



Sermon Series: “A Visit to the Good Physician”
“Do You Want to be Faithful in Much?”

Preaching Text: Luke 16:1-13

22 September 2013: 18th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

1 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. 2 So 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.’ 3 Then 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. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7 Then 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.’ 8 And 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. 9 And 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. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 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” (Luke 16:1-13).

In this section of his Gospel Luke continues exploring the theme of people’s relationship to possessions via a troublesome parable: “The Unjust/Dishonest Steward.” This parable often creates an intense anxiety among believers. Even the parable’s text is tricky—where does it end? David Buttrick writes, “Clearly the parable embarrassed Luke, for he keeps adding verses—8b, 9, 10-12—trying to find an acceptable moral for the story” (*Speaking Parables*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2000, p. 210). So let’s focus on the parable.

Luke uses the image of a “rich man” as he sometimes does to begin this parable (see: Luke 12:16; 16:19). Evidently the steward’s master lived a distance from his business



but, nonetheless, caught wind of his steward who was “squandering his property.” After calling him to account (the steward never denies his neglect of his stewardship) the master generously does not fire him at once, but rather asks for an “accounting of your management.” This act of mercy buys some time for the manager. The dishonest manager/steward then ponders what he shall do because “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” Without a job recommendation and the prospect of another job appearing improbable, he all the same hits on an idea.

The steward’s idea is to place others in his debt by discounting their bills to his soon-to-be former master. Of course the master’s debts will not be paid until the harvest, and the intervening time will allow him to scramble for the next “saving-his-skin” idea. The dishonest manager acts hastily before word of his dismissal spreads to those who owe the master.

Luke gives us two cases of debt reduction—a hundred jugs of olive oil become fifty; a hundred containers of wheat become eighty. Readers assume from the parable’s context that the dishonest manager used this practice again and again. In defense of the steward/manager we might infer that he reduced his commission on the collection of debts, but the parable never explicitly tells us this. The parable’s surprise: “the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” I am shocked! You are shocked! What kind of parable is this, and why did Jesus tell it as a positive model?

No doubt one reason Jesus told this parable is that the value of a “welcome you into the eternal homes” is such that those who seek God’s realm must be willing to employ drastic measures. Thus the master praises the steward not so much for his dishonesty or chicanery as for quick thinking in a pinch. When it comes to matters of salvation and eternal life, we might apply Jesus’ words: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). At times to be wise, faithful stewards must do some fast thinking. When faithful



stewards face desperate times and circumstances, then these occasions call for rash actions.

The dishonest manager perhaps put the creditors in his debt. Later he can appeal to them on behalf of his prior favor. Perhaps the master praised him for his economic “slight of hand” that got the master into the good graces of those who first owed him. Either way, in a tight spot the dishonest steward/manager did what was required to save his neck. In the realm of God those who “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth” also know how to make friends with a God who ushers them into their eternal homes. This parable speaks to the issue of wise use of the resources at hand. Faithful stewards on occasion do what needs to be done in order to best manage God’s resources.

And yet . . . I like what Msgr. Frank C. Wissel, pastor at St. Mary Church in Greenwich, CT, writes:

The Roman emperor, Julian, citing this parable as an illustration, attacked Christian teaching as corrupting to the morals of society.

But the emperor missed the point—and the pun of the parable. Like all parables, this story is a Trojan horse. It appears to be a straightforward, simple story.

But once inside our defenses, it unloads its hidden challenge.

Jesus wants us to see the value of living with a sense of purpose, with the same sense of the future. Many Christians live with the despair that the best days are behind them, that the “old-time religion” of their memory is the best God had to offer.

Our task as Christian believers is to grasp the future and hang on with all we have—making the best of our circumstances because God is with us in Christ. We scramble and scuffle—some grind it out day to day—but life is a gift and an adventure all wrapped up in one big package.

Another and final way we might propose something of a way out or way into this parable is by using the context, perspective, or framework of Luke as he writes his Gospel. Human life and its relationship with the gospel is something like what we



see in Luke's parable. At the beginning of the parable every character is in what we might call a **"down position."** The Master has money owed to him, squandering the Master's property is the steward's position, while the debtors obviously owe a lot to the Master. At every turn in the parable each character acts in self-serving ways—that is each seeks his advantage in some resolution of the business arrangement presented by Jesus.

Yet by the end of the parable everyone's needs are addressed and resolution to everyone's satisfaction seems probable . . . although the parable remains open ended. We really never know if people live happily ever after or not.

The gospel is like this too. We self-seeking human beings try to control and manipulate the outcomes of our life only to find that the best things we have or get are given as a gracious gift. Amazing . . . full of grace . . . and oddly wonderful.

Let us pray:

Living for Jesus through earth's little while,
my dearest treasure, the light of his smile,
seeking the lost ones he died to redeem,
bringing the weary to find rest in him. Amen.