

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 16:1-13

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This is a parable of the street. Jesus is telling this parable with a glimmer in his eye and in the spirit of a guy on the street. It has a colloquial feel to it. It's about the relationship between rich men and their employees. Everyone in Jesus' audience knew what that was about. They all had to deal with rich men who owned the land in one way or another. Most of the time the rich men were arrogant. They were tough, gruff, and rough. That's the style of this rich man, which in turn creates the basic dynamic of identification with the shrewd steward (or the dishonest manager, or however you want to name him). This is the keystone of this parable.

The dynamic of the steward's dilemma and its narration have very similar dynamics to the parable of the rich fool. You may remember how that parable goes: "The land of a certain rich man brought forth a great harvest and he said to himself, 'What am I going to do because I don't have anywhere to store all my grain and my crops? I know what I'll do, I'll tear down my old barns and I'll build up new bigger ones and there I'll store all my grain and my crops.'" Jesus is doing the same thing in both parables, that is, the dilemma is one with which everyone can identify, and the dynamic is to create identification with these two characters as they try to figure out what they're going to do.

Another similar parable is the story the prodigal son. "When he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to eat and here I sit starving. I will arise and go to my father...'" and so on. He makes a decision. Well, that's what happens here. The steward figures out an approach to a crisis, the crisis of being fired. So this is the crisis of unemployment. What he does is to make deals with his master's debtors in order to insure his future.

Now the way in which "the charges" is translated in the NRSV implies that the steward was squandering his boss's property. But the Greek word *diascorpidso* is related to scorpion. Whenever scorpions are around things scatter. That's the sense of this. He was scattering, he was perhaps embezzling, but more likely he was using the property in the interests of poor people and he was using it in ways that the manager didn't like. The rich man was losing money because his steward was scattering his property.

So the steward figures out, "I know what I'll do so that when the master takes the job away from me (when I get fired), they will receive me into their homes." Who is *they*? *They* are the people who will benefit. It's people who owe a lot to rich people. It is poor people. The steward makes deals. In the commentaries you will see that commentators try to figure out a way to justify Jesus' parable. For example, it is proposed that the steward negotiates away the exorbitant interest that would be charged by the rich man. In the case of the first one, it was 100% interest, so he only charged the principle and deducted the

interest so that he only had 50% to pay. In the second case the interest rate may have been lower.

I doubt that's what Jesus' listeners understood. Rather, what they understood was that the steward was reducing people's debt in the first case by 50% and in the second by 20%. He was giving them a great deal so that they would then feel an obligation to him. It's the way of the old world: if I scratch your back, you'll scratch mine. It's the basic strategy of the Godfather: I'll do something good for you and you'll do something good for me. The deal that the steward makes creates the possibility that people will receive him and take care of him once he loses his job.

The comment of Jesus is what creates the scandal about this parable. That is, he says that the master (the rich man) commended the dishonest manager because he'd acted shrewdly. It is an ethical conundrum because the way in which he'd acted shrewdly was to rip off the rich man even more than he had before. So why is it then that his boss commends him? What is Jesus talking about? Of course, this is the sign that the story is a parable. No rich man in the first century would commend a manager who reduced the debts that he was owed by 50% and 20%.

This is a sign that the story is about God. God is the one who commends a shrewd steward for acting in a way that was not in the benefit of a rich man. Jesus explains why the master, that is God, commends this dishonest manager. The reason is that the children of this age are shrewder than the children of light in their own generation. That is, they know how to act. This guy knew how to work the system and to have it work for him, whereas the children of light are often naïve, pious, nice, and don't figure out how to use stuff in their own self-interest.

The steward's plan appeals to a practice that Jesus' listeners would have known: poor people welcome those who are friends and are in need into their homes. Jesus' final comment is then: "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of corrupt money (dishonest wealth), so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes." "Gone" isn't the best translation. The best translation is "when its power collapses."

Two things about this. First, this is about the turn of the ages when the old age comes to an end and the new age of the kingdom of God begins. The collapse that is going to happen is the change of the ages. This is the same dynamic as is present in the book of Revelation when the owners of the world, the capitalists, grieve at Rome's destruction. Their way of making money is gone because the kingdom of God has come. This is the same basic idea. The way to insure your future in the kingdom of God is to work the system of this age in the interests of poor people.

Second, who are they who will welcome you into the eternal homes? "They" are the same ones as "When I am dismissed as manager, **they** may welcome me into their homes." They are poor people. "They" are those who are indebted to the rich. In the new age they

are the ones who are the gatekeepers for the kingdom of God. The confirmation of this exegesis is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that follows. Lazarus is the one who is in the position of power in the new age after they both die and it is he who determines whether or not the rich man can get into heaven. He is in the position of power, whereas the rich man is in hell in a position of great weakness. Who will welcome you into the eternal homes? Those whom you have benefited by the way in which you used your money.

The sayings that follow only make sense in light of this reversal of expectations in the parable. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. This shrewd steward has been faithful in the way that he has managed a little money in this age. Whoever is dishonest in very little in this age will use money to accumulate wealth and power for themselves. So if you then have not been faithful with dishonest, corrupt money, by using it in the interest of the poor, who will entrust you with the true riches? The shrewd steward has been faithful in his use of corrupt, dishonest wealth and so he will be entrusted with the true riches, which are the riches of the kingdom of God.

If you've not been faithful with what belongs to another, if you have not used it in the interests of the poor as the shrewd steward did, who will give you what is your own in the age to come? So no slave can serve two masters. "You can't serve God and money" means you can use money in the interests of the kingdom of God and poor people or you can use it as an end in itself. You can serve money, or you can use money in the service of God.

This is a classic Jesus parable, that is, Jesus turning things upside down in a playful, utterly delightful manner. It's very important that this parable not be told as a series of moralisms, but rather told in a spirit of thinking from the perspective of the new age and the reversal of values that is present there. That value is recognizing that the real power of money is to be used in other people's interest. That's being truly shrewd and acting in your own best interest in the long tem, namely, in the kingdom of God.