

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Parable of the Dishonest Manager”
Genesis 39:1-6a
Luke 16:1-13**

**Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018**

Genesis 39:1-6a

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Introduction

This week we will continue in our Lenten sermon series on the parables of Jesus. We're taking this time to study this genre of teaching as a way to help us recenter onto Christ during Lent. Last week we looked at the Parable of the Persistent Widow. We learned that Jesus used that story to illustrate to his disciples the importance and necessity of fervent and persistent prayer, even in the midst of adversity. For that prayer should prepare us for his eventual return. The Christian life is one that is spent in constant and expectant prayer. Today we will hear the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. There's a lot of activity within this parable, but Christ's purpose and admonition is very clear. Listen now to our New Testament lesson.

Luke 16:1-13

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

“The Parable of the Dishonest Manager”

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Some folks like to insist that the Bible is an outdated and useless book, for it does not speak to our present circumstances. And while it is true that the Bible does not teach us about computers, rocket science, or forestry, I completely believe it is full of things that are still pertinent to the human condition. For there are timeless truths that remain unchanged across history and across cultures. One of those universal truths is money. While minting procedures and practices may change over time, as long as one person values something so much that he is willing to pay an amount for it, then the human race will always practice economy. This was absolutely true in Jesus' time. And he speaks about money quite a bit. Roughly a third of the forty or so parables of Jesus have something to do with earthly treasures or currency. And a consistent theme in Jesus' teaching is that his disciples ought not place their trust in material wealth.

For example, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and Christ's encounter with the rich fool illustrate how riches can be an impediment to entering the kingdom of heaven. The Parables of the Talents, of the Minas, and of the Vinedressers all remind us that we are merely stewards of whatever earthly resources the Lord entrusts to our care. The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price are not about seeking or hoarding earthly wealth, but rather illustrate the infinite value of the heavenly kingdom. Jesus sums up his teaching on this matter in Matthew 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Our parable this morning falls into this category, however, it is one of the most astonishing and cryptic of all. This story contains a shocking and peculiar twist. How is it that we are to build any kind of positive spiritual principle on the unethical actions of a dishonest manager? Let's start to answer this question by taking a look at the main character in this parable. The Greek phrase used to describe this character in verse eight is *oikanamon adichias*. That second word is a negated word, *a-diche*, not-*diche*; which literally means “someone who is contrary to what is right.” It's not that this guy is just bad at what he does, he's not inept. In actuality, he is very adept at his work, but he does so wickedly, dishonestly, and amorally. The role that he has is *oikanamon*, which is actually where we get our word “economy.” This was a vital role for any mid- to large-scale operation. The steward or manager had important financial responsibilities, and the usual day-to-day running of the business was often on his shoulders.

The owner in the parable is made aware of the dishonest manager mishandling his resources. Maybe the manager was overspending, or overcharging clients, or embezzling funds. Regardless, the owner made it clear to the manager that it was high time he be audited. At this, the steward knew it would be only a matter of time before his malfeasance was uncovered, his mismanagement documented, and his reputation disgraced. By his own admission, he says that he is not cut out for ditch-digging and he's too prideful for panhandling. So what does he do? Instead of coming clean and accepting his punishment; instead of petitioning for mercy, he opted to cook the books in favor

of those who owed his master money. And he did so for his own benefit. He grossly forgave large debts, in effect stealing from the owner, in order to win friends and purchase favors. In this way, when he was finally sacked, he would have associates who could return the favor.

In all probability, the wealthy owner and the shrewd manager were likely, at least initially, on very good terms, for no one would deliberately hire a scoundrel. The owner likely had faith in the manager's skills and integrity, so much so that he entrusted him with full control over his assets and affairs. Likewise, the manager was entitled to act on his own integrity and authority without close oversight or interference. Truth be told, the landowner might never have discovered the steward's deception if word had not come to him from another source. But instead of riding immediately to the manager and demanding his resignation, the owner orders him to give an account of his actions, wrap up his final dealings, and leave. Unfortunately for the owner, that was a bad decision. When clear signs indicate that someone is guilty of mismanagement, it is generally a good idea to relieve that person of all responsibility before more damage can be done. Because if a steward is willing to squander his master's possessions when he is accountable, he clearly cannot be trusted when the last incentive for him to deal honestly has been removed.

And that's exactly what happened. To get a better grasp of the severity of his actions, let me give you an exchange rate for his discounts. A hundred measures of olive oil was 875 gallons. The price for that much oil would be about a thousand denarii. Let's say around \$3,000. A fifty-percent discount on a deal like that was equal to an average salary for more than a year and a half. A hundred measures of wheat was a thousand bushels. A hundred acres were required to produce that much wheat. Its full value equaled eight to ten years' labor. That means a twenty-percent reduction amounted to about to years' pay. And those two debtors were merely a representative sample. Verse five says the manager "summoned his master's debtors one by one." Half-a-dozen or more discounts at those rates would represent a massive fortune, buying favors enough to set the steward up for life.

What makes this parable so startling is Jesus' unexpected turn. We might expect the story to end like the Parable of the Wicked Steward in Matthew 24. There Jesus says that the master will come unannounced and cut down the wicked steward. Instead, Jesus says in verse eight that "the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness." Unfortunately, or fortunately, since parables are so fluid, it's nearly impossible to pin down one common interpretation. What I mean to say is that while other parables with rich landowners may point to Christ or God, that cannot always be the case. This, I believe, is one of those instances where we cannot equate the Lord with the owner, for God never approves of wanton sinfulness. What needs our attention is the language in this parable. The wealthy owner is not commending the steward's dishonesty *per se*, rather he applauds the man's forward-looking ingenuity. "The master commended the dishonest manager *for his shrewdness.*"

The Greek word translated "shrewdness" is *phronimos*, meaning "prudently" or "cannily." The word has the idea of being cautious, keen witted, and scrupulous. The manager's plan, while underhanded and dastardly, was wickedly innovative. The sheer cleverness of the scheme was what elicited the master's admiration. Thankfully for us, Jesus himself states the point of this parable. In that very same eighth verse, Jesus says, "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." Sinners tend to be more clever regarding

their temporal well-being than saints are in the work of laying up treasure for eternity. “The children of this world” are those who have no part and no interest in the kingdom of God. Yet, while they have nothing to look forward to except the remaining years of their earthly lives, they are extremely skillful in preparing for their earthly future. “Children of light,” however, seem to be lacking in zeal for their own eternal future.

What makes this parable challenging is the fact that Jesus is illustrating his point with a very underhanded and unethical character. There are no alternate facts here, there’s no mass media to add a positive spin on this manager. But there’s also no need to imagine a context that might make this man’s behavior acceptable, for after all, this is still a parable. Jesus made up this story, and if we are shocked at the surprise ending, then that’s exactly Jesus’ intention. His original audience, too, would have been scandalized. The audience of the parables are important for discerning Jesus’ meaning. Luke shows us in verse one that Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples. That specific audience changes the theme and direction of the parable. This is not like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which was directed toward tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and Scribes.¹ Our parable is directed to those who are already committed to following Jesus. Women and men who have turned away from a love of sinning and intend to live their lives with a concern for the glory of God. This parable is a discipleship parable. I am thankful that Jesus kept going for he continues his explanation to the disciples and, like a good Baptist, presents three points.

The first lesson comes from verse nine, where Jesus gives this advice to the disciples: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” Use your money to make friends—not earthly friends, but friends who will welcome you into your eternal home. In other words, be generous with the people of God. Put your money to work for others; truly help the needy amongst God’s children. Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 25: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me...as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Jesus is reminding us that we are stewards of his Father’s resources. And unlike the dishonest manager, we are under orders to be generous with our Master’s resources. What Jesus is doing in this parable is a common teaching style of argumentation from the lesser to the greater. If a scheming and dishonest manager is shrewd enough to use his resources to influence his own future, how much more should we use our Master’s resources to live out God’s will in our own lives.

The second lesson comes from verse ten, where Jesus gives this advice to the disciples: “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.” While the former lesson was directed outward toward the benefit of others, this lesson is focused on ourselves. We often hear or say, “If I had more I would give more.” We know that’s not the case. Truly generous people are so because of their character, not because of their bank account. Lots of people who have everything give little or nothing, and someone who does not have a spirit of generosity will not suddenly become generous if he won the lottery. It is crucial for believers to have a proper perspective on their duty as stewards, regardless of whether they have little or a lot. In fact, Jesus’ statement seems to suggest that wise stewardship is best learned and practiced in small ways first. It’s foolishness to wish for wealth if you haven’t been a true and faithful steward with what God has already given. And that is the main thrust of this

lesson, that our resources are actually God’s resources that he lends to us for a time. Everything that we have is a stewardship—not just the money we give to the church or to charity. All that we have and all that we are comes from God, and everything we have and all that we are is to be used for God’s glory. True riches and true wealth are over there in heaven, and like Paul says, “as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”²

The third lesson comes from verse thirteen, where Jesus gives this final word of advice: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” Jesus is suggesting that the way we manage our stewardship is important evidence revealing whether we are genuine believers or mere pretenders. Money, wealth, prosperity, and success cannot usurp God’s authority. If you “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce,”³ as King Solomon encourages, then you demonstrate by your stewardship that you have rejected those false gods of prosperity and greed. Jesus is not saying we cannot have wealth or money. Jesus is saying that our resources, our talents, and our very life comes from God and should be used to glorify his name. Our material wealth and social success are also gifts from God. Therefore, as gifts they must neither replace God as the object of our life nor must we be fooled into believing they come purely from our own effort—for even our abilities and work ethic are from God. This is the lesson of this parable for the disciples. Now the very following verse fourteen says “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.” Because these eavesdropping passersby ridiculed Jesus, he tells them the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which we’ll touch on later in our series.

For now, I’d like to invite you to pray with me. Holy and Merciful God, you provide not only for our wellbeing and our salvation, but you also provide for our comfort and means in this life. To some you give much and to some you give little. Some steal much and others struggle through earning little. Lord, your will is mysterious but your command is clear: you alone are our God and you alone are to be worshiped and glorified. Therefore, you teach us to be just, righteous, kind, and loving. You show us the way of peace, hopefulness, and gratitude. Help us to be good and faithful stewards of your resources. Help us to use our talents to benefit your kingdom and to share your good news. It is in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, that we pray. Amen.

¹ Luke 15:1-2

² II Corinthians 4:18

³ Proverbs 3:9