

**“Making Your Money Work for You” GPPC 9-18-16**  
**Jeremiah 8:18—9:1, Luke 16:1-13**

The parable of the dishonest manager is maybe the most offensive parable Jesus ever told. Saint Augustine said, “I can’t believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” (Quote from William Harkins in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2*, 92.) No kidding. Of the four gospels that became part of the New Testament, Luke is the only one that records this parable.

He says there was this billionaire who had a property manager. Charges were brought to the billionaire that his property manager was actually wasting his money. So the rich man called the manager into his office on the 50<sup>th</sup> floor and said, “So, what’s this I’m hearing about you? I want a full accounting on my desk by tomorrow, and you can go ahead and start cleaning out your desk, because you’re not going to be managing my property anymore.”

The parable makes sense so far, right? The rich man apparently accepts the charges that have been brought against the manager at face value; we don’t hear anything about a continuing investigation. And the manager himself doesn’t argue that he is being treated unfairly. He is

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accused of “squandering” the money. And initially we don’t know if he’s corrupt or merely incompetent or both. So the parable continues with the manager’s interior dialogue.

He thinks to himself, “What am I going to do? I’m too weak to dig ditches and too ashamed to get a sign and beg out on Battleground Avenue. I know what I’ll do, so that when I’m actually fired, I’ll still have some clout and prestige in this town.”

So he brings in each of the folks who owe his “master” (Luke switches from calling him “a rich man” to calling him “master” here). The manager brings in each of these folks, then says, “What do you owe my master? That much, huh? Okay. Have I got a deal for you! Go ahead and write a check today and you only have to pay part of what you owe.” And Luke says when the master finds out about it, he commends the dishonest manager because he acts shrewdly.

Seriously, Jesus?

This guy was already squandering his master’s money. Now, in order to protect himself from hard work or embarrassment, he costs his

master even more money. And then the master commends him for acting *shrewdly*.

Really, Jesus? Is this the way you'd run a business, Jesus?

What's happening here? As you can imagine, Bible scholars offer varying interpretations.

Some think that the dishonest manager lowers the bills the people owe his master by dropping his own commission he would normally receive as manager. Thus, the people who owe the debt are happy with the master *and* the former manager, and the master is happy when he runs into happy debtors. Happy, happy, happy. That's one theory.

Others say, no, this manager not only squanders the property, but then he manipulates the financial records, "cooks the books." And the manager calls him shrewd as a kind of sighing, throw-up-your hands congratulations. "Well played, former money manager. Well played."

Still other scholars say that the manager isn't dishonest at all, just not very successful at managing property. What's dishonest, they say, is the whole monetary system that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. And the manager strikes a blow against the system and a blow

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for the poor by dismissing some of the debt they owe. Shrewd, very shrewd. (See Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, 212-214.)

Which of these three interpretations is correct? We don't know, do we? But, as we've seen before, Jesus is not above trying to shock us with a story in which an unlikely character or even an unsavory character ends up being the hero. Maybe Jesus is being playful and trying to get our attention with some hyperbole. Maybe he wants us to think, "Well, if a scoundrel like that manager can be shrewd and please his earthly master, surely the people of God can do better in pleasing their heavenly Master."

Remember the master calls the manager shrewd not because he's so good at managing his property. No. He's *lousy* at managing his property, maybe even *dishonest* at managing it. So why does the master call him "shrewd"? Isn't it because in the end he has the right attitude and he takes action? He understands that the day of accounting has suddenly arrived. And instead of being paralyzed by it, or whining about it, or searching for someone to blame, or looking for excuses, he *does* something about it.

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A theologian says, “We do not know when we will be dismissed from our temporary management of all [the things of this life], but dismissed we will be. The present order is not permanent, and our authority over life, goods, and all the rest is temporary.” (Justo L. González, *Luke*, 191.)

The manager shows us the key is our attitude and our actions. The key is our attitude and action toward money, toward God, and toward life itself. How do we view money, God, and life?

On Thursday night, the Mission Committee of our church sat around tables for a meeting that lasted a little over two hours. We spent part of our time talking about a mission trip to Nicaragua this summer. What projects participants might tackle while there. How we might raise part of the money needed for the trip and the projects. Important and exciting stuff and you’ll be hearing more in the days and weeks to come.

But probably the longest section of the meeting was devoted to deciding how to allocate thousands of dollars of Guilford Park’s mission budget money to dozens of local organizations and programs that help people in our area and show the love of God. As you can imagine, the

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committee really struggled with their decisions, but in the end, we felt very good about how God's money is going to be used to help people. Isn't it fun giving away money to help people? Isn't it a marvelous privilege?

Every year at the Mission Dinner and Dessert Auction we remember that. A homemade cake or pie or a plate of cookies might go for a couple hundred bucks; fifty bucks is a bargain. And we laugh through the whole bidding process. It's fun giving away money to help people, isn't it?

Our life is rich when we love God and use money--and not the other way around.

Money is not evil, of course. But loving money instead of God and people is. Money is not evil, but it is a challenge for people of faith. Jesus says we need to be shrewd, we need to be prudent about money. Heck, Jesus even says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth..." Whatever Jesus means by "dishonest wealth," he says if God can't trust us with dishonest wealth, how is God going to trust us with something bigger—the reign of God? And as one Bible

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scholar says, “Giving it away is the only way to make dirty money clean...” (François Bovon, *Luke 2*, 451.)

We know our time on the earth, our time to use what we have to show God’s love is limited. Nobody knows when his or her time is up. But like that *shrewd* manager, we have the opportunity *today* to use our money to show God’s love to a needy and hurting world.

But Jesus says we can’t serve two masters. We either love money and try to use God, or we love God and try to use money. This week let’s spend some time thinking about how we might make our money work for us by having it work for God’s love. How about investing ourselves more fully--time, abilities, and money--in God’s church? And are there causes and people in this community we will put our money, time, and effort into? After all it’s fun to spend money on ourselves, but that fun is nothing compared to the joy of giving it away to make God’s world a better place. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal