

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/18/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, September 18th

Luke 16:1-13

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The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

This week's Gospel lection features one of the most difficult of Luke's parables to interpret: the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. Falling between the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus, some contemporary commentators read social justice implications into this story while others have performed all sorts of contortions to make sense of it. Perhaps this parable is as simple as Jesus challenging us to be both radical and bold with the resources we have been given.

Luke 16:1-13

¹ He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'³ And 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, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'

The lection text opens with Jesus speaking to His disciples, but the Pharisees may also have heard (16:14). The manager of a rich man's estate is confronted with a charge that he is wasting the possessions he was employed to manage. The man is clearly guilty since he does not protest his innocence. The soon-to-be ex-manager worries that after he is dismissed (suggesting he is a free man and not a slave), he will not be able to make a living. He comes up with a shrewd idea that will allow him a future after judgment is passed.

⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' 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?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

The manager's plan is simple. He gathers the people who owe his employer (*kyrios* - which can be rendered lord or master) and he reduces the amounts owed. In doing so, the manager will receive future favor with the debtors. There appears to be some strategy involved since the debts are reduced by different percentages.

⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for

yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

No doubt coming as a shock to the disciples, Jesus tells them how the employer commends the dishonest manager. It is now that Jesus begins to explain the parable. The sons of this world are contrasted with sons of the light. Jesus' disciples were referred to as children of the light (John 12:26). Jesus notes that the people of the world are shrewder at dealing with each other than His disciples are. He then tells them to do what the dishonest manager did, use the worldly resources (*mammon*) shrewdly to benefit their mission. Jesus also reminds them that worldly wealth is always going to fail. Such wealth does not follow us into eternity but what we do with it will.

¹⁰ "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money."

This next section of text may not immediately seem to connect with current narrative. V.10 appears similar to the response of the master to the two successful servants in Matthews' Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:21,23) and Luke's Parable of the Ten Minas (19:17). In v.11, "*unrighteous wealth*" may refer to worldly wealth and "*true riches*" refers to spiritual wealth and responsibility in the Kingdom. This is further explained in v.12: "*that which is another's*" refers to worldly wealth given to God's people for them to steward during their lives and "*that which is your own*" again refers to the "*true riches*" in v.9, namely Kingdom wealth.

The final verse of the text ends with a line right out of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24). The word rendered here as "serve" is "*douleuō*" and suggests the work of a slave rather than that of a servant. Being a slave to worldly wealth (*mammon*) is exactly what happens when we elevate such to the status of an idol in our lives. Note Jesus says "*cannot*" rather than "*should not*." It is not possible to serve God and worldly wealth.

Reflections

Scholars have come up with all sorts of explanations to make sense of this strange and surprising story. Perhaps Luke was left with a few odds and ends he had to find a place for - rather like having a screw and two washers left over after assembling an IKEA bookshelf? Maybe this parable got mixed up with others? Maybe this is just the literary technique of hyperbole (an intentional over-the-top overstatement) to make a point? Maybe the dishonest manager reduced the debts so it would result in immediate cash flow to his boss so he might save himself? Maybe he simply cut out his own excessive commission? Maybe this was about social justice for the debtors? Perhaps the rich man in the parable is God who at once is both righteous (dismisses the dishonest manager) and yet acts with mercy and grace (does not have him imprisoned). The dishonest manager is not praised for his morals but for his perception of the situation, his cunning, and his willingness to act. Or perhaps this parable is simply Jesus challenging us to be both radical and bold with the resources we have been given? We are to be as shrewd as the dishonest manager in this parable with the resources we have been given to steward.

How much unused financial reserve exists within many of the various church organizations? While this may be prudent financial management in the worldly accounting system, does this practice pass the Kingdom test? How many square feet of real estate belonging to churches remain virtually unused for most of the week? How much talent existing within the body does the church fail to engage for Kingdom purposes? How effectively is our own time, talent and treasure being invested?