

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager



Luke 16:1–9

A Theological Essay on Luke 16:1–9 The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

Setting the Scene

Jesus is still on the long journey toward Jerusalem that began in Luke 9:51. The immediately preceding chapter has just given us three parables of lost things found—sheep, coin, and son—spoken in the hearing of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes. The mood of chapter 15 is extravagant mercy: heaven’s joy over the one who turns. Then, without a change of scene, Jesus turns to his disciples and tells a story that feels like a slap of cold water.

A rich man learns that his manager has been wasting the estate. The manager is summoned, told to produce the books, and informed that he is finished. Facing a future he cannot bear—too weak to dig, too proud to beg—he summons the master’s debtors and slashes their bills: oil cut in half, wheat reduced by a fifth. The master, astonishingly, commends him. Not for honesty. For shrewdness.

Then Jesus himself speaks: “The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

The story is short, morally ambiguous, and theologically dense. It has embarrassed commentators for centuries because the hero cheats, and the punch line sounds like a command

to buy friends with dirty money. That discomfort is part of the point. Jesus is not offering a morality play. He is forcing a crisis of imagination about time, money, and the coming kingdom.

Context

The parable is spoken to the disciples, but it is spoken in the hearing of men who loved money. A few verses later the Pharisees sneer, and Jesus answers that what is exalted among men is an abomination before God (**Luke 16:14–15**). Luke has already bound chapters 15 and 16 together. The same verb of squandering that described the prodigal (**15:13**) describes the manager (**16:1**). Both men face sudden ruin. Both speak to themselves. Both act with desperate energy. The difference is the object of their hope. The prodigal turns home to a father. The manager turns the last hours of his office into a network of obligation. Mercy has been displayed. Now the question is what a man does with goods that were never his.

What follows the saying in verse 9 is the Lord's own commentary, even if the assigned text stops at verse 9. Faithfulness in little and in much, true riches over unrighteous mammon, the impossibility of serving two masters: these are not a later moral tacked on by the Church. They are the grain of the story. And the next parable, the rich man and Lazarus, is the same teaching from the other side. One man used the last of his stewardship to make friends. The other died with a full table and no one waiting for him but flame.

The larger Lukan witness is the same. "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail" (**12:33**). "You cannot be My disciple unless you give up all your possessions" (**14:33**). The dishonest manager is not an exception to that doctrine. He is its dark illustration. **He finally treated wealth as temporary**. The children of light are charged with doing the same thing in the light, not in the dark.

Observations

1. We are stewards, not owners.

Chrysostom names the error that makes the parable necessary: men treat the goods of this life as if they were lords in their own house, when they are guests and dispensers of another's bounty. Ambrose says the same: we administer what is God's. Theophylact is exact: we have nothing of our own; we are stewards of what belongs to Another, and the Master's will is that what is entrusted to us be spent on the needs of fellow servants, not on our pleasures. When we spend it on ourselves, the accusation in verse 1 is already true of us. Matthew Henry draws the net around every hearer: we are all liable to the same charge. We have not made due improvement of what God has trusted us with.

2. The praise is of prudence, not of fraud.

The text will not let us baptize the crime. Jesus calls the man the dishonest manager. Augustine is careful: we are not to take the whole for imitation; we must never act deceitfully against our Lord so that from the fraud itself we may give alms. The argument is *a minori ad maius*—from the lesser to the greater. If a wicked steward is commended for cleverness about a fading life, how much more will the upright steward be commended who obeys the commandment. If

earthly affairs require planning and decision, heavenly affairs require no less. Calvin is equally plain: to hunt a meaning in every minute circumstance is an absurd way of reading a parable. No sane master praises the theft of his own goods. Christ meant what He adds: worldly men are more industrious about a life that is passing than the children of God are about the life that does not pass.

3. “Unrighteous wealth” does not mean stolen money offered as piety.

Augustine corrects the abuse at once. Some seize what is another’s, give a portion to the poor, and think they have kept the command. That reading must be rejected. Give alms of righteous labor. You will not deceive the Judge, who is Jesus Christ. Calvin agrees: Christ does not teach us to buy pardon for fraud and waste by large donations. The first duty is sobriety; the streams must come from a pure fountain. Riches are called the mammon of unrighteousness because they so commonly entangle men in deceit, pride, and luxury. They are not evil as created things. They are dangerous as masters. The name is a warning, not a license.

4. The crisis is death and the judgment.

“When it fails” and “when you fail” are the language of the end of the administration. The steward’s world ends in a day. Ours ends at death, and after death the account. Theophylact: when we are about to be removed from the management—that is, torn from this present life—then, too often, we perceive too late what must be done. The parable is therefore eschatological in the plain sense. There is a reckoning. The books will be opened. The question is whether, while the goods are still in our hand, we have used them as the Master commands.

5. Friends and eternal dwellings.

“Make friends... so that they may receive you.” The Church has not needed a novel sociology to hear this. Almsgiving is the point. Chrysostom: the most skillful of arts is mercy; it does not build houses of mud but lays up everlasting life. He notes that Jesus does not say they will receive you into *their* habitations, as if the poor were the final hosts. God remains the Host. Yet He has bound Himself to the poor: what is done to them He records as done to Him. Calvin: it is foolish to turn the verse into a proof that the dead become our advocates. The Lord looks to the work. Liberality shown even to the ungrateful is not thrown away before God. He has promised to the merciful that He will show Himself merciful. The welcome into eternal dwellings is not a wage that purchases heaven. It is the fruit of a life that has already begun to treat God’s goods as God’s, and God’s poor as brethren.

Questions

Does the parable teach that cunning may replace holiness?

No. The man remains “unjust.” The sons of light are not told to become sons of this age. They are told that it is a disgrace when those who have the Word and the Spirit sleep over eternal things while men without hope scheme over a lease.

Is the rich man God?

In the broad moral sense the tradition has often said yes: God is the Owner, we are the stewards, the dismissal is death, the account is judgment. But Calvin’s caution stands. Press every figure

and the story breaks. The master in the tale praises a fraud. God does not. The comparison is limited to the one quality Christ names—shrewd provision for what is coming.

Who are the “friends”?

The poor who have been relieved, and, behind them, God who receives the giver. Luke’s Gospel will not separate those two. Treasure in heaven and open hands on earth are the same obedience.

Does verse 9 teach justification by alms?

The Reformation answer is the right one. Christ speaks after the manner of men. A man who makes friends in prosperity has help in adversity. In the same way, mercy shown now will not be forgotten then. That is not the purchase of grace. It is the path of those who already know they must give an account, and who know that the Judge is also the Father of the prodigal.

What then of the Pharisees?

They are the living contradiction of the parable. They tithe and they love money. They justify themselves before men. They will not use what they hold for those who cannot repay. Lazarus will soon lie at a gate they will not cross. The manager, wicked as he is, at least saw that the present order was ending. They do not.

Conclusion

The parable does not ask us to admire a thief. It asks whether the children of light have the sense God gave a frightened clerk.

Everything we call ours is on loan. The Owner is not absent. The audit is not optional. Wealth is a bad god and a usable tool. Used for the self, it accuses us. Used for the brethren, it is translated, by God’s promise, into a welcome we cannot build for ourselves.

Augustine’s lesser-to-greater still governs the whole: if a man who is losing a post can act with clarity for a house that will perish, the disciple who has been shown the kingdom has no excuse for vagueness. Chrysostom’s correction still stands: put off the pride of possession and put on the humility of a steward. Calvin’s charge still stings: how disgraceful that those whom God has enlightened should neglect a blessedness that does not fade, while worldly men provide so carefully for a life that is gone in an hour.

The dishonest manager is not our pattern in his sin. He is our rebuke in his urgency. The goods will fail. The soul will not. Use what is passing for what cannot pass, and when the stewardship ends, you will not stand as a man who called God’s things his own. You will stand as a servant who, late or soon, learned whose they were.

So the end of the matter is this. God desires that those who handle His goods do so as stewards, not as lords: that wealth be put to work for friendship that outlasts the wealth, and that the children of light meet the coming account with at least the urgency this man showed for a fading roof. Man’s moral failure is already in the first line of the story. He wastes what is not his, and when the books are called for he is still thinking of himself. He may be shrewd. He is not faithful. Christ does not bless the fraud. He uses it to wake His disciples. He is the Lord who

says, “Give an account,” and the Lord who says, “Make friends by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” The office will be taken away. Mammon will fail. What remains is whether, while the goods were still in hand, we heard His call and used them as He commanded.

