

Luke 16: 1-13

Unknowns

I usually begin the message with something to draw you into the story. Today I got nothing! This scripture is downright difficult. It doesn't matter how many times I read it, it feels disjointed, about things that are not connected, and simply ridiculous. Why would a boss congratulate a dishonest person who has cooked the books for his own sake? I feel like I am watching a drama unfold that is out of some mafia movie with backroom deals and manipulation. Somehow this story just doesn't belong in Jesus' repertoire. And yet here it is in gospel of Luke with the words coming out of the mouth of Jesus.

There is the saying, misery loves company, well the misery here is that anything I read as I tried to see what others understood about this scripture starts out pretty much the same way...no one really knows what this is all about. Still, it is here and rather than skip over it and not deal with it, let's wrestle with it a little.

We know that parables have layers and we can't get to all the layers every time we consider a parable, but maybe today we can scratch the surface as we ask, "What is there for us in these words?" We take into account that parables present more of a problem to be puzzled over than a story with a moral to be learned.

So here we have a rich man and his manager and we learn that the manager is about to lose his job because he has cheated his employer out of wealth. It goes on to tell us what the manager did as he anticipated his loss of employment. After he was canned, he didn't want to get his hands dirty and he didn't want to lose his prestige by begging so, he plans out a scheme that will have others indebted to him because he gave them a break on their bill. One of those, you scratch my back and I'll scratch your moments. All of this scheming has the rich man slapping the manager on the back in a gesture of congratulations.

Now none of this seems to fit with either our Christian ethics or a good moral compass, so what is going on here? Well, the answer seems to lay in the next words, "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

One person writing on this passage had this to say, "

What is interesting about the parable is that the master "commended the dishonest manager" for his actions even though they likely had a negative impact on the master's bottom line. Perhaps the master was impressed that the

manager was finally acting like a manager! Had the manager cared for his master's wellbeing with the same level of urgency and creativity, as when his own wellbeing was at stake, then perhaps the manager would still have a job. So it is with those who belong to the kingdom of God. We have been entrusted with the resources of God's kingdom. Will we act on behalf of the kingdom with the same sense of urgency and creativity as if our own personal wellbeing depended on it?¹

But what of this dishonest wealth? Even though in our personal and church lives we don't like to talk about money, we think it a taboo topic, Jesus never shied away from questions and teachings about money and wealth. Money, wealth, prestige, power all have the ability of moving us away from God and more into caring about ourselves. The last line of the reading is one that people flippantly and often incorrectly quote whether they know it is comes from the Bible or not, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

As Christians it is hard to deny that we live in world that forces us to serve both. Nothing is ever so neat and tidy or cut and dry that we can say that we do not end up serving wealth. We need money to live, to eat, to keep a roof over our heads, and have something left over, and, if we are lucky, to be able to do more interesting things with our money. But maybe this is at the core of the issue. Is our heart set on obtaining more and more wealth for ourselves or is our heart set on our relationship with God, and so wealth is used not only for our benefit but the benefit of others?

Given Jesus' care and concern for the poor and knowing that the next parable in the scripture is about a rich man ending up in hell and a poor man in heaven, there may be something very important to think about regarding how we view money, attend to it, and share it with those who don't have the benefits we may have.

Going back to thinking about dishonest wealth, because I can tell you that I am still having a hard time relating to the dishonest manager and his being commended for his actions, let's consider another opinion on what the words, "dishonest wealth" may be pointing to as shared by another on the meaning of this term by John Nolland in the World Biblical Commentary Series. He writes, "Another way to interpret "dishonest wealth" is wealth obtained through the dishonest systems of this world. In other words, all wealth is considered "dishonest" because the economic systems of this present age are inherently corrupted. But this "dishonest wealth" doesn't imply willfully dishonest actions by individuals. It simply is shorthand for the wealth and resources at our disposal in this lifetime, as opposed to the riches of God's kingdom to come."²

That is helpful as it relates to why our own wealth may be dishonest. It may be because inevitably we make money through economic systems that are unbalanced and are geared so that a few make profits on the backs of others. Even as we work in those

¹ [Luke 16:1-13 \(aplainaccount.org\)](http://Luke16:1-13.aplainaccount.org) Accessed September 16, 2022.

² Ibid.

systems for our own well-being and those we love, we too end up participating in corrupt or broken economic systems, so our wealth can be understood as dishonest as it doesn't honour the most vulnerable in our communities and has the danger of moving us away from relationship with God.

Regardless of how we might interpret this parable the one thing that is certain in the example and teachings of Jesus is that relationships matter. The poor, sick, lonely, hungry, those who are suffering, matter. Our relationship to money matters because it can take away our focus on matters of the heart.

Verses 10 through 12 are puzzling. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

Now I basically failed my logics class in college, so I will be the first to admit that I have a hard time following this reasoning, but maybe this is saying that how we use our resources matters. Again, I use the words of another, “It’s as if Jesus asks, ‘why would I entrust you with the kingdom of God when you have not done what I commanded with the resources you already have—resources that are almost worthless compared to the true riches of the kingdom?’”³

All of the congregations I am working with right now are going through a time of discerning what they have for resources from people to passion and energy to finances, so maybe this parable has something to say to those situations and to any situation where we find ourselves considering where we spend our time, energy, money, and talent. It likely also has something to say about who we attend to with our time, energy, money, and talent.

I know that I have not made a clear conclusion to what this parable is saying. I don't believe I can as I am still, as with others, pondering what Jesus was really getting at with this story. Yet, questioning of the biblical texts to uncover meaning in our time is a practice for all of our life's experiences and decisions. It times, such as with this parable, when we cannot come to clear understandings, it can be a place to acknowledge that we can go through long periods of time where things seem unknowable. The past is over, the future yet to be determined, and we sit in the struggle for meaning and purpose.

Yet if we remember that for Jesus, it is about relationship and how we use our lives for bringing hope, peace, grace, joy, and love into the world, then we can trust that God is in the places where we don't understand either the Word of God or we have to sit in the times of unknowns in our lives.

³ Ibid.

So there we are, in the uncomfortable closing that did not close, still with questions left without answers. Welcome to living faith, one that makes us question, reflect, and still believe and trust that God is in it all. We are not abandoned, but are given the opportunity to live out our faith, even when the path is not clear. May our focus be on serving God and others in love and grace. In Christ, with Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.