

Topic: Lessons from the Parable of the Dishonest Manager

Subtopic: Making friends with the use of our wealth

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/kYrKGwC0IGk>

It has been said that when you come to an Episcopal Church, you are not required to leave your brains at the door. Today's parable of the unjust steward puts that slogan to the test, for it requires careful discernment and reflective thinking to understand it rightly.

The parable is about a manager who is charged with financial malpractice and, as a result, is fired by his master.

The parable, in many ways, reads like a modern mystery novel full of twists and turns, where the bad guys have something in their characters that you strangely find yourself coming to admire. In this case, admiration was even extended by the person he defrauded.

Such stories capture our imagination. One example of this is the real-life story of Frank W. Abagnale Jr, who later spent time in prison for his misdeeds in defrauding people. His life was featured in the 2002 Steven Spielberg film "*Catch Me if You Can*," starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks.

There is something fascinating about con men and women who use their wits to survive because that's the only thing they have going for them. In the parable today, the manager who has just been fired is faced with some tough decisions. He is not able to do manual labor nor is he willing to beg for financial assistance. Therefore he takes the bills of those who owe money to his master and cuts the amount owed from 50 to 20 percent; as a result, he will be provided for by those he has helped financially. Then the master, who had been defrauded

by this, praises the dishonest manager for his cleverness in using his master's money to secure his future well-being.

It is no coincidence that the original word for the word "**manager**"<sup>1</sup> in this parable could also be translated as "**steward.**" The Britannica World Language Dictionary defines a steward as "a person entrusted with the management of estates or affairs, not his own." From a Biblical point of view, "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we are all stewards of the time, gifts, and talents that God has entrusted to us.

One of the points Jesus makes about this manager concerns the shrewdness he demonstrates by the way he uses his master's wealth to secure his future.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Fred Craddock writes that "words like "shrewdness" and "cleverness" are often associated with self-serving behavior, if not ethically questionable behavior,"<sup>3</sup> which Jesus doesn't deny. The original word that is used for this "**dishonest**"<sup>4</sup> manager literally means unrighteous. Jesus does not condone his behavior, but neither does he condemn him. Jesus knows that earning a living in a fallen world is often messy. Furthermore, just because this person wasn't upright in his business dealings doesn't mean we can't learn anything from him. For example, I learned the electrical trade from people far from righteous, and eventually, they became my friends.

The application Jesus makes from this man's shrewdness focuses not on his approval of the unethical business dealings but on the prudent way he prepared for his future amid options

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<sup>1</sup> Strong's Concordance #3623 oikonomo: **A steward of a household**

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 24:1

<sup>3</sup> Citation Lost

<sup>4</sup> Strong's Concordance #93 adikia: **injustice, unrighteousness**

that were far from ideal. Ultimately, he chose to use worldly wealth, not his own, to make friends.

Our lectionary's translation for “worldly wealth”<sup>5</sup> is known in the original text by another more revealing idiom, namely, “unrighteous mammon.”<sup>6</sup> Mammon is a Semitic term for “the treasure a person trusts in.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this tendency to trust in the power that money can give, Jesus later says, “***You cannot serve God and money (mammon).***”<sup>8</sup> Yet even if this tendency taints it, we all need it and must use it. Therefore, Jesus encourages us to use our money for redemptive purposes by using a puzzling proverb that states, “***the children of this world’s age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.***”<sup>9</sup> The implication is that believers often neglect prudence in using material goods to secure lasting benefits. Therefore, Jesus says, “***I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.***”<sup>10</sup>

As Jesus concludes this parable, he makes a universal application for believers. Much like the predicament the manager faced in the parable, our choices concerning our use of money is never ideal. In such situations, it takes wisdom, insight, and shrewdness to determine what to do when choices before us are not simple. So in getting started, Jesus would suggest starting with little things for “***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. If then you have not***

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 16:9

<sup>6</sup> Literally “mammon of unrighteousness” or “unrighteous wealth.”

<sup>7</sup> Strong’s Concordance #3126 *mammōnás*: riches, money, possessions, property

<sup>8</sup> Luke 16:13

<sup>9</sup> Luke 16:8

<sup>10</sup> Luke 16:9

***been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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. You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>11</sup>***

Making an application of these words confronts us with some tough decisions. Such choices often place us between the proverbial rock and a hard place. As we move towards faithfulness in these matters, the prayer offered in our opening collect is useful. “Lord, help us not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”<sup>12</sup>

This past week Federal Express warned its investors about a global recession. In uncertain times, one thing is sure, those who invest in God’s kingdom will gain an eternal treasure that will never perish, spoil, or fade. And by the proper use of God’s gifts, we can gain friends that will one day richly welcome us in God’s blessed kingdom.

Closing Prayer: “Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>13</sup> *Amen.*

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 16:10-13

<sup>12</sup> BCP Collect for Proper 20, p. 234

<sup>13</sup> BCP Collect “For the Right Use of God’s Gifts,” p. 827