

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-12-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ¹⁰“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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.”

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This parable is one of the most (if not the most) confounding of Jesus’ teachings. As we will see, not even Jesus and Luke seemed to know quite what the main point of this parable is. There are four characters in the parable: The rich man, his manager, and two debtors. The manager gets notification that he is being fired for impropriety in his management. There is no actual proof of wrongdoing presented to us, but the manager’s subsequent actions certainly back up the accusations levied against him. He apparently responded to losing his job by defrauding his master out of even more money or possessions. In such an economic system, it is possible that the part of the debt that the manager was cancelling was his own cut of the deal. In other words, he isn’t cheating his master out of money, but he is instead allowing his master to collect his dues while forgoing his own share temporarily in order to earn the generosity of those whom he had forgiven, knowing that they would owe him (and his master) a debt of gratitude.

Even if he did squander the master's property, in an honor and shame culture, being known as a generous land owner who forgave massive debts might, in fact, be more valuable in the long run than having 50 extra gallons of oil or 20 extra containers of wheat.

⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;

The problems with interpreting this parable are numerous, but the main difficulty is that the dishonest or unrighteous manager is praised—either by Jesus or by his master in the parable—as shrewd, prudent, or wise. Rarely is the hero of a parable one who has acted unrighteously.

Verse 8a can be treated either as the end of the parable, as the NRSV has done here, or it can be treated as the beginning of a new portion of the narrative. Verse 8a can also be translated “And the Lord commended the dishonest manager...” In fact, this is the most natural way to translate it. The literal verse in Greek is: “And the Lord/Master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;” The subject of this verse is the term *kurios* which can refer either to a master of someone or something; that is a lord in the political sense OR it can mean (as it often does in Luke and the other gospels) The Lord, referring to Jesus. So depending on how we choose to translate this verse it either forms a shocking end to the parable: The *defrauded wealthy master* commended the unrighteous manager for his shrewd or wise behavior OR it forms a shocking commentary from Jesus on the parable itself: *Jesus* commended the unrighteous manager for his shrewd or wise behavior. Either way the same essential problem remains: A manager who is a scoundrel is praised either by his former boss or by Jesus himself as being wise, prudent, and shrewd in his actions. The NRSV has chosen to translate 8a as the end of the parable probably because the parable seems incomplete if it ends at verse 7, but either way we must contend and wrestle with why a lord or The Lord would commend a dishonest manager for forgiving debts he had no right to forgive.

for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

To continue the difficulty with how to understand the parable, we hear Jesus praise those with worldly shrewdness in dealing with “their own” over and above the so-called “children of light;” i.e. the disciples. Further, verses 8b and 9 are the first of three summaries or interpretations or commentaries on the parable. It seems Jesus and/or Luke didn't know exactly what the point of this parable was either, so they give us three possible takeaways to consider. In this first one, the point seems to be using worldly resources to further the kingdom of God and to get into the good graces of secular society. The term “dishonest” really means “unrighteous, evil, or unjust.” The term “wealth” can be translated as “wealth, mammon, riches, property, possessions.” What is meant by “unrighteous wealth” is not exactly clear, though one could make the argument that any wealth is unjust in the sense that in most economic systems if someone has more than they need, others have less than they need. Again, if the manager forgave only his own cut of the deals, then we might understand Jesus to be advocating radical sacrifice in order to secure future favor from those outside of the community of faith. If the manager indeed cost his master large chunks of money by his actions, we are likely left puzzled as to how this would apply to our lives as disciples. Because this explanation of the parable didn't seem to fully explain it, we move on to the second possible interpretation of the parable in v. 10.

¹⁰“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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

Here the issue seems to be not so much *what* we have or whether it is just or unjust, but rather *what we do* with what we have. How we use our possessions in this world matters. If we're not faithful with secular things like money and possessions as those who seek to follow Christ, will he then entrust us with sacred matters? Again, not fully wrapping up or doing justice to the parable here, we move on to possible interpretation number 3.

¹³No 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.”

Here the explanation for the parable is not so much what we do or what we do with what we have, but rather what our priorities are. This hardly seems a satisfactory explanation for the parable, but was likely tacked on here as a “saying” of Jesus since it has to do with wealth and possessions like the rest of this passage.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Do you think the manager deserved to be praised in this parable? Why or why not?**
- 2. What do you think Jesus is trying to get his disciples to understand about the kingdom of God in this passage?**
- 3. Do you think Jesus is correct in his assessment that one cannot serve God and wealth? Why or why not?**