

"A Practice Sermon about Stewardship"

Luke 16:1-8

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
22 September 2019
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This parable is baffling.

A rich man gets word that his manager has been cheating him. (The Greek word for manager—oikonomos—often translates as “steward” and describes one who manages an estate or a household.) Translators use words like “squandering his property” and “wasting his possessions” (NRSV, NIV) to describe the manager’s crime. The translator JB Phillips calls this manager a “rogue” and a “rascally steward.”

When the manager finds out he’s going to be fired, he tells himself (in a bit of tension-building interior monologue), I’m too weak to dig for a living, and I’m ashamed to beg.

So, he does what he does best. He wheels and deals.

He summons the people who owe his boss money, and he radically reduces their debt. The guy who owes a hundred jugs of olive oil has only to repay fifty. The farmer who owes a hundred containers of wheat has only to repay 80.

Why does the manager do this? This is why: When he is finally fired, he can go to the Olive guy and the Wheat guy and catch a break. *Look, I gave you a great bargain, remember? Now, I'm out of work and surely you have something for me to do. Certainly, you have a place for me to stay. I did you a favor. A big favor. Now it's your turn to do me a favor.*

The manager proves to be street wise. He’s able to take care of himself in a dire situation. No, it’s not honest, but we can gather that this guy is going to survive.

So far, so good.

How does his boss react? *This is where the parable unravels for most interpreters.*

It would seem logical that the rich man would be angry. *People owed me 100 jugs of oil and you collected only 50? How dare you!*

But, in a huge twist, the rich man *commends the manager* because he “acted shrewdly” (NRSV, Luke 16:8a), “acted cleverly” (CEB), “done wisely” (KJV).

What is Jesus’ point?

It seems we need just a little more information that the text doesn’t provide.

Maybe the rich man was a terrible person who gouged his clients, and the manager, by only collecting a small portion of what the debtors owed, was cutting them a fair break. That would, maybe, make sense. But the scripture doesn't say that.

Maybe the rich man had charged unfair interest for the loans. Or maybe the rich man had been unfair to clients in some other way. It would be nice to make this manager some kind of Robin Hood.

But scripture won't allow us to draw this conclusion.

Nor does Luke tell us why the Rich Man commends the dishonest manager for being shrewd. What does being dishonestly shrewd in this context have to do with living a godly life?

Charles B. Cousar, New Testament professor emeritus at Columbia Seminary says this "bewildering" passage is simply "one of the great exegetical mountains of scripture" (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, Westminster Press*, p. 97).

Scholars can't agree.^[1]

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My sermon title bills this sermon as a practice sermon on stewardship. Our seasonal focus on stewardship will begin in October.

As you know, the most important question for the Christian is this: do you want to be a Christian in the first place? Do you want to be a disciple of Jesus? If the answer is "yes," the next most important question is, How? How are you going to use your gifts to follow Jesus? How are you going to attempt living a life of faith? This is a question of stewardship.

This passage may suggest to us that "managing" what God has entrusted to our care requires bold, wise, even "shrewd" thinking. How do I use everything I have—my time, my talent, and my treasure—to serve God? How do I manage and organize my very busy life to best serve others in God's name? Since I can't do it all, how do I prioritize all of the needs of my family, church, community, and job?

This interior monologue with ourselves—about how am I to be the best disciple I can be—is where the example of that crooked rogue might be of some use to us. The bad manager, when threatened with being fired for poor management, ingeniously poured his energy and creativity into his own selfish gain. If we poured the same creative energy and shrewd management into our own efforts to be a faithful disciple, the kingdom of God might be rejoice, and our neighborhoods and the ministries of our church might be faithfully and well served.

So be shrewd. Be honest. Work faithfully. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

Luke 16:1-8 Then Jesus^[a] 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.

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[1] Eugene Peterson paraphrases the passage this way:⁹ “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by . . .”