

Sermon for Proper 20C  
Sunday, September 18, 2022  
“Get your priorities straight”

Text: Luke 16:1-13

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you find today’s Gospel reading disturbing? Does it bother you that Jesus told a parable that seems to advocate dishonesty and cheating? This isn’t the kind of message that we expect to hear coming from Jesus. It is one of those passages that preachers would rather not preach on. C’mon, there’s this manager who’s worried about his future, he cheats his boss out of the full amount that he was supposed to collect—maybe because he was ticked off for firing him—and tried to win some friends by scratching the backs of the other debtors with some debt relief. But then, instead of the rich man getting mad, he praised the manager for being shrewd. Wealth isn’t an easy subject to deal with in the first place, and although the turn of events of this passage seems to confuse us, Jesus was trying to comment on a meaningful observation and call some folks out for their bad behavior. To understand this parable we need to start by asking the question: *Why* is Jesus telling this parable in the first place? So, here’s a little background and context.

The parable starts out, “There was a rich man who had a manager.” The rich man charges the manager with squandering his property, so he brings him into his office and says, “You’re messin’ with my bottom line; you’re stealing from under my nose. You’re fired!” What’s a guy gonna do? This is a guy who doesn’t get his hands dirty much; he is a debt collector, not a laborer. He works for a hedge fund on Wall Street; he’s not going to get a job as an auto mechanic or a construction worker. But, he also has his reputation to uphold.

So, it is important to be aware of important cultural and historical information. First, you need to keep in mind that rich landlords in Roman-occupied Galilee were loan-sharks. They lent money and charged exorbitant interest rates to amass more land, and when the borrower couldn’t pay up—with interest—they would disinherit peasants of their own family’s land. The manager would have been the guy who physically collected the debt. He himself would have charged extra interest, which he would keep as a kick back, but the extra interest took the form of hidden charges. (It’s kinda like when you buy an airline ticket, but when you read the fare details, the taxes and fees are as much or more than the fare itself!) The people originally listening to Jesus and the early Jewish Christians hearing or reading about it in St. Luke’s gospel would have presumed this to be the case. As Jews, they would have understood this scenario to be in direct violation Deuteronomy 23:19, which says, “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, or interest on anything that is lent.” The landlord and his manager were violating the Torah. They were making money off their fellow Jews by charging high-interest loans and mortgages.

The manager, likely aware of what he and his boss were doing, feared losing everything, including his reputation, and maybe he feared incurring God's wrath for disobeying a commandment, so he went around to the folks who owed money and cancelled their extra debts. Well, the landlord found out about what his manager was up to, but in a strange plot twist, he commended him for acting shrewdly. Such a twist might seem strange to us, but to the ears of those who knew the Torah, the relief of debt may have served as a sign that some sort of repentance, restitution, and restoration had taken place.

Then, Jesus, went on to comment on the parable by suggesting that we make friends, even by means of dishonest wealth, because those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. The folks that are willing to have your back when times are tough are going to be there for you in the good time. There are those who are more shrewd in the world than the children of light. It is not clear just who Jesus was talking about, but you might be interested to know that at the end of this parable, Luke wrote an important comment, which we didn't hear today. Luke wrote, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Jesus. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'" There's the *why*. There's the reason why Jesus told this parable. Though at times Jesus seems to be defending wealth, I don't think he is saying wealth is a bad thing; rather, he is admonishing those who idolize material things, placing transient earthly goods before God and heavenly treasures, both of which are eternal. The bottom line of this teaching seems to have something to do with faithfulness and priorities.

There are three points that I think the Parable of the Dishonest Manager can teach us. First, is that wealth isn't necessarily a bad thing. Jesus wasn't saying that wealth was a bad thing. It's what we do with our wealth that matters. We can be greedy about holding on to it or we can use it to help others. Wealth doesn't always mean money, either; perhaps you have a special gift or talent or some special training that could benefit others. Today's parable reminds us that however God has enriched your life and your being, use that for a good purpose, for the benefit of God's people and to his glory.

Second, this parable reminds us that things in life are fleeting: jobs, wealth, health, relationships, shelter, status, power, privilege, and so on. We would do well to make good in our relationships. The manager in the story knew that the bottom was about to fall from underneath him, and it would be wise to have some friends to help catch him. We, too, should foster and nurture relationships with those to whom we might turn when a crisis or sudden change occurs in our lives. One of the things that I love about the people of All Saints, one of the real blessings about the people of our community is that when the chips are down, you come to the fore and help get us through it. When there is a crisis in our community, you rally to keep our heads above water. When somebody from our parish family has a crisis, you rally behind that person to get them through it. The relationships we have with one another extremely important. Our

human relationships are part of the tangible gifts God provides us with on this earth to get us from day to day. But the gospel lesson reminds us that even these things are fleeting.

And finally, this parable also reminds us that in the midst of crisis, God is there. In the midst of our struggles, be they personal, financial, emotional, mental, in our community, in our world, in the midst of our struggles, God is always there to meet us and get us through it. That theme runs throughout Luke's entire Gospel from Jesus's birth to death. God shows up in the unexpected places. In the midst of life's chaos, we can always depend on God's changelessness, and he always shows up. And, that's the most important relationship we should be concerned with, because even our friends are human. Material goods will come and go, but God will always be there. We need to keep our priorities straight, which is what Jesus was trying to say through this parable.

Jesus focused on money in this parable, but there are many things that we idolize and prioritize in our own time: money, careers, cars, the internet, other people. We have many things that distract us away from God, but those things might disappear in an instant. The lesson for today is not to let those things be our god. Let God be our God, because when people and things don't come through, he will never abandon us. Amen.

#### Resources

“Commentary on Luke 16:1-13,” in [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2982](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2982)

David Lose, “Wealth and Relationships,” in <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/>

<http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/AAHH2001/404>