

Jesus Teaches about Stewardship: Managing the Material

Our New Testament reading is Luke 16:1-13, Jesus' Parable of the Shrewd Steward. This parable is considered one of the most difficult to understand and even to accept as being from Jesus. The problem seems to be Jesus' use of a wasteful manager as an example for his disciples to follow. But Jesus often used "sham saints" to teach us important lessons (Lk. 11:5-13;18:1-8. H Thielicke). In this parable, Jesus says something important about managing the material.

Follow as I read **Luke 16:1-13**:

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And 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.

¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Jesus tells a story about a fired and corrupt manager who gives us a good example to follow in kingdom living and serving. Jesus says he's a good example of the shrewd management of the material side of life that has a parallel with life in the kingdom of God. Jesus said more about money than he did about anything else except the kingdom of God, devoting about one fifth of all of his teachings to money and the material, which has a vital connection with the spiritual and eternal. I promise I'll not devote one fifth of my sermons to financial stewardship. In fact, our text is the New Testament reading in the lectionary and not one I arbitrarily chose.

One of my favorite cartoons that appeared in a ministry journey was a drawing of two men who were leaving the church after the service. Both were wearing barrels to conceal their naked bodies and had a totally shell-shocked facial expression. One said to the other, "That was the best stewardship sermon I've ever heard!"

I'll not be that forceful, but will relate this important stewardship text. Jesus used the word "mammon" when referring to money. Mammon is not an inert commodity but is substance which can easily become an idol, and was the name of a Syrian god who presided over wealth (FW Robertson). Unless money is under the lordship of Christ it indeed becomes a god we worship and the object of our greed. Money itself is not the root of all evil, but as Paul says it's *the love of money* that's the root of all sorts of evil (1 Tim. 6:10), and greed is idolatry (Col. 3:5).

When Jesus warned about the wrong use of the material, he wasn't addressing the wealthier class, but the working class, most of whom would be poor by our current socio-economic standards. He needed to warn those even among the poor who thought that material wealth would be the solution to all of their problems. Paul said that those who "*want to be rich* fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim. 6:9).

The man in the parable (or "current event") proved to be less than fully responsible. In some way he had mismanaged and wasted his master's possessions. A similar story could well be told of politicians, financial managers and bankers today. We're all aware of corporate fraud during the last recession that rocked our entire economy. And 40% of all thefts were committed by an employee in the finance/accounting function. *The Message* paraphrase reads that the rich man "got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses" (1).

All things are essentially God's, and yet certain things are on loan to us, entrusted to us to manage (1 Cor. 3:21ff). As redeemed followers of Christ we realize that we're not our own—we have been bought with a price, and a great one at that (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 1Pet. 1:18f). God's managers realize that all things are his and we belong to him and are called to be his managers of his creation and especially of the things that are entrusted directly to us. God owns all things, this present order, including our bodies (2 Cor. 4:16-18). This was the attitude of the church in Jerusalem, which was united "in heart and mind. No one," writes Luke, "claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32, NIV).

When John Wesley heard that his home had been destroyed by fire he exclaimed, "The Lord's house burned. One less responsibility for me" (R Foster). Would that we had more of that emotional disconnect from material possessions! Such a holy indifference to the things of this world comes with an awareness of the true worth of the material against the backdrop of God's everlasting kingdom that shall never pass away.

As followers of Jesus we're now responsible to him in every area of our lives, including all of our material and financial dealings. This includes more than our tithes to the church and offerings and gifts to kingdom of God activity and ministries. We must bring all of our finances under the Lordship of Christ and allow him to dictate all that we give, save, spend and invest. This means God cares about the home you buy or rent, the car you drive and the entertainment center you purchase, as well as your pension and your children's educational fund.

The man in the story was fired from the job, given his “pink slip,” his official notification of his job termination. And rather than being defeated by this devastating news, this man seized an opportunity. An unsatisfactory employee thus becomes a good example at least in one aspect of his financial management. The manager had just been notified of the termination of his employment and he acted with a sense of urgency. He still possibly had another week’s pay remaining, but there would’ve been no severance pay over an extended period of time. He realized that he’d be reduced to living on the streets if he didn’t do something quickly. He knew he didn’t have the physical strength to do manual labor and he was too proud to become a professional beggar. He had to act quickly.

However long our earthly sojourn, against the backdrop of eternity the longest mortal life is brief and our opportunities to be God’s managers are limited, singular and fleeting. The opportunities we neglect will never return to us, can never be repeated in exactly the same way. We have a singular and urgent opportunity to invest transient wealth and temporary income and possessions in Kingdom causes that will affect eternity and have lasting implications for our lives and for those to whom we give.

This fired manager acted swiftly and sagaciously by going to his master’s debtors and offered them a generous reduction in their debt. Scholars debate whether Jesus’ story might have indicated that this man was waving his personal “take” of the profits or if he was cutting into the owner’s profits. In fact, it was customary for a manager or middle man to make something like a “tip” from his master’s debtors, but what he offered was far more significant than his own “tip.” He reduced the rent owed his master by amounts equaling three to nine plus years’ wages (D Bock). These debtor/renters would have been overwhelmed by his generosity and with a sense of indebtedness to him. Thus, the manager used his master’s property and wealth to ingratiate others to him. These grateful renters would doubtless feel obligated to hire him themselves, or at least give him a solid job recommendation.

The master commended the fired manager for acting shrewdly. Jesus commented that the people of the world are shrewder in doing their worldly business with one another than are we people of the light in doing kingdom of God business. People of the world are busily making investments and building worldly wealth and empires that will pass away. And yet we, who’re part of the eternal kingdom of God, are often slovenly, careless and neglectful. People of this world invest more time and energy in temporal matters than do we in matters that have an eternal impact.

Whatever we invest in people, in terms of love, prayer, giving and ministry, is never wasted and will be eternally rewarded. The best financial expenditures we can make in this life are those gifts that will impact lives for eternity. Those that God has allowed our giving to touch will be among those who will welcome us into “the eternal homes” (9). And do not discount the simple acts of love and generosity you express to strangers and others that God places in your daily path. When we give to others we’re actually giving to Jesus, who dwells within his people who are hungry, thirsty, in need of hospitality, clothing and visiting (Matt. 25:31-46). Jesus says in this parable how incongruous it is that those who belong to the fallen world give more thought to worldly investments and financial planning than do we who are entrusted with kingdom of God riches

The fired manager took a risk and trusted that the master would be merciful to him and make good on the presumptuous promises he made to the renters to reduce their payments to the master/owner. He was counting on the grace and generosity of the owner, his former boss, to make good on the offers he had just made and not to react angrily by having him thrown into jail for incurring these losses (K Bailey). And when we act as God's managers of his property entrusted to us we too must trust in his goodness, mercy and faithfulness to make good on his promises. Just as with the master/owner in the story, so God's reputation is at stake. Already the entire community was announcing and celebrating the owner's generosity. To rescind the fired manager's offer would have made the owner to appear as miserly.

So we too can and must trust in the mercy of God toward us, to make good on his promises of his rewarding everlastingly our faithful and generous giving to his people and his kingdom causes. But we can also trust him to take care of us in the present, making sure that we have all we need to live for him and to serve him with our lives and resources. (2 Cor. 9:11).

Jesus concluded these words about the story of the fired manager with a warning to those of us who might think we can live a dual life of serving God and this force called "Mammon," the power of the material to control us. Mammon is a god who will demand first place and wrest our loyalty away from Jesus. This is such a subtle process that can happen to good, responsible church-attending, honest tax-paying people. Money is a wonderful servant but is a terrible master (W Wiersbe). Unless we commit our financial and material resources to the lordship of Christ, we'll easily and subtly drift into self-centered greed and acquisitive, selfish living.

I once baptized a man who forgot to take his wallet out of his back pocket. (Remember, I'm a Baptist and do total immersion!). I subsequently thought that perhaps that wouldn't be a bad practice, to baptize everyone's wallet and purse, with cash, checks and credit cards. All of life needs to be under the lordship and master-ship of Christ.

Jesus doesn't say that the owner, who commended the fired manager, likely was merciful and restored him to his job. But we can be sure that God, who has given us material goods to manage, will be just and merciful. Every Sunday we have an opportunity to invest in Kingdom causes, and now especially with our special offering for world peace that will touch lives the world over. Let's be faithful to invest in things and people that will last forever.