



The Parables: The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-13)

16:1 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 2 So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' 3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-- 4 I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

5 "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' 7 "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' 8 "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

9 I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. 10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Are you impressed with the savvy that some people seem to have when it comes to the ways of the world. Whatever happens, they always seem to get out of the problem almost unscathed. Ronald Reagan had the nickname of the "Teflon President" because whatever mud got thrown at him, it never seemed to stick. Bill Clinton had the same problem and he managed to get himself out of even stickier spots – and remained remarkably popular figure throughout his eight years in office.

Or there are the sorts of people that even though they have done the most terrible things, somehow people respect them in a funny sort of way. In 2002 the gangland murderer, Reggie Kray dies and was buried in Chingford. There was a funeral cortège from the scenes of some of his worst crime scenes, through East London to Chingford. Right along the route of the cortège, thousands of people waited for a long time to see the cortège pass. For some it was curiosity, for others it was to pay their respects in a funny sort of way. It's strange how we sometimes commend these people because of their infamy but it's a funny old world and that wasn't lost on Jesus as he taught His disciples about what the relationship should be between His people and the world.

It's a strange story. A steward – a household manager – a senior servant with responsibility for the master's finances was found to have been wasting the master's money. He is described as dishonest. And he is given his marching orders. Oh dear. He was too proud to beg and too weak to go off and grow his own crops. So he devises a cunning plan! Before everyone knows he is sacked, he uses his position to write off a couple of large debts. Why? Because the people who owed the master will be so grateful for the favour that they would make sure he didn't go hungry. Clever eh? And it worked.

People have a problem with verse 8 *"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.* Was the master commending dishonesty? No the master would only have found out after the man was sacked! He was still sacked and that's where Reggie Kray, Ronald

Reagan and Bill Clinton come in. They did wrong things, but you can't help commending their savvy even though you condemn their dishonesty. The master commended the dishonest steward's savvy whilst probably being glad to see the back of him – after all the dodgy manager had just done him out of 400 gallons of olive oil and 200 bushels of wheat – which was quite a substantial amount – as well as the rest he had mismanaged.

Was Jesus condoning that kind of action? No. The master in the parable may have commended it but in truth he would have been glad to see the back of him. Jesus in no ways condoned or commends the dishonest action Himself, but He uses the example to pull us up short. What He says about it is three-fold:

- ◆ *Use what worldly wealth you have for eternal gain*
- ◆ *Our use of money shows our spiritual priorities.*
- ◆ *Our use of money shows where our true loyalty lies*

◆ Use what worldly wealth you have for eternal gain

8 "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. 9 I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

This is one of those parables about accountability. There are a few about stewards and responsibilities and verse 1 shows this was clearly aimed at the disciples. As I've said, people have problems with trying to work out what this parable means but as often is the case with parables, rather than looking for deep secrets in the story, we must look at what Jesus teaches through it which is clear in vv9-13. Unlike prophecy, particularly apocalyptic prophecy like we find in Revelation, the parables of Jesus are intended to be interesting stories with a simple message and the first part of this simple message is that we should use our worldly wealth in a way that leads to eternal gain.

The master in the parable commends the dishonest steward for his outrageous use of money that didn't belong to him to ensure his future security. Now Jesus latches on to that and says *For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.*

The Message expresses this verse nicely:

16:8 "Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way--but for what is right--using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour."

I really couldn't put that better. Look at the way in which people commend themselves to others in this world – using underhand means and sometimes just plain cheek to make friends. There was a book one written called *How to make friends and influence people* written by Dale Carnegie in 1936. Needless to say Carnegie didn't really suggest underhand means – it was a much more genteel book than that. In our modern age, being streetwise and sharp off the mark is the way of the world.

Things are probably more like the more iconic 80s film with Michael Douglas and Martin Sheen called *Wall Street* which was a dog eat dog film that reflected the yuppie culture of the 80s where outrageous practices generated large salaries amongst a group of unscrupulous businessmen. In the 80s it was a new thing and is perhaps more the rule than the exception in the 21st Century. The central character, Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas) makes the famous phrase "Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works."

And Jesus looks at people like these and says – these people know how to look after themselves and commend themselves better than good upright people – like us – the people of the light. So *use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.* Jesus is not meaning go dishonest. What He's saying is that we as honest people should use the worldly wealth and all the influence it brings we have to benefit the purposes of God. That's be making friends – because it is through friendship that people come to Christ. If the world

can do it through unrighteous means – how more so can we do it through righteous means.

And that's the issue. God has blessed us with personal wealth, personal belongings and a standing in society. Are we using it for His glory? As you probably know, it'd a common theme in the words and parables of Jesus. Non-Christians have no hesitation in using their wealth for THEIR glory. What are we doing with the wealth that God had given us? We are stewards of it. Are we using it up to gain friends that we take in to eternity with us? Or are we just sitting on it and telling everybody how blessed we are. *I want you to be smart in the same way--but for what is right--using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour."*

◆ Our use of money shows our spiritual priorities.

10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"

Yes, it's another sermon on stewardship. We've had a few lately and not just by me – by Peter Manson a few weeks ago and then by Alexander Love last week. I think God is trying to tell us something. We've been given much. We love to think about how poor we are in Britain – but we're the fourth richest nation on Earth. And we have been given much as the people of God. We have been entrusted with worldly wealth. We have been entrusted with possessions. We have been entrusted with nice homes. We have been entrusted with the words of life. And what are we doing with them. Are we using them to make friends and bring people to Christ. Are we prominent in the community for our good deeds? Do people know who we are without asking?

We've received of the grace but where are our spiritual priorities? As I said the other week, I recently got a book called *The scandal of the evangelical conscience* by Ron Sider who is a well-respected Baptist author and theologian in the United States. He looks at a study done by the Barna Institute in the USA which is an evangelical Christian research organisation – similar to Christian Research here in the UK. It looks into the behaviour of evangelicals over a range of issues. It finds that in the USA divorce is more common among "born again Christians" than the population as is the incidence of physical abuse on wives, more racist than non-Christians and had the same general attitudes to money and sex as the general population. Sider comments "*scandalous behaviour is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity most "Christians" regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate an allegiance to money, sex and self-fulfilment.*" Arguably, if you look at the state of the church in the UK, we beat the Americans to it years ago.

Jesus said *10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"* And what is correct handling of worldly wealth? It isn't being a good accountant. It isn't showing thrift. It isn't about Home Mission grants. It isn't using it like the dishonest steward first did to gratify himself. But God has given us that wealth, those possessions, that status we have to bring Him glory and sweep people into eternity. There is the sense in which the dishonest steward got it right in the wrong way in the end. But still that was only to help himself. If people like that can act in a shrewd manner, then how much more should the people of God use what they have been trusted with to make friends! And what does Jesus say about this? *So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?* That's a tough one isn't it? How have we used what God has given us? How are we using it? Are we making friends? Are we pointing them to the kingdom? Or do we keep it all to ourselves. Do our priorities point us to eternity – or to ourselves?

◆ Our use of money shows where our true loyalty lies

12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

But it goes a step deeper than that. I've tried to be broad this evening but in truth Jesus is focusing on our material wealth It's one of these parables where Jesus challenges us with how we use what God has given us. The key verse is *13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both*

God and Money. That is the issue faced by the dishonest servant. He was more loyal to his lust for his master's money and the position of importance it brought him. In the end he showed his loyalty lay with himself and not with his master.

Where is our loyalty this evening? In a few weeks we are to have another baptism. Again we will be remembering that baptism is a statement of going God's way. "I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back". If we come down to it, we don't like parables like this one. We sing it, we say it, but do we mean it.

This brings us to a painful place. We can sit there and justify to ourselves all those times when we selfishly did things for ourselves. We justify those times when we have been mean. We can justify to ourselves our unwillingness to give, our unwillingness to share and our unwillingness to use what we have to gain influence to bring people to Christ.

Yet we can't escape the gaze of our fellow believers and worse, we can't escape the gaze of our family, friends and neighbours who don't know Christ. How you handle your worldly wealth broadcasts to the rest of the world where your spiritual priorities lie and worse, who you are loyal to. We need say nothing else because our behaviour says it all. Ouch! How does the world view you and I tonight?

We are never given these words to condemn us, but to give us a timely reminder of the God we serve and the Saviour that bought us with His blood. Let's examine ourselves tonight and commit who we are and what we have to His service so that we'll make friends with those in the world so that they will sit up and listen as we tell them about Jesus and receive Him.

