who is showing up, and calling these unrighteous managers, the Pharisees, to turn in the books. How have they stewarded what God has given them?

If they were wise, they'd repent. They'd stop oppressing the widows, they'd stop binding burdens on others they don't bear themselves. They'd use the law and the prophets wisely to point everyone to Jesus.

And this is their moment of reckoning and crisis.

Will they turn and be faithful?

That seems to be the meaning in the very difficult to interpret verses 16 and 17:

**16 "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.**

So Jesus says that until John the Baptist came along, we were in the Old Testament era - the era of the law and the prophets. And the religious leaders in Israel were the managers of that era.

Then John came as the pivot point - the last OT prophet and the first to introduce the kingdom of heaven. And since John came and Jesus started ministering, the New Covenant was preached. The good news of the kingdom of God was being delivered.

And he said that "everyone forces his way into it," which could be translated "everyone is pressing into it." People are responding to the good news of the kingdom with an urgency - I must press in and be part of that kingdom. Whatever it costs me, I'll give it to be part of that. Whatever changes I have to make. I'm going to give it all up to know this Jesus and be part of his kingdom.

That's what it is to be a recipient of the grace of God.

And the Pharisees are called to do the same. Give up all the life they knew - the life of robbing widows and misusing their position to oppress, and press in to the kingdom of God. They loved money, so they'd have to give up their master money to serve their new master Jesus.

They think they are righteous, they think of themselves as the "children of light" and as the rightful managers of the Lord's resources in His word. But they, in scoffing at Jesus, are showing that they can't recognize the moment of crisis and decision even as well as that wicked manager.

The Pharisees, and all of Israel, at this moment, face a crisis. The Old Testament era is drawing to a close and now they have to decide who their master is. And Jesus is calling them to respond in a way that secures their eternal dwellings.

Jesus had been warning them that the way they are responding to the kingdom is leading to their complete destruction. And here he gives them another chance to turn and respond well to Jesus. They've been using their status and position and money to make friends with politicians and the rich and powerful, but Jesus is calling them to use everything - their money, their position, their tables and banquets, to make friends with God and stop clinging to their stuff.

Will they repent by taking those burdens off of the poor and widows? Will they repent by making friends with those in need of grace as Jesus was doing among them? Will they care for the sinners like Jesus, or will they continue to care only for themselves. If they refuse to make these friends with what they have, they will be fired, and have nowhere to go. They'll be judged by God.

It was a moment of crisis and decision for them. And it wasn't that the word of God that they taught was wrong, it was that they taught it wrongly:

**17 But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.**

Jesus says "I'm not voiding the Bible that you teach - I'm voiding the way you use it to serve your love of money. And you must repent and press in to this new kingdom, because this is the moment of reckoning when you face the master.

And this moment of crisis for them is supposed to be a moment of crisis for us.

What will we do with Jesus?

Will we keep greedily clinging to other gods, will we follow Jesus as long as he costs us no comfort or money or effort? Or will we press into the kingdom, and give up whatever it costs to have the true riches that are ours in Christ?

## **Sermon Notes and Discussion Questions**

Luke 16:1-17

The Dishonest Manager

### **I. Jesus Commends a Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-9)**

Jesus commends the dishonest manager. He is obviously not endorsing sin. So what is He endorsing? What aspect of the person's management is being commended to Christians as exemplary?

What does Jesus mean when he tells us to make friends with money in verse 9?

How is it significant that Jesus speaks of a time "when wealth fails" in verse 9?

What are the eternal dwellings of verse 9?

### **II. Jesus Commends Faithfulness with Wealth (Luke 16:10-12)**

What does our use of money say about us?

What is the ultimate goal that Christians have in mind when they decide how to invest their wealth?

### **III. Either God or Money Will Be Master (Luke 16:13)**

Why can't we serve God *and* money?

### **IV. Jesus Commends Pressing in to the Kingdom (Luke 16:14-17)**

How would the Pharisees have repented of their love of money?

How would we?