

## STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

### Study 7

## **A Long-Term Investment** (Luke 16:1-13)

Here's a parable that has worried many people. It has also fallen victim to some rather far-fetched interpretations. That's largely because we rightly believe that the Lord would never commend dishonesty. Some therefore resort to interpretive gymnastics in an attempt to avoid any such inference. The acrobatics are actually totally unnecessary if we realize that this *is* a parable and confine its teaching to the points Jesus actually makes.

Interestingly, there are two parables in Luke 16. The first is about a shrewd manager who is generous with his master's money and the second is about a wealthy landowner who is tight-fisted with his own money. Nowadays we are reticent to speak about finance in church. This, as Craig Blomberg remarks, is largely because "so many Christian leaders who talk about money simply harangue their listeners for more, abuse the Scriptures' teaching on the subject, or (precisely because of others' abuse) think that finances are not a topic to be discussed in public at all."<sup>1</sup> But he quickly reminds us that "approximately one-fifth of all (Jesus') teaching was about money matters."

### **WHAT?**

#### 1. The Setting

Jesus was speaking primarily to his disciples (probably the wider circle of disciples and not just the twelve; see Luke 6:13; 10:1), but the Pharisees are assumed by Luke to be included among the listeners (16:14). The 'players' in the parable are the owner of a landed estate, his estate manager and a number of tenants who paid their rent by giving the owner a fixed amount of their yearly produce.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 83.

## 2. The Parable

Everything indicates that "the rich man" in the parable (the owner of the large estate) is an honourable man. But it comes to his notice that his business manager is doing a really poor job ("wasting his possessions"). We are not told that the manager was guilty of embezzlement or fraud and we ought not to say any more than the parable does. The owner summons the manager and calls him to account. The manager knows that the charges are valid and is intelligent enough to remain silent. Kenneth Bailey argues that "this silence is supremely significant in the Oriental context."<sup>2</sup> The hearer would have expected him to protest his innocence, but he does no such thing. He is dismissed on the spot ("You cannot be manager any longer"). His authority is terminated immediately. But, in a sense, his dismissal is in process. He still has to turn in the books and the word of his dismissal is not yet out in the community. He has time to manoeuvre, and manoeuvre he does!

En route to collect the accounts, the quick-thinking manager settles on a course of action. He realizes he is in serious trouble. He is out of work. Manual labour and begging are out of the question. But he has a small window of opportunity. This man was not only shrewd but also crooked! He was taking something of a risk. His master could possibly have jailed him if, in the first place, his dealings had been dishonest. And when he pulls his next trick, the wealthy landowner can declare the transactions null and void on account of the fact that the manager is no longer in his employ and is therefore not entitled to transact business on his behalf. He can also take punitive action against him. But he knows his master well enough to think that the risk is worth taking.

The tenants do not know that he has been fired. As far as they are concerned, he still speaks for his master. The amounts that they owe are not *due* until the harvest, but they were *owing* from the moment the agreement was signed. He has to act quickly. He calls in each one of his master's debtors and asks him how much he owes. He then significantly reduces the bills (two examples are given: 16:5-7). "Reducing such account figures--sometimes because of unfavourable weather conditions affecting the crops--was not all that unusual."<sup>3</sup>

The tenants understandably assume that he has full authority to do so, and possibly that he has prevailed upon his master to show this lenience. His motivation for this is clear. In a society where one good turn deserves another, they will be kindly disposed to him when they know he is out of work. He was in the business of making

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 97.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 769.

friends. If he had abused his position of trust before his dismissal, he was now resorting to deceit. So he was bad; there's no doubt about that.

There are other angles on the parable that make it exceptionally rich. For example, in taking a calculated risk, the manager was placing his master in an awkward position. Good news like this travels. The communal nature of Middle Eastern society is such that a round of celebration would already have started in the village by the time the master discovered what had happened. The wealthy landowner would have been lauded in the district for his amazing generosity (the assumption being that he had authorised the reductions). Imagine how stingy he would appear if he had declared the transactions null and void on the basis that the manager had been dismissed. So he lets matters stand, cuts his losses, and accepts the goodwill of his debtors as well as their family and friends--as his unscrupulous manager expected he might.

### 3. The Problem

The problem arises in verse 8: "The master *commended* the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Would the Lord commend dishonesty of this kind? Well, first of all, it is not the Lord who commends this man; it is his master who does so. Secondly, his master does not commend him *for his dishonesty*, but can't help but admire his shrewdness. The man was resourceful. Thirdly, in the parables, the Lord does sometimes use examples of bad behaviour to make a point *without condoning the bad behaviour itself* (e.g. the neighbour who was reluctant to help a friend in need [Luke 11:5-8]; the judge who administered justice only because he was sick and tired of the persistence of a widow [Luke 18:1-8]). Our ethical norms are determined by the teaching of Scripture as a whole, which is quite clear on the matter of honesty. Remember also that the Lord frequently uses 'shock tactics' in his parables. He tells stories that are drawn from the world with which the hearer is familiar, but "but preference and with great art, Jesus' parables tell just such stories, which are not by any means a regular feature of daily life."<sup>4</sup> The point(s) Jesus was making would come home with extra force precisely because he used such a shocking example.

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<sup>4</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 70.

#### 4. The Interpretation

The interpretation of the parable is complicated by the fact that there are *three* points related to wealth in verses 8-13.<sup>5</sup> Let's take them one at a time. The main point of the parable is contained in verses 8 and 9.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Craig Blomberg suggests that Matthew 10:16 may, in fact, be the best one-sentence commentary on Jesus' parable found anywhere. There, Jesus commanded his followers to be 'as shrewd as snakes' but 'as innocent as doves.'<sup>6</sup> (Someone has commented that he does not tell us to be as wicked as serpents and as dumb as doves). The Lord is, of course, saying more than, "Smarten up!" That is certainly included in the point he is making. If we are to be good stewards of the resources he entrusts to us, we need to administer them wisely. That is the *responsible* thing to do. It is the *moral* thing to do. Indeed it is the *loving* thing to do.

But there's more to his statement than that. The reference to "eternal dwellings" is significant. The dishonest manager realised that he had a failing resource. Within hours he would be in no position to use the wealth at his disposal for his own benefit. So he seized the opportunity and made the (control he had over the) money work for him. Jesus tells us to use whatever worldly wealth we have as wise stewards. But notice the contrasts. He would never advocate dishonesty! The dishonest manager feathered his own nest. His motive was selfish. In the short-term future, he wanted to be invited into the houses of the "friends" he had made by dubious means. We should seek, with pure motives, to make "friends" who will welcome us into *eternal* dwellings.

Our interpretation is "controlled" by several factors. We *know* that the Lord would never advocate dishonesty. We *know* that our motivation should be love. So we do not use our resources simply to get a warm welcome into our eternal home. If we were doing no more than making a smart personal investment, we wouldn't be much better than the dishonest steward. There are important hints in the passage. Look at the contrast between "the people of the world" and "the people of the light" in

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<sup>5</sup> Some hold that the parable and its interpretation end in verse 8 and that verses 9-13 contain a three stanza poem about money. From a compositional point of view there may be something to this suggestion, but verse 9 is well integrated into verse 8 and flows from it. It certainly seems like part of the application of the parable.

<sup>6</sup> Blomberg, *Parables*, 84.

verse 8. We too have worldly wealth, but it is to be invested in people (for the right reasons of course) so that it will pay *eternal* dividends.

The application of the parable may have ended right there. But Jesus made two related statements about our attitude toward money that are pertinent.

- *Be a trustworthy steward.*

In verses 10 to 12, he urges us to be faithful in our administration of worldly wealth. God entrusts us all with wealth. It really belongs to him. We are stewards. Our use of our wealth (great or small) is a sure indicator of our trustworthiness. Sobering thought! Your cheque or credit card statement is an indication of your priorities. Again, the contrasts in the passage are significant:

"trusted" - "dishonest"

"very little" - "much"

"worldly wealth" - "true riches"

"someone else's property" - "property of your own"

I don't think we need to attempt to relate this statement directly to the dishonest steward by asking, "Is *he* now being criticised?" What we have in these verses (10-12) is a general statement about *good* stewardship!

- *Get your perspective right.*

While on the subject of money, it is clear that if our supreme allegiance is to God, we use money and everything else in life in his service. If, however, money has mastery over us, we cannot really be serving God. No one can serve two masters. This statement is, of course, shorthand for something else. None of us arranges our money on the living room floor and bows down to it. In reality, to "serve money" is to be self-absorbed and to have incorrect priorities. Nothing stifles spiritual growth more than a preoccupation with money and nothing liberates us from greed more than allegiance to God. The statement in verse 13 is as true today as when Jesus first spoke the words.

Interestingly, there were some highly religious people in the audience. Luke comments: "The Pharisees, *who loved money*, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus" (16:14). Along these lines, I know of no better passage than 1Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19. Isn't it wonderful how one passage of Scripture corroborates another?

*To sum up:*

If we take the teaching of the passage in reverse order (just to come at it from a different angle), here's what it says: You need to understand that it is impossible to serve God and money. Money is not the most important kind of wealth that there is. But God entrusts us with it so that we can administer it to his glory. If we can't even do that, how can we expect God to entrust us with "true riches"? So, our use of money is an index to our general trustworthiness. If we have any sense, we will 'invest' our money so that it earns *eternal* dividends. In fact, even a rogue of a man had enough sense to use a resource he could not keep in an enterprising way. If he, as "a person of this world," did so for selfish ends, we, as "people of the light," should do so for altruistic ends.

### **SO WHAT?**

1. What is the main teaching of this parable and how does it apply to us today?
2. So, should we talk about money in the church? Why (not)?

### **NOW WHAT?**

1. Have you looked at your cheque or credit card statement lately and asked whether the priorities reflected there are likely to "make friends" who will welcome you into "eternal dwellings?"
2. Have you heard of the "graduated tithe" by means of which you give an increasing proportion of your income (as you become more 'prosperous') to the advancement of the kingdom, including the needy? What do you think about it?
3. If you use 1Tim 6:6-10, 17-19 as a "commentary" on Jesus' teaching in this passage, how practically could we implement its main points? ("contentment," "simple lifestyle," "humility," "trusting God," "enjoying our 'possessions,'" "generosity.")
4. So, what if you are wealthy (in global terms, most of us are exceptionally wealthy)? Should you seek to become poor so that you can serve God better?
5. Somebody said, rather simplistically, "It's all right to have things, so long as things don't have you." Think about the valid point that is made. Is there a convenient 'loophole' in a statement like this one?