

## Worldly Wealth and Heavenly Riches: Luke 16:1-13

Today's gospel reading is a very strange parable where the "Baddie" in the story is given a "pat on the back" for the way he manipulates a situation to his own advantage. To understand this parable it helps to understand the world that Jesus lived in. The rich man may have been a person who had a large land holding. His land could have been worked by tenant farmers. As a rich man he would have also employed a person to manage his finances, to collect the rent from tenants and any portion of the crops that were owing to him. This manager would have been a trusted employee whose position would have carried great authority. The rich man would rely entirely on the honesty and business acumen of the manager. One of the tenants may have cared for a grove of olive trees while another tenant may have grown a field of wheat. The tenants would not have paid their debts, not in cash, but in a portion of the crop that they farmed.

Today's parable is known as the parable of the shrewd manager. It was addressed to Jesus' disciples (16:1) but it's worth keeping in mind that the Pharisees were also present (16:14). Luke places this parable in his Gospel just after the parable of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal son squandered his wealth, his share of his father's estate, while the shrewd manager is accused of wasting the possessions of the rich man who employed him. The word used for squandering in the parable of the prodigal son is the same as the word used for wasting in the parable of the shrewd manager. The manager is not initially accused of acting dishonestly but rather he has wasted the rich man's resources. The rich man confronts the manager and asks him, (16:2) "*What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management because you cannot be manager any longer.*" Clearly the manager knew that when the time came for him to give an account to the rich man he would not be able to satisfactorily explain the misuse of his possessions. So, the first thing the manager does is to assess his situation. He realises that once word got around that he had been dismissed from his present position then he would be virtually unemployable in the same line of work. He considers other possible alternatives. He recognises that physically he is not strong enough to take on any manual labour. And it is too demeaning for him to be seen begging. So, he hits on a shrewd plan of action that will secure his future. It may not make him rich but it will ensure a roof over his head and food for his stomach.

He says to himself, *I know what I'll do so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.* (16:4)

His basic plan is to allow a major forgiveness of debts, which will obligate people to reciprocate by providing for *his* needs. He is going to leverage the social obligation of what is known as reciprocity. Today we know it as "quid pro quo" or more crudely, "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." We see it at the highest level at election time when donations are paid to a political party with the understanding that the donor will be favourably treated should the party gain power.

The desire to reciprocate is a part of human nature. If we do someone a favour then we hope, should the need arise, they will reciprocate and do likewise. It was a deeply-held social value in the near east of the first century. And this story infers that, due to the social norms of that

period, the manager's plan would obligate people to take care of him in the future. In making this calculation, the manager was extremely shrewd.

So, *the manager called in each one of the master's debtors*. The fact that *he summoned each debtor* shows that he had great authority, and is continuing to project this authority. He realised that the master was not going to employ him any longer, nor give him a good reference, so instead, he acts in a big-hearted way towards the master's debtors. By reducing their debt, he has endeared himself to the debtors and ingratiated himself into their lives. But he has been dishonest in his dealings as the master's representative. The master had not given him permission to reduce the debts.

The parable makes no mention of the master prosecuting the manager. Presumably, that the master is a person of some standing in the community and he does not want to expose himself to public ridicule. He had foolishly allowed himself to be swindled by an employee. It is very strange that the parable then says in 16:8a *The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly*. The master understood that manager is preparing for life in the future, when he is unemployed.

Google tells us that to be *shrewd* means to have, or show, sharp powers of judgement; to be astute. It is the ability to understand what is happening and to take the necessary steps to be prepared, and not caught off guard when the situation changes. The manager was certainly shrewd. About to be without a job he negotiated down the debt of two men so that they in turn they would be grateful to him, and, if he should be destitute, welcome him into their homes.

A strange parable indeed where the actions of the “Baddie” in the story are admired.

From 16:8b we learn that *the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light*. Remember this parable is addressed to Jesus' disciples. His disciples are the people of the light. This parable is about people who aren't Jesus' followers but are people of the world. The rich man who admired the shrewdness of his manager is a person of the world. The debtors who are now indebted to the dishonest manager are part of the world. And of course, nobody is more worldly than the manager who connived for his own advantage. If he had been a person of the light then he would not have wasted the master's possessions in the first place. If he was a person of the light he would have tried to make amends with the rich man rather than feathering his own bed with the debtors.

Jesus draws three lessons from this parable. The main lesson is

### **What people of the light must do to gain eternal wealth.**

Firstly, he tells the disciples, *use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. (16:9)*

From the parable we see that in reducing the debts the manager misappropriated the master's money so that he gained earthly friends and secured his earthly future. If he acted this way for earthly security how much more should the disciples use worldly wealth to secure their

eternal dwelling. The parable is not encouraging the disciples to act dishonestly or fraudulently, rather to be shrewd in the way wealth is used.

The disciples, *the people of the light* should recognize that they are stewards, with God as their *Master*. All of their material possessions, what Jesus calls worldly wealth, come from and belong to God. They will not take any material possessions into the next world. He wants them to use the material possessions He has entrusted to their stewardship to benefit others.

Worldly wealth is to be used by people of the light to make friends and to be a blessing to them. In Luke's gospel there is a great emphasis on God's compassion for the poor and marginalised. There is a great emphasis on seeking and saving the lost. So we may assume that the disciples should use their worldly wealth to make friends of the poor and the lost.

There is the later parable in Luke 16:19-31 of the Rich Man and Lazarus. When Lazarus, the beggar died, he went to be with Abraham/paradise. When the rich man died he went to hell/place of torment. The lesson of the parable is that during his life the rich man had seen the plight of the Lazarus but failed to show him compassion. He knew the teachings of scripture that required him to care for the poor but he had ignored these teachings. As a result he wasn't welcomed into an eternal dwelling with Abraham because he hadn't used his worldly wealth to make friends with a poor person.

The possessions the disciples have in this life are to be used to gain friends so that when they die, they will be welcomed into eternal life. They will be welcomed into their eternal home by the poor and the marginalised whom they have helped in this life. In doing so, they will be *shrewd in an eternal way*, and gain enormous *eternal* benefits.

The point of the parable is not to commend the dishonesty of the manager but the fact that he thought ahead and planned for his earthly future. Jesus wants the disciples to think ahead and plan for their eternal dwelling. He implies the secret to this to use money shrewdly, not dishonestly, by sharing their wealth and developing their friendship circle so they will be welcomed into their heavenly home. Although not explicitly stated here, we probably can assume that the larger the circle of friends that the disciples have then the more people they are able to influence for the sake of the kingdom.

Secondly, Jesus makes some comments on trustworthiness. He speaks about

### **How people of the light must steward another's money**

In 16:10, we read, *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.* This seems self-explanatory. If you are dishonest in handling a small amount of money, then it seems to follow that you couldn't be trusted to handle a significant amount. Jesus goes on to say in 16:11, *So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?* As on so many other occasions, Jesus is making the point that there is something greater than material wealth and if you have been careless or dishonest in handling material wealth then it is questionable whether it would be wise to allow you to

care for something more precious, *true wealth*. If you behave unethically with money then who will trust you to recognise and value those things of a more spiritual nature.

Jesus continues this reflection on trustworthiness by saying in v12, “*And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?*” These words hark back to the parable. The manager couldn’t be trusted with the Master’s property, where mismanagement and dishonesty could have resulted in punishment. So why would he ever have property of his own, a situation where he wouldn’t have to answer to anyone if he squandered or neglected it?

Bible commentators see these last three verses, v10-12, as building upon each other. Because of the context of the passage some commentators go so far as to consider that v12 implies that if you have acted dishonestly with the worldly goods of another, then are you deserving of something of your own, are you deserving of something of lasting value/ something of eternal value? Are you deserving of an eternal home?

Thirdly, in 16:13 Jesus comments on the danger of being enthralled by money. He is unequivocal as to

### **Who People of the light must serve**

He makes the point that *No servant can serve two masters..... You cannot serve God and money.*

Jesus had previously cautioned against focusing on accumulating wealth in Luke 12:13-23 when Jesus told the parable of the Rich Fool who had more than he knew what to do with. You will remember that rather than share it around he decided to build a bigger storage facility. However, that night his life was taken from him. Jesus explained the point of this parable as being “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (12:33). The rich fool had accumulated wealth on earth only to lose his life before he could enjoy its benefits and in so doing he had failed to build up a relationship with our heavenly Father. It was with his heavenly Father where his eternal home could have been. The implication being that he missed out on an eternal home with God. The Rich Fool focussed on his possessions and not God.

The shrewd manager’s job required him to manage another’s finances. Because of his plight through his mis-management he didn’t act with integrity and disregarded the commandment, *Thou shalt not steal*. His dishonesty showed that he was not a man of God. Money had been his downfall.

The disciples were not to let money be their Master. They were not to be obsessed with accumulating wealth. Otherwise, they too were in danger of becoming a servant of money rather than a servant of God

So we are not to store up things for ourselves and consequently fail to be rich toward God like the rich fool (12:21) and we are not to be dishonest like the shrewd manager but we are to use our material possessions shrewdly to open the doors to an eternal home.