

Luke 16:1-13 | The Where a Guy Uses Questionable Business Practices

Written by John Fox | 2.19.2023

Text: Luke 16:1-13

Title: The One About the Guy with Questionable Business Practices

FCF: love of money/greed/selfishness

Shaft: You cannot serve God and money (v.13)

Main Point: How we steward God's money exposes what we really believe about Jesus.

Points:

1. A warning (v.1-8)
2. An instruction (v.9-12)
3. A reality (v.13)

INTRODUCTION

Parables Reminder & Interpretation Challenge

By way of reminder, we are currently in a series studying the parables of Jesus. We are actually right at the halfway point as this is the 7th out of 12 sermons. This far in, it's easy to forget some introductory notes about parables, but I think we need two points of review because today's passage is notoriously difficult. In fact, all the commentaries I read said this is *THE* hardest parable to interpret. One of the primary resources we are using even listed the top 16 ways to interpret the parable. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment because I picked this one, but allow me to remind you of two things.

1-Jesus' Parables are meant to be relatable

The word parable comes from two words, "para" (alongside), and "ballo" (to cast or throw). So the meaning of parables connotes the idea of throwing a comparison or contrast alongside a real life issue. But, these are not simply moralistic lessons. Unlike Aesop's Fables, Jesus always in relation to himself and his coming kingdom. This brings us to the second important thing about parables.

2-Parables are meant to clarify & confuse

Those whom God has given the secrets of the kingdom will understand what the parables mean.

Matthew 13:10-11

10 Then the disciples came up and asked him, "Why are you speaking to them in parables?"

11 He answered, "Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them."

Those who don't understand, have not been given this knowledge. That's why we pray before a sermon. We pray that the Holy Spirit would give us eyes to see and ears to hear.

That said, there's something comical here as well. Did you notice that right after Jesus explains this to the disciples they turn around and say, "Explain to us the parable..." after going privately into a house (Matt. 13:36). So much of the disciples' time with Jesus can be characterized as "Ahhh, now we get it." This reminds me of most of my music theory lessons as a teenager. Sometimes it takes some effort to understand, which shows desire to learn. But the enlightening is ultimately provided by God the Father. So, if you struggle with today's parable, that's okay. So did the disciples.

Ultimately, however, I believe Jesus gave this parable to teach his disciples about stewardship, so that is what we will be focusing on today.

Main Point

Main Point: How we steward God's money exposes what we really believe about the gospel

Points: 1) A warning, 2) an instruction, 3) a reality.

BODY

1. A Warning

1. Audience

It is pivotal this morning that we not skip the first six words of chapter 16, "Now he said to the disciples..." Why does this matter? Audience. This parable is clearly addressed to Jesus' disciples, but the context indicates a public setting. We know this because verse 14 which tells us the effect of the parable says, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and scoffing at him."

Jesus is engaged in public discourse with tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and Scribes, and disciples around him (Luke 15:1). Jesus just gave the parable of the lost son- with the younger son representing the tax collectors and sinners, and the older brother representing the bitter religious leaders. He now turns his attention to a different, maybe mixed crowd of his disciples. And he issues them a parable as a grave warning. But it's an odd warning. You might call it a cautionary tale.

2. Parable

Luke 16:1-7

1 Now he said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who received an accusation that his manager was squandering his possessions. 2 So he called the manager in and asked, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you can no longer be my manager.’ 3 “Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do since my master is taking the management away from me? I’m not strong enough to dig; I’m ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I’ll do so that when I’m removed from management, people will welcome me into their homes.’ 5 “So he summoned each one of his master’s debtors. ‘How much do you owe my master?’ he asked the first one. 6 “‘A hundred measures of olive oil,’ he said. “‘Take your invoice,’ he told him, ‘sit down quickly, and write fifty.’ 7 “Next he asked another, ‘How much do you owe?’ “‘A hundred measures of wheat,’ he said. “‘Take your invoice,’ he told him, ‘and write eighty.’

A rich man has a manager who isn’t doing a good job. We would say that he has an accusation of malfeasance or fraud, which is apparently so credible that he doesn’t object and has to pack his bags.

As far as we can tell, this is a notable position under the rich man’s authority. The manager seems to operate as a CFO and CEO, an agent, while the rich man is the owner. And this is big business. The manager is dealing in millions, if not billions. He’s probably something more akin to a hedge fund manager. This would have also meant that the investments that the manager managed were legalling binding. But as it turns out he is squandering the owners money SIGNIFICANTLY.

But what does the manager say to himself? He realizes that he will never get a job this good again in the same city. Maybe ever. So he evaluates his options. He can’t do manual labor, and he’s too proud to beg, so he cooks up a shrewd plan to live off of others.

On his way out he uses his remaining authority to cheat the master yet again and advantage himself. He calls in a debtor who owes 100 measures of olive oil and reduces the debt to 50. This is a HUGE amount of money! This is equivalent to 800-900 gallons of oil. This is about 150 olive trees worth of oil and about 3 years wages for the average worker.¹

Furthermore, the manager calls another debtor in who owes 100 measures of wheat, which was enough to feed 150 people for a year or pay an average worker for 7.5 years.² By reducing the debt load I’m sure he did make some friends! And this is just two debtors, whereas Jesus gives the impression that there are many more.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008). Exported from Logos Bible Software, 10:14 AM February 14, 2023. Page 10.

² Ibid.

3. Warning

The most difficult part of this parable to interpret comes when the master praises the unjust steward for his shrewdness.

Luke 16:8

8 “The master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light in dealing with their own people.

On the surface it can sound like Jesus is commending dishonest action. But here Snodgrass is a help to us again.

Snodgrass

“Only two options exist: the steward is praised because he did something either just and effective or unjust but effective.”³

Some people argue that the unjust manager has had a change of heart and reduces the debts and wants to make friends for himself because he realizes that friends are what’s really most important in life. I don’t find that interpretation convincing for three reasons.

- 1- It appears his reasons for reducing the debt are selfish, he doesn’t want to work but just mooch.
- 2- In verse 8 Jesus renames him from the “manager” to the “unrighteous manager” or “steward of unrighteousness” after everything has transpired.
- 3- The entire point of the parable uses him as an object lesson to say, be at least as shrewd as that guy.

So, I don’t believe he is commended for doing something that was just and effective. Rather, **he did something unjust *but was effective*.**

I believe we can capture the warning of Jesus with this parable to his disciples in sentence:
WARNING: “Disciples, everything you have is from God who will demand an account of how you used it, so use it wisely.”

This brings up a key biblical truth for us. Everything we have is a gift.

APPLICATION

- Consider that everything you have is from God, and what account you will give to him.

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008). Exported from Logos Bible Software, 10:14 AM February 14, 2023. Page 33.

This parable and the entire Bible tells us that everything we have is a gift. In the Old Testament the tithing standard was 10%. That may seem like a lot, but can you imagine a business deal where the owner said that you could have a 90% commission? Act shrewdly with God's money because everything you have is from God who will require an account. God will not only hold us accountable for every careless word (Matt. 12:36), but every cent spent.

2. An Instruction

Jesus not only gives a warning of how we will give an account, but provides instruction on how to steward God's money effectively.

1. Worldly Wealth

Luke 16:9

9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings.

Before getting into the instruction, allow me to address an interpretive question related to the phrase, "worldly wealth." The ESV says "unrighteous wealth," NASB says "wealth of unrighteousness," NKJV says "unrighteous mammon." **Money**, or **Mammon** here, refers to money and property. **Is Jesus saying we should be deceitful with money for a greater good? NO.** Probably the best way to take it is "money of this world, which tends to corrupt."⁴ Snodgrass To the rescue!

Snodgrass Quote

"By way of summary then, v. 9 may be paraphrased "Put yourself in a good position through your use of money, which so easily leads you astray, so that when this age is over God will receive you into his eternal dwelling."

Jesus seems to be saying that we need to use our worldly valuables, which can corrupt, for Kingdom purposes. But what purposes?

2. Eternal Friends

Luke 16:9-12

9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings.10 Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and whoever is unrighteous in very little is also unrighteous in much. 11 So if you have not

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008). Exported from Logos Bible Software, 10:14 AM February 14, 2023. Page 37.

been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with what is genuine? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you what is your own?

Jesus is certainly instructing his disciples on how to be wise stewards of what God has given to them. And there is **one main piece of instruction: Use money to make eternal friends.**

EXAMPLE: Tiramisu and Next World

At the dinner table this past week I read this parable to my four boys and asked them what the point of it was. There were various answers, but one of them said, "We should use money so that we can have more friends in Next World." I think that's it! But it's not easy.

Just a few minutes later we dug into some fantastic tiramisu my wife had made for Valentine's Day. It's one of my favorite desserts and I can eat a lot of it. But then my wife asked if she should share it with the women's bible study she leads the following night. I'll admit, my first reaction was, "You mean my tiramisu? No!" I quickly realized my error and she shared it the following night, but I was surprised at how imperceptible the temptation was.

APPLICATION

- Make friends.

Jesus commands us to not be like the Pharisees who used their material wealth only for worldly gain. Rather we are commanded to use it to make friends for heavenly gain. As people who live in a reserved culture, we must take Jesus' instructions to make friends seriously.

3. A Reality

So far Jesus has warned his disciple that they will have to give an account to God for how they use his resources. Jesus has also instructed his disciples to use their worldly wealth to make eternal friends. Now, to sum everything up Jesus tells his disciples a stark reality about money.

Luke 16:13

13 No servant can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

1. God or money

The hard reality that this parable gives us is that we cannot serve both God and money. It's easy for us to think, "Well I can be generous with some of my money, but the rest is for me." But Jesus is saying it's an either or reality. This statement should completely reshape how we think about what to do with our tax returns, if we get them.

Notice that Jesus doesn't give us a strategy for what to do with our money. Nor does he call all of his disciples to take on a vow of poverty. Instead by giving us the reality he makes us rely on wisdom for how to best use his resources. So, should you buy a Mercedes or a Mazda? I don't know. Everyone's position is different, but whatever the choice we must use our wealth such that we are always asking ourselves, **"Why am I spending money on this thing?"**

2. Jesus as our example

You may feel that is a cheap answer, but the reality is also that God did not give us a budget to follow, he gave us a person to follow. Here's what I mean.

There was once a famine in the ancient Mediterranean world. People were starving and suffering for daily needs. Macedonian churches were deeply affected. So Paul calls on the Corinthian church to pull together their resources to send to the Macedonians. He could have ordered them to do so as an Apostle. Instead, he calls them to consider what Jesus did for them in the gospel.

2 Corinthians 8:9

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that **by his poverty you might become rich.**

You see, Jesus is not asking us to do something he hasn't already done. We have an incredibly difficult time not using earthly riches for our own benefit, but Jesus left the comfort of Heaven! He became poor, he took on flesh, he suffered as a human, a criminal, and died a humiliating death. Why? To make eternal friends. And he commands us to do the same.

APPLICATION

- Look to Jesus for your model for wise stewardship.

CONCLUSION

Jesus gives us the parable of the unjust manager to teach us how to be faithful, wise, stewards that have an eternal reward. He does so as the righteous steward who himself wisely managed the wealth of his Father in heaven and multiplied it to an uncountable multitude.