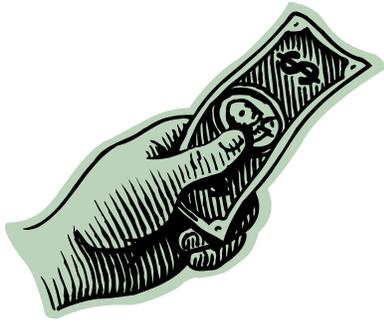


Parable of the Unrighteous Manager
Pastor John E. Dubler
Luke 16:1-9

Use earthly wealth to make friends for the Kingdom of God. If worldly people know how to use wealth to benefit themselves, should not believers know how to use earthly riches to benefit the Kingdom of God?



Is Jesus praising dishonesty in the Parable of the Unrighteous Manager? Here is a parable that causes many people to shake their heads, and many Bible students have bloodied their noses bumping headlong into the difficulties of this passage, seeking to understand how it may be possible that Jesus praises dishonesty. No doubt because of the difficulties in interpretation, this parable is seldom taught in the church, especially in Children’s Church with flannel graph and cut-out figures.

Though this parable is unique in many ways, the theme is not unique to the teachings of Jesus. Material possessions and the love of money are brought into focus, but in a way we might not expect. Here we hear Jesus telling us to use our material possessions for advantage in the Kingdom of God—to make friends for the Kingdom while it is possible to do so. There will come a time when the money will fail, but until then we are to make good use of it. The parables of The Talents, The Rich Fool and The Rich Man and Lazarus also focus on the issue of money.

But the Lord is not praising dishonesty. Rather, He is instructing us to make good use of our material resources now, while it is still day, giving to those in need and passing on an inheritance to our grandchildren and helping others when they are faced with the exigencies of life. By so doing we are making friends for the gospel and opening doors that may otherwise be closed. Certainly any door opened through the judicious and wise use of our material possessions will mean more people saved and more of those who have been influenced by us will be in heaven, part of that great cloud of witnesses who will welcome us into the eternal dwelling places.

The connection of this parable to the wise use of money is preserved in the context of the passage as well, as verses immediately following (10-14) tell us that we cannot serve God and money simultaneously and criticize the Pharisees as being “lovers of money”.

14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. 15 And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God. Luke 16:14-15.¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated Version published by the Lockman Foundation.

The Text of Luke 16: 1-9

Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' 3 "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; I am ashamed to beg. 4'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.' 5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly



and write fifty.' 7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Elements of the parable.

The dishonest manager. Here is a shrewd and dishonest man. The Greek in this instance (shrewd) is φρονιμῶς (*fronimoos*), and carries the connotation of being prudent rather than dishonest. But the manager is also dishonest. He has also gotten caught at being dishonest. His dishonesty has been reported by someone to his master and as a result, his days as manager are numbered.

Now in a further, brazen finale, his dishonesty is aimed at feathering his own nest. He has no access to unemployment insurance, and since he knows he is about to be fired for squandering his master's wealth, he is taking a bold but dishonest move to make life easier for himself when he is terminated from his position.

The rich man. Like many other rich men, he has put confidence in an unprincipled man. Far better for those who hire others to ask questions about character before discussing performance and résumé achievements. “There was a rich man who had a manager,” the parable begins, but it soon becomes obvious that he had a dishonest and unprincipled manager, however shrewd. The manager “had” him.

When is the Lord Jesus speaking and when is it the master in His story?

When is the Lord Jesus speaking directly in this parable and when is the “master” of the story speaking? The “master” mentioned in verse 8 (“And his master praised the unrighteous manager . . .”) is not the Lord Jesus but the rich man who hired the dishonest manager. However, the speaker in verse 9 is not the master of the dishonest steward but the Lord Jesus Himself (“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness . . .”).

The distinction is important as much of the interpretation of the parable hinges on the identity of “the master” in verse 8 and the speaker in verse 9. In the first case it is the rich man of the parable and in the second case it is our Lord Jesus Christ. Though the word κύριος (*kyrios*) is used in verse 8, (a common reference for our Lord in Luke), it is not unusual for κύριος to refer to an earthly master as well.²

If one were to conclude that the “master” of verse 8 were the Lord, then a dishonest manager being praised by the Lord Jesus indeed becomes a thorny problem for interpretation. However, such is not the case. The “master” is simply the rich man himself.

The dishonest manager is fired.

The dishonest man must go. He does not have the character and principle necessary to make him a good manager. He cannot be trusted. He has been a wastrel. He has squandered his master’s wealth. He has taken him for granted. Here is a character lesson apart from the main point about using money wisely.



Character is critical.

We should always be concerned about our character. The deeds you do which the world sees give us your reputation. The deeds which you do that only God sees declare your character.

² Regarding κύριος (*kyrios*) meaning an earthly “lord,” here are four examples, two from Matthew’s Gospel and two from the Gospel of Luke:

- a. Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two *masters* (κύριος) . . .”
- b. Matthew 13:27 “*Sir* (κύριε) did you not sow good seed in your field?”
- c. Luke 12:37 “Blessed are those slaves whom the *master* (κύριος) will find on the alert when he comes”
- d. Luke 20:15 “What, then, will the *owner* (κύριος) of the vineyard do to them?”

A man I know was recently interviewed for a very important position as a manager over a substantial portion of a Fortune 500 company. The owner of the company was one of those to interview the prospective employee. Here are some of the questions the owner asked:

- What do you like?
- What do you hate?
- Why are you on the earth (your purpose in life)?
- What's the worst thing that ever happened to you?
- Have you ever witnessed anyone lose their integrity? What happened and what did you do?

These are questions relating to character and not to specific skill sets and abilities. Why did he ask these questions? I believe he asked these questions because he had witnessed the consequences of failure in these areas in the past.

The rich man in this parable was not dealing with a man of good character. Quite the reverse. His own, trusted employee was robbing him blind. The employee's reputation is gone. So is his job. Character has consequences.

A sin and its consequences.

Before the rich man can actually get rid of this individual, the schemer has concocted a plan for making sure he doesn't have to fall back to hard, manual labor. He has a fairly soft desk job and now, with his true colors known, faces some hard choices.

"What shall I do," he says to himself, "since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg."

Perhaps he is too old to return to manual labor or simply has not the constitution for it. Either way, the idea of finding other, honest work does not gain ascendancy with him.

He briefly considers another idea and dismisses it out of hand. He could be a beggar. No, that would never do. He is too proud.

Then a plan takes shape: "I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes."

His plan is simple and effective. Taking advantage of the trusting nature of those who have done business with his master, and their lack of character in being willing to accept unearned and questionable discounts, he immediately cuts himself a deal. Those with debts are eager to get a discount, and do not inquire carefully into the nature of the break they are getting. "Sit down quickly," he tells them. They obey unquestioningly. But there is no free lunch. Soon enough they will discover that the largess of the manager comes with a price. In this case, they will have to take care of their benefactor for an unspecified period of time. Their "break" will come at a cost to them, and they don't even know it.

The manager is making "friends". He is actually obligating people to help him later on when the rich man finally severs his employment.

Why does the master praise the unrighteous manager?

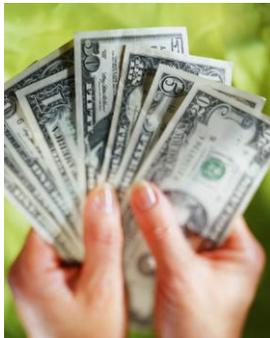
He is not praised because he is dishonest. Let us be very clear that the text does not say that he is praised for dishonesty. He is praised for shrewdness. The rich man recognizes a shrewd dealer when he sees one—and may have acquired his own wealth by some fairly shrewd dealings.

The rich man expresses admiration for his erstwhile manager because he is foresighted enough to make provision for himself against a time when he knows he will face unemployment. No doubt the master wishes his old manager had been so prudent and careful with his own accounts.

Jesus makes His point through a shrewd but unrighteous man.

Here is a well recognizable fact: Some unbelievers are far more savvy than believers when it comes to using money. Really. I think this comes as no surprise to those who observe gullible and lax believers as they “manage” their money. In one case a believer, wanting to help a man he had recently met, lent him his own credit card! Of course it wasn’t long before he discovered that he had been fleeced. Others entrust cash, and other easily convertible resources, to alcoholics who transform the largess into addictive substances. How naïve.

How shrewd are you?



Do you use money to good advantage in the Kingdom of God? Are you as shrewd as the unrighteous manager? In verse 9 Jesus tells His listener to “make friends for yourself by means of the wealth of unrighteousness.” The “wealth of unrighteousness” is money, simply that. Care must be taken not to over spiritualize what is being talked about here. The Greek word in this case is μαμωνά (mammon). The New King James Version preserves the transliteration “mammon,” but the NASB renders it “wealth of unrighteousness,” causing confusion. We are talking about money, possessions, the stuff of this world.

Make friends with money? The short and simple answer is “yes,” why not? Use the wealth God gives you to help others along the way. Do not hoard or squander it. Be like the shrewd manager who recognizes that the judicious use of money can spare one of potential difficulties which may lie in the path ahead. Carefully using money to make friends for the Kingdom of God means that helping someone in need opens a door that would otherwise be shut.

We are obligated by Scripture to give to the poor and widows. That is a given. But using our abundance to help others, whether or not they are in need, even if only to ask them over for a meal, may open a door for the gospel.

The unrighteous but shrewd manager finally learned how wealth might be given away to do some good. Even though he was giving wealth that was not his own and the good done was for himself alone, he did learn how to use wealth for (self) beneficial purposes.

Likewise we should be good at using wealth to do good. What better time than now? In a previous parable (The Rich Fool) we saw a rich man concluding that he needed to tear down his barns and build larger ones to store up his God-given wealth. God called him a fool.

“So that when [the money] fails . . .,” the Lord continues. Money will eventually fail. When it does we will no longer have the option of making friends for the Kingdom with money. At this point the parable says “. . . so that when it fails they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings.”

The parable cannot be referring to God as welcoming us into eternal dwellings as we cannot use money to open a door of friendship with Him. It cannot be referring to the angels for the same reason. The reference here is to the ones who have come to the Lord by means of this wealth which was used to open doors for the kingdom. Our wealth did not get them into the Kingdom, it merely opened a door for presenting the gospel. Jesus becomes their savior and, if we are pre-deceased by these we have helped—well, it is my assertion that they will be there in heaven to welcome us as we arrive.

A discussion of trustworthiness, honesty and dishonesty

Verses 10-13 which follow, though not part of the parable, give further insight into the matters at hand. Trustworthiness is contrasted with dishonesty. Jesus concludes with the well-known didacticism: “You cannot serve God and wealth.”



A conclusion from the Scriptures.

Here then from the Scriptures themselves is the most fitting conclusion to Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Unrighteous Manager:

“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of 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 else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Luke 16:10-13.