

## Parables Session 8

### Introductory Comments

1. Major problems face the interpreter of this parable. So difficult is the solving of them that there remains no scholarly consensus. Although the basic point being made is not terribly complicated, making the details fit together is. We are given no help by any other sources since nothing in this section of Luke has a parallel except the final saying.
2. The first problem is determining where the parable ends and where the moral lessons begin. Since the rich man in the parable has been identified as “master” (*kyrios*) and since Jesus in Luke’s narrative has been identified as *Kyrios* as well, one can understand why 16:8a should create some puzzlement: “the *kyrios* praised the wicked manager because he acted cleverly.” Does this end the question in the voice of Jesus, or does it begin the interpretation put in the mouth of Jesus by the narrator? The issue has been troublesome especially to readers who thought that if it were Jesus who approved the cleverness, this would constitute an approval of the man’s immoral behavior.
3. That leads to the second problem: what was the nature of the household manager’s action? Did he continue his fraudulent ways for his own advantage and the continued cheating of his master? Or did he sacrifice something of what was legally owed him as agent in order to secure grateful clients for himself? In either case, was his behavior within the bounds of conventional expectations and legality? Was he “wicked” in the first instance (wasting his master’s money) and only “clever” in the second? Or was his “cleverness” also wicked?
4. And then there is the issue of what to do with the morals that come after (16:9-13). Where does the parable end, and the morals begin? What is the connection between the parable and the closing string of observations? At the end of the day, this is a complicated parable that doesn’t lie flat. Of course, many have tried to make it so. To do so is the parabolic equivalent of Billy Collins’ students’ approach to poetry from his poem, “Introduction to Poetry” (But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it. / They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means). While many of us would like to beat a bruised, but clear, meaning out of this parable, we will do our best to let it speak through its complications and messiness.

### Questions

Read Luke 16:1-8, the Shrewd Manager

1. **In difficult passages, we are often well-served to understand the context in which the passage falls. What is the context in which this parable appears in Luke?** Jesus has turned from controversy with the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-32) to teach his followers. And if Luke’s usual pattern holds true, some of the elements in the earlier section will reappear in this one, but now by means of positive exhortation rather than polemic. Furthermore, this passage is followed by the Pharisees “mocking” what Jesus teaches (16:14), so they are to be imagined as overhearing this instruction of Jesus’ disciples. This parable also follows directly after the “Parable of the Lost Son,” so there may be some interpretive relevance.

2. **What is the trouble that the manager gets into?** He is accused of “squandering” his master’s wealth. The word has nothing to do with wasteful spending or illegal bribery. It is a word with its roots in the sowing of seed. That means that the master was upset because he heard (whether accurately or not) that the manager was spreading his money around. The manager was investing. Or he was diversifying. Or he was stimulating the local economy. He was managing... and, influenced by the accusations, the master was opposed to that management.
3. **Why is the manager called “dishonest” in verse 8? What does he do that is “dishonest”?** If we skim this parable quickly, we assume that the steward is dishonest because of what he does in the parable, lowering the amount each debtor owed his master. If we read more carefully, we notice that the parable doesn't tell us that the steward is dishonest because of what he does in Luke 16:5-7. It doesn't even actually come out and say that he was dishonest before that – the Greek word used in verse 1 means “slandered/accused” rather than “dishonest.” What it does say is that charges were brought to the rich man against his manager, that he was squandering his employer's property. Was he? Or did somebody want the rich man to think he was? In my view, the adjective "dishonest" refers to the actions he was accused of at the beginning of the parable, not to his actions in lowering the debtors' debts to his boss in verses 5-7. While we do not know exactly what the manager did that was “dishonest,” the title in 16:8 refers to him as such.
4. **Why does the master commend the manager?** From a business standpoint, it makes no sense. But what about from a spiritual standpoint? The alleged dishonest manager was certainly not someone we would consider a model citizen, but there was still something he was 'good' at - being shrewd. The manager took this 'gift,' if you want to call it that, and made it work for him so that his future was more secure. Management, they say, is the art of using what you have to get what you want. And this is exactly what the clever manager in the parable did. He used every power and opportunity at his disposal as a manager to secure for himself a bright future. As a manager he was shrewd, he had foresight, and he was pragmatic. The gospel challenges us to bring into the conduct of our spiritual lives the same foresight and realism that this manager brought into the conduct of his business life.
5. **Where do you place yourself in this parable? Is there someone you should emulate?** How about the rich man? The rich man doesn't even give the employee a chance to defend himself. The alleged accusation was automatically presumed true, and the rich man plows ahead with his judgement. What kind of person is this rich man that he so quickly passes judgement on someone who had obviously worked hard to be placed in such a position of trust? And then, when an accusation comes out of the blue - sorry, no questions allowed - it's out of the door with you? This is the same rich man who would later commend the accused “dishonest” manager for his shrewdness. The manager had just cost him a significant loss on his loans, and yet he commends him. What strange behavior. Certainly not a sterling example of righteousness.

What about the so-called dishonest manager? If he was not guilty of being dishonest before, he went ahead to live up (or is that down?) to his accusation. He goes one by one to the people who owed the rich man some goods. He offers them deals to take between 20% or 50% off on their bills. And, as if incriminating himself was not bad enough, he encourages the debtors to be accomplices by writing their own invoices!

6. **How is the manager like Christ?** First of all, he dies and rises, like Jesus. Second, by his death and resurrection, he raises others, like Jesus. But third and most important of all, the unjust steward is the Christ-figure because he is a rogue, a reprobate like Jesus. The unique contribution of this parable to our understanding of Jesus is its insistence that grace cannot come to the world through respectability. Think of how many times Jesus was accused of eating and socializing with the worst of society. He was judged as wholly outside the bounds of “respectability” by the ones who thought that “respectability” was paramount. Respectability regards only life, success, winning; it will have no understanding of the grace that works by death and losing - which is the only kind of grace there is.
7. **What is the point of this parable? What does it provoke?** There are many possibilities, but here are three. A) This parable says that if you imagine you live in a morally simple universe then you’re not old enough to live in this universe. The world is complicated. B) Everyone is caught in those complications. The parable makes it clear that if you imagine that you are and will always remain clean, you have not been paying attention. C) The parable also requires us to note that too much idealistic protest forgets that we are all enmeshed in a system that is more complicated than we understand. If we were to wait until we or our situation was perfect to act in Christ-like ways, we would never lift a finger. Much like what the Prodigal Son indicated (that we are best served to act on behalf of compassion and reconciliation, not waiting for an apology or until we can forgive, this parable reminds us not to wait for the perfect in order to act on the good. None of us is *only* good, or *only* respectable; we are all caught up in messy realities and the “wickedness of mammon.” But we are all capable of managing to act with justice, of managing to act with compassion, no matter the circumstances that got us to where we are. Why would Jesus tell a story like this? He appears to be particularly aware of the complications that make human life what it is, but he also knows the possibilities. And when we free ourselves from judgment, and we get out of the way, more room is created in which God can work. It’s like Mother Teresa once said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”

What does this parable provoke in you?

*\*\*\*For next session, read Matthew 18:23-24, Unforgiving Slave*