

## THE DISHONEST MANAGER

TEXT: Luke 16:1-13

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on September 18, 2022*

When heard all by itself, that parable offends a lot of people because it seems like a crook is being lifted up as someone Jesus' followers should emulate. To make sense of it, we have to broaden the lens to see the bigger context and also look at a practice in Bible publishing that can get in our way.

To deal with the latter first, you might find it helpful to take one of the Bibles in the pews and turn to the passage we just read. It's Luke 16:1-13 and is on p. 74 of the NT in your pew Bibles. OT and NT are numbered separately. If you're seeing page numbers in the 7-8 hundred range, keep going until the numbering starts over in Matthew. Bottom of the first column.

At the macro level, this parable sits toward the end of a whole series of parables that Jesus tells across several chapters. Chapter 15 is filled with what are called the "Lost parables," since they deal with a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son—otherwise known as the Prodigal Son. If you're looking at it, you can see that this is the very next story after the Prodigal Son, which is key. There's not so much as a single word separating them. We'll come back to that placement in a minute; but I want to give you some Bible study tips first.

An important thing to remember in all Bible study is that the chapter divisions and verse numbers weren't added until the Middle Ages. Luke did not finish up telling the Prodigal Son story and then mark a new chapter. The verse and chapter divisions, in both Testaments, were added more than a thousand years later to help people find passages more easily.

So, the chapters and verses are not "biblical," in the sense that the biblical writers did not put them, or anything like them, in there. Not only do the earliest manuscripts not have chapters and verses, they don't have paragraphs. They don't have spaces between the words, and the Hebrew Scriptures didn't even have vowels, relying on those who would read the texts orally to supply the full word.

Neither Testament originally included punctuation of any kind. If you see quotation marks or the words of Jesus in red; those are all guesses by translators about who is speaking, and scholars argue all the time about whether they got it right. Spare a kind thought for Bible translators!

And it wasn't until modern times that sub-headings were added; and those vary by translation. You can see on p. 74 that the pew Bibles label today's reading as the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. The NIV translation calls it the Shrewd Manager. Those headings aren't "biblical" either. Luke didn't include them. Even the names of the books of the Bible were later additions as are footnotes, book introductions, maps, and other supplemental material in your Bibles.

In general, those additions make the text easier to read and reference. But those additions also can make us forget that a decision to start a new chapter, verse, paragraph, or even to add punctuation is a form of later interpretation that is subject to bias. Sub-headings are particularly bad, because they are often a summary description of what a Bible publisher thinks a section is about, which colors how we read what follows and decides for us, as well as for the biblical author, which verses we should see as part of the same theme.

The New Revised Standard folks have told us in their heading that they think the manager in Luke 16 parable is dishonest. The NIV folks call him "shrewd." Both of those descriptions set us up to be confused if not offended that the manager is praised in the end. Those headings are not the biblical text. Ignore them both.

To be sure, the manager was behaving in a way that got him fired. But the word "dishonest" is a stretch. If he were embezzling funds, he'd be getting more than fired. We're told he's "squandering" his master's property. Hmm...where else have we seen someone squander someone else's property? Oh, right. That's exactly what the prodigal did in the story immediately preceding this one.

But we're not trained to look there for clues because that's part of chapter 15 and now we're in chapter 16. Clean break, right? I mean, look at it. But Luke didn't make any such break. Luke didn't have so much as a space between them, let alone all the punctuation, capital letters, headings and numbers. Luke wants us to move right from the prodigal son to this prodigal manager, while the first parable is still fresh in our minds.

Okay, so does the prodigal son story tell us what kind of behavior represents "squandering?" Not really. We're told the son squandered his father's money on "dissolute living." The word "dissolute" in Greek just means "excessive." That so many pastors tell their congregations he spent it on alcohol and prostitutes is perhaps a self-own. Maybe he bought too many fancy robes and horses.

The son lived excessively and his money ran out. That's all we know about the son; and we know even less about the kind of squandering done by the manager. All we know is that the spending by the manager was not how the owner wanted his property used; and the manager lost his job over it.

But there's more to learn by comparing the parables, as Luke's placement invites us to do. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father figure represents God; and the prodigal, who squanders his father's money, represents any human being who has willfully stepped away from God.

I think the prodigal manager has a similar structure, with the boss—who has abundant wealth—representing God; and the money manager—who squanders that property—being those of us who are poor stewards of God's resources. But if the boss is the God figure in this parable, why is he praising a rotten steward? In other parables rotten stewards get sent off to lakes of fire and other nasty things. Praise of the manager is the main stumbling block for people in this parable because our lovely sub-headings have described the manager in less-than-savory terms.

But if we hear this story flowing from the prodigal son—remember how that parable ends? It doesn't end when the father embraces and restores the son who changes his ways and comes home. It ends with the father dealing with his *other* son, the prodigal's elder brother, who's mad because he was the good son who did the right thing all along and resents the fact that his brother gets a party and gifts after squandering his father's money.

The last verse of the prodigal **son** story, the words immediately preceding the prodigal **manager** story, which Luke ran together without so much as a space, has the father almost pleading with his other son, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The very next verses tell us about a prodigal manager who does the same thing, only it's a rich boss instead of a rich dad. The manager squanders the boss's money, changes his ways after seeing where that squandering lands him, and then we're mad because Jesus praises him at the end? Have we just become the elder brother? Did the prodigal son parable even really end or is Jesus still talking to the elder brothers who might be listening?

But, wait! The manager didn't change his ways; he fleeced his boss again on the way out the door by forgiving all those debts! That's more money lost to the boss, long after the manager leaves, while the manager lives off the largesse of his new "friends!" I hear you, but I think that interpretation is exactly why people can't get their minds around this parable. I think it's exactly the forgiveness of those debts that wins the manager God's praise.

While other parables warn against hoarding wealth; this parable is about how God would like us to spend it. And I think the core reason that people stumble over Jesus praising the manager, and that all the headers paint him as at least shady if not downright dishonest, is that lots of people see forgiving debt as a fundamentally bad and irresponsible thing.

We'll do almost anything to make sure we don't have Jesus advocating for loan forgiveness. Giving our used clothing or a bag of groceries to those in need is one thing. But forgiving debt? The economy would collapse! Hide that parable! Make it complicated! Make it somehow not what it says! Don't. Praise. Debt. Forgiveness! That's how we built civilization! Exactly.

If the boss represents God, like in the parable before it, then this is a stewardship parable. The fundamental principle of stewardship is that everything belongs to God. Whether we gain wealth through a gift or a salary or a

scam, God is still the source and still the owner of that wealth. It is never “ours.” We are merely the mangers, the steward, the trustees. As such, our job is to use God’s resources in a way that represents the unconditional, extravagant love of God; a love that pours out abundant and costly gifts on tax collectors, sinners, and wasteful prodigals as well as always-faithful elder brothers and by-the-book Pharisees.

If I’m a trustee for someone else’s money, it doesn’t matter whether I like the rules set up for use of the funds. I’m not the owner, I’m just the manager. The manager in this parable doesn’t lose a dime when he forgives huge chunks of everyone’s debt. Why doesn’t he lose? Because the money’s not his. That’s not the *problem* in the parable; that’s the *point*. If the boss thought the debt forgiveness was yet more squandering, the manager would be imprisoned if not executed.

The fact that the forgiveness of the debts earns the manager praise instead of condemnation is all we need to know. The manager is, at last, using wealth in a way that is in keeping with the way his boss wants. The boss is happy, those whose debts are forgiven are happy, and they will be happy to take care of the manager for the rest of his days, so he’s happy, too. Drinks all around.

When the prodigal manager turns around and uses wealth to forgive debts, he’s living out the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors.*” We use the word “trespasses,” but the word “debts” is a better translation in that prayer, because the Greek word is an economic term. In fact, it’s a cognate of the exact same word for debtors that we find lining up in front of the manager here in Luke 16.

The prodigal manager forgives the monetary debts of others. Jesus commends him and then directly connects that kind of action with being welcome in God’s eternal home; just as God welcomed the prodigal son home, not as a slave, as the son had offered, but as a son.

When we remember that God is really into forgiving debt—and has been since the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus when God ordered all debts forgiven in Israel every 50 years—this is no longer a problematic parable. It becomes as full of grace as the parable about the lost son just before it. That son owed his father big time. The elder brother was miffed that his father forgave his brother that debt. He had paid his dues at home all that time. Where was his reward?

Here’s the same story again, and we’re playing the elder brother, unable to find anything praiseworthy in the manager’s behavior, perhaps because we have slipped into serving a different master. Whose steward are we? The master in *this* parable, through the voice of Jesus, is the same voice we heard in the last one, trying to help the elder brother understand that love doesn’t keep score.

The translation in the pew Bible says the manager is commended as being “shrewd,” which has some shady connotations. But the root word there means “wise.” It’s the same word used for the wise man who builds his house on the rock instead of the sand. It’s the word for the wise virgins who bring enough oil. It’s the word Jesus uses when suggesting that his disciples should be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

The manager is praised because he finally realized what so many other parables tell us—we’re not supposed to serve wealth; we can’t serve two masters. Any wealth we have is given to us by God, to be used in a way that witnesses to God’s generous and abundant love. The prodigal manager is praised because he finally realized that wealth is meant to be a bridge to build loving community; not a wall to protect our personal vault or thrown to the wind.

However human lenders may feel; the Divine Lender doesn’t feel fleeced when debts are forgiven. In God’s ledger, that’s an act worthy of praise and a source of joy to both the debtor and the one who forgives. The doors to our eternal home are thrown open and we have a party to celebrate. We can sulk in the corner because someone else got a break if we want. The elder brother is still a beloved son. But we cannot serve both God and money. Amen.