

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Luke 16:1-17** **“Jesus Praises A Sly Scoundrel”**

July 20, 2014  
(6th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646  
Church Office: 864-229-7551  
Church Website: [www.msumc1.org](http://www.msumc1.org)

## **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 16:1-8, 9-13  
 "JESUS PRAISES A SLY SCOUNDREL"

This Parable Only In Luke (L)

**A. 16:1-8 THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST & SHREWD MANAGER.** New Setting

Story Is Disturbing To Many Readers: Jesus Praises A Clever Rogue

**1) v.1 Rich Man And Steward: Bad Report/ Poor Manager.** Most Difficult Of All Synoptic Parables

7 Stanza Of 3 Lines Parable (vv.1-8) + 3 Stanza Poem (vv.9-13)

1 And Jesus said to **HIS DISCIPLES**, Lukan Introduction (Includes Wider Audience)

Ia "There was a **RICH MAN** who had a **STEWARD** //v.19, Fully Authorized To Act As An Agent, Jo b Description

b and charges were brought to him Community: Honorable Man, *Shaliah*: Estate Manager/Power Of Attorney

c that he was wasting (scattering, squandering) his goods. // Prodigal 15:13, Inept, Not Necessarily Dishonest

Limited Goods, Land-Based Economy: He Had too Much

**2) v.2 Problem: Crisis Of Accountability.** Widely Known? Made Master Look Foolish!

A Man's Agent Is As Himself

2 Ila And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you?' No Response: Silence

b Turn in the account of your stewardship Fired But Not Jailed, Bring Me The Books!

c for you can no longer be steward.' He Believed The Charges, His Silence Implies Guilt

Must Have Books Before Transfer To New Man, Find Out Contracts

**3) v.3 Question To Himself: Facing His Limits.** //15:17-19, Soliloquy At The Middle

No Defense Of Innocence, In A Crisis He Took Decisive Action

3 IIIa And the steward said to himself, Question + Self-Assessment + Insight

b 'What shall I do because the master is taking the stewardship away from me?' Time To Act

c I am not strong enough to farm and ashamed to beg.' 2 Counts, Valid Self-Assessment

Unsympathetic Character: Weak/Lazy/Proud

**3) v.4 Answer To Himself: An Idea To Create A New Future!**

No Future Unless He Creates Some Good Will Fast! Still A Rogue!

4 IVa 'I know that I will do Flash Of Insight

b so that when I am put out of the stewardship Assumes Loss Status And Security

c they may receive me into their houses. v.9b, Folk Hero, Assumes Hellenistic Reciprocity

No One Yet Knows He's Fired, *Quid Pro Quo*

**2') vv.5-7 Solution: Quick Action To Make New Friends, Enhance Master's Honor.**

Land Renters, 20x Average Farm Income, Exaggeration

5 Va So summoning his master's debtors one by one he said to the first, Do Not Yet Know He's Been Fired

6 'How much do you owe my master?' A Con: He Is No Longer Employed!

b And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' Persons Of Means, 800+ Gallons/ 1000 Den.

c And he said to him, 'Take your bill and sit down quickly and write fifty.' They Are Now All Accomplices

50%, They Must Later Reciprocate

1.5 Years Wages

7 VIa Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?" Relies On Master's Mercy

b And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' 1000 Bushels (2,500-3,000 denarii)

c And he said to him, 'Take your bill and write eighty.' 20%, Must Later Reciprocate

Nearly 2 Years Wages

**1') v.8 Rich Man And Steward: Good Report/ Clever Manager.** Outsmarted By A Wily Slave

How Did Master Find Out? Steward Is A Professional Freeloader

8a VIIa Then **THE MASTER** commended the **STEWARD** of unrighteousness //v.9, Not Praise Of His Original Waste

because he acted shrewdly (cleverly), Quick Thinking, Decisive Action! Delight In A Rich-Man Duped!

Application They Use Money To Guarantee Future In This Life, What About The Next?

8b b for the sons of this world are shrewder Non-Christians Brighter/More Inventive Than Disciples In A Crisis

c than **THE SONS OF LIGHT** in their own generation. Mt. 10:16, Why Don't We Take Creative Action In Crises?

He Was Completely Bound Up In This Fallen, Evil World An Acted Accordingly

Rich Man, Tricky Agent, Cooperative Merchants = *This Generation*

Wisdom = In Crisis, Throw Your Life/Future On God's Mercy, Just Like The Prodigal

What Happened To The Steward? Don't Know. Open Ended. Great Skill At Self-Preservation

Parable Ends With v.8b, v.9 Begins Three Stanza Poem

**B. 16:9-13 A THREE-STANZA POEM ON MAMMON AND GOD INTERPRETS THE PARABLE.**

14:33, 12:21, 33, How Do We Use Our Resources Shrewdly?

**1) v.9 Mammon (Money), Angels And God (6:2).** Explains v.8, Be Shrewd & Generous

Mammon = Something To Rely On, Syrian God Of Riches

9		To you I say:	Authoritative Statement
	a	for <u>yourselves</u> make	You (Now)
	b	friends	Friends (Earthly? Heavenly?)
	c	from unrighteous <b>MAMMON</b> (i.e. worldly wealth)	Mammon (' <i>mn</i> = <i>trust</i> )
<b>DEATH</b>	c'	so that when it fails (runs out)	Mammon at death// v.4
	b'	they may receive (Mishna, <i>Yoma</i> 8.9)	They (Circumlocution: God)//v.9
	a'	<u>you</u> into eternal tents.	You (Later) <b>I En. 39:4, 2 Esd. 2:4 God Honors The Generous</b>

**2) vv.10-12 Mammon And True Riches. (6:2, Double Lines) *Qel Wahomer* :Lesser -Greater)**

How Masters Treat Slaves, Double Aphorism/Proverb + Double Question

10	a	The one faithful in little also in much is faithful,	Faithful (Reliable as a steward of another) <b>a-b-b'-a'</b> <b>Mammon/God, Mammon/Truth, Mammon God</b>
	b	and the one in little unfaithful also in much is unfaithful.	Unfaithful <b>a-b-a'-b'</b> <b>To Jesus Possessions Are Trivial</b>
11	c	If therefore in the unrighteous <b>MAMMON</b> you are not faithful	(the little) Unrighteous Mammon <b>The Unfaithful = No Truth</b>
<b>TRUTH</b>	c'	the <b>TRUTH</b> who to you will entrust?	(the much) The Truth (Eternal Life) <b>Passive Voice = God</b>
12	b.	And if in <i>what is another's</i> you are not faithful,	Unfaithful <b>Character Reveals Faith Complex Structure, Unity Of Thought</b>
	a'	the <i>what is your own</i> who will give to you?	Faithful (Possibility of being a steward for God) <b>Money Is Not Real Wealth, Jesus And His Kingdom Is Guarantee Your Future By Trusting/Cooperating With God Now</b>

**1') v.13 Mammon And God (Use Of Money Reveals Ultimate Loyalty/ Trust) (6:2).**

//Mt. 6:24, Use Money, But Don't Serve/Worship It As God

13	a	No one can serve two masters.	Two Masters Not Possible For Slaves
	b	Either the one he hates	Hates
<b>LOVE</b>	c	and the other he loves,	Loves <b>Love God</b>
	c'	or the one he is devoted to	Devoted
	b'	and the other he despises.	Despises
	a'	<u>You</u> cannot serve God and <b>MAMMON</b> .	God And Mammon (Idolatrous Power) <b>To Cling To Possessions Is To Isolate From God, Now And Later</b>

### A Brief Treatment Of Luke 16:1-13

The next section of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is a long section on stewardship (16:1-31) which opens and closes with parables about a rich man (vv.1-8, "There was a rich man" // vv.19-31, "There was a rich man"). Today's treatment is of the first two sections (A. vv.1-8: *The Parable of the Unjust Steward*, and B. vv.9-13: *A Poetic Reflection on Mammon*). The parable and poem are placed side by side and thus interpret one another, but are not exactly the same topic. The poem is more than a series of three comments on the parable, though the thematic link between vv.5-8 and v.9 is explicit. The parable praises prompt action in a crisis to secure one's future using an unforgettable scoundrel as a key character; the poem is a reflection on the false god of *mammon* and the faithful character and love necessary to resist its lure. The parable is a shock to the hearer's imagination; the poem then fills the space with wisdom about the right use of money with a view to the future (v.9), the possibility of true riches for the faithful (vv.10-12), and the issue of ultimate love and loyalty (v.13). The clever use of money is not to enhance the self but to become God's present agent through Jesus Christ. Our only security is in God.

The parable's verbal brackets or inclusions are *his disciples* (v.1) // *the sons of light* (v.8b), *rich man* (v.1) // *the master* (v.8a), *steward* (v.1) // *steward* (v.8a). The clear delineation of the opening and closing are reinforced by several complementary structures, the first being that the whole falls into seven three-line stanzas (I-VII). These are organized into six sections (the fifth, 2' vv.5-7 with two stanzas). At the center is a question and answer (3. v.3 // 3' v.4). Note at the center the parallel construction of *What shall I do?* and *I know what I will do*. It's the turning point and pivot. The problem and solution are the next outside layer (2. v.2 // 2' vv.5-7). The opening and closing frames (1. v.1 // 1' v.8) contain the verbal inclusions and a contrast between the steward criticized as wasteful (v.1) and the same steward praised as shrewd (v.8). The overall surface structure is a 6:2 concentric pattern. The telling ends with Jesus taking a jab at his friends, "for the sons of this world are shrewder than the sons of light in their own generation," meaning, "if those submerged in this world's values act with savvy to preserve themselves in this life (which is not the kingdom), what about you in the new situation? Are you as insightful as they?" This parable was often misread in the early and later church because the proper comparison was missed. The rogue manager is a colorful scoundrel. Within the short limits of opportunity, he secured his future by clever action. He is not a moral example but an exemplar of crisis management when all was lost. Jesus praises him as a shrewd worldling, then supplements the picaresque with a wisdom poem.

The poem on mammon begins with a formal introduction to mark a new section, "I say to you," and is formed in three stanzas (1. v.9, 2. vv.10-12. 1' v.13), each with *mammon* as a link (vv.9, 11, 13b). Each stanza has six lines in a 6:2 concentric configuration (a-b-c // c'-b'-a'). In order the topics are: *present monies and the future kingdom* (v.9); *character, money and truth from God* (vv.10-12); *money and a greater love* (v.13). To give generously benefits the poor and indicates affinity with the future kingdom even now. To live in this fallen world by the values of the world to come makes one a friend of angels and God, and when money has no more power (i.e. at death), we have a new home into which we are welcomed by old friends. The central section (vv.10-12) begins with a pair of two-line contrasting proverbs on faithful management (vv.10a, b), then reminds us that we if we are not faithful with the lesser (v.11a), how can we hope to gain the greater, which is God's truth for which we were designed. The double lines of the central section (vv.10-12) mark it off from the opening and closing stanzas with their single lines, as do the double questions (vv.11, 12). A proverb, "No one can serve two masters," opens the final stanza; we were designed for a single, over-riding loyalty as the focus of our affections. Our lives indicate loyalty, and in the end we choose what we love and value. Jesus was into clear choices. Are you?

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## JESUS PRAISES A SLY SCOUNDREL

*“You cannot serve God and Mammon.”*

One of Jesus’ more offensive statements.

A rich man stopped to visit the Teacher in his modest hut. He was astonished to see the famous man had but a wooden table, some simple chairs, and a few books in his main room. “Teacher,” the man asked, “where is your furniture?” “I might ask the same question of you,” the Teacher replied. “I have no furniture because I’m just a pilgrim, just passing through.” The Teacher looked up and smiled, “So am I.”<sup>1</sup>

So is traveling light a sign of wisdom?

John Patten wrote, “Money is something which buys everything but happiness and takes a man everywhere but heaven.”<sup>2</sup> A simple count reveals Jesus spoke a great deal on the topic. Sixteen of thirty-eight parables deal with money and possessions. In the four Gospels one out of every ten verses deals with money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith and more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions.<sup>3</sup> Why so much? Because the security and status and power and privilege and promise and ease money delivers, if we’re not careful about first things, steal our hearts and become a false center of loyalty, what the Bible calls an idol, which then serves as a conduit for blindness to God and bondage to alien powers. At death mammon’s power to make things happen evaporates; it’s all left behind; it fails us, is shown to be an illusion, and we stand before God not with a balance sheet but as a naked soul, a transparent record of what we’ve become along the way. For some

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<sup>1</sup> William White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 99.

<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 288.

<sup>3</sup> James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 372.

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**Luke 16:1-13 ..... 6**

that transition will be easy as the angels<sup>4</sup> greet them as long-time friends who've done business together all along, "It's been great working with you all these years. What a faithful undercover agent you've been, what a conduit of divine help to others." For others the transition will be more jarring, "You sent so little ahead. Did you not understand? Is this why your soul is so small and shrunken and undernourished?"<sup>5</sup>

This is why Jesus personalizes money and notes its title, *Mammon*, which was at the time the Syrian pagan god of riches and comes from a little Aramaic word that means *trust*.<sup>6</sup> Mammon is what we trust for life, whatever it may be that's less than God. And here in the middle of the summer, the season church giving slumps a bit, it's prime time to be reminded that stewardship is what we do after we say "I believe." As one man said, "To meet Jesus is to look yourself in the pocketbook, which is the most unmistakable way of looking yourself in the heart."<sup>7</sup> We do not see him face to face- though some still see visions; we do not hear him in the same way as did his first hearers- though we know the distinctive sound of his voice. We meet him, rather, in the stories he told, the poems he composed, and in the multiple influences of the Holy Spirit which is his alter-ego present with us as light and power. I never cease to be amazed his words were remembered so exactly, recorded so carefully- even their poetic patterns- and are before us today.<sup>8</sup> We read and explore them because we're convinced that just behind them is the living Lord Jesus and that through them the Holy Spirit continues to illumine and shape our lives. We are tethered to a Book, and to us is given the record of divine revelation in this singular

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<sup>4</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 46, note 85, sees the *they* as a circumlocution for the angels.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent reconsideration of a forgotten issue, see Jerry Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2012). Some sort of purgation experience seems to be taught by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:10-15.

<sup>6</sup> 'mn, see David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 651.

<sup>7</sup> Albert M. Wells, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), 190.

<sup>8</sup> For the literary structure and culture I draw on Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 86-118; for updates on subsequent research, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 401-419; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 146-156.

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life.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is our window into the One who is true.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**A. Parable Of The Unjust Manager (vv. 1-8)**

The *Parable Of The Unjust Steward*, found only in Luke, is the most difficult and offensive of all Jesus’ stories. Its main character is an estate manager who lives the high life as a prodigal on his master’s dime,<sup>10</sup> then- when found out- quickly alters the accounts to save his own hide and obligate. Nothing noble about him. Self-indulgent, incompetent, concerned only about himself; he’s irresponsible, physically soft and personally proud; he’s conniving and brassy, and in the end receives a standing ovation from both the man he cheated and from Jesus, a true con artist, a sly scoundrel. What’s going on here?

So offensive was this story that several church fathers of the early centuries wanted to cut it out of the canon of Scripture as an intrusion. They couldn’t believe Jesus would tell a story that appears to undermine morality. Some other early preachers took a different tact. They made the unjust steward a symbol for Judas or even for Satan himself, but that’s an interpretive stretch. I appreciate their concern: how do you train new converts to be honest with Jesus telling stories like this? In the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate used this parable to assert the inferiority of Christianity and of its founder Jesus. It’s not an easy story, but I presume it fits the rest of Jesus’ message, and that if we dig deep enough we can find our way to the buried treasure. Did Jesus really praise a scoundrel for his dishonesty? No, but he did praise him for something else.

Until just a few decades ago much of the South was farmed by sharecroppers. Tenants were given a stake, a shack, and a share. Many of their collapsing houses dot the dirt roads of our state. The situation in the Palestine of Jesus’ day was similar. A large land owner leased land to farmers who then paid the rent with a fixed amount of the crop, typically olive oil from groves or wheat from the fields. They owed from the day the contract was signed but did not pay till the harvest. A rich land owner hired a steward to negotiate contracts, collect rents, and act on his behalf with full

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<sup>9</sup> On the relation of divine revelation and Scripture, see William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford, England: University Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> The word *squandered* is defined in 15:13, then reused as an echo in 16:1.

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**Luke 16:1-13 ..... 8**

*power of attorney*. When you dealt with the agent, you were legally dealing with the owner himself. The steward or middle-man would receive a salary, a bonus for each new contract, even a little *under the table* from each tenant as a courtesy. So long as it was not excessive, everyone understood it was the way business was done.

Our story opens with a broken trust. The landowner is apparently well enough thought of in the village to be notified when his steward is not doing a good job. He's scattering rather than gathering wealth. Verse 1, "And Jesus said to his disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a steward and charges were brought that the steward was wasting his goods.'" Time for a closed-door meeting.

In verse 2 we hear the voice of the owner but not of the steward. "What is this that I hear about you?" His question never receives an answer. The steward knows he's been exposed, and in that culture silence was the wisest option. Then comes the judgment, "Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward." Legal authority as power of attorney is canceled, and he's fired. But he is not jailed or beaten as law allowed. Real judgment is his, yet also mercy as he stands in silence, then departs to a new life apart from privileges and perks.

Ever gotten caught with your hand in the cookie jar knowing no excuses would help and that anything you said would be wrong? Ever felt the terrible brew of dishonesty and embarrassment, shame and fright churning nausea in the pit of your stomach? If so, then like me you can identify with the exposed steward. A visitation from his Lord results in judgement. His is a guilty silence, then a thankful sigh-of-relief silence that he's not jailed or whipped. His old world has just ended.

For those of you who've ever been let go from a job, it would be interesting to know what your thoughts were in the moment. Shock, anger, fear, vengeance? In verse 3 Jesus lets us in on the steward's thoughts. There's no self-loathing because of guilt, no remorse. Instead, he blames, "What shall I do because *the master* is taking the stewardship away from me?" Then a pitiful assessment of what he *can't do* and what he *won't do*, "I am not strong enough to farm and ashamed to beg?" He needs a job, but who will hire a dishonest manager? Poverty is ahead.

It is then an idea comes. Verse 4, "I know what I will do." You see the light bulb turn on as his expression changes from worry to hope, "Maybe, just maybe it will work if I act quickly. Do a favor for others, and they are required to do a favor for me. If it's a big enough favor, it buys some time to reinvent myself."

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Crises, as I observe them in myself and others, are not so much an attack on character as a revelation of it. What people do under pressure tells you a lot about them. Fired? Found out? Divorced? Bankrupt? Any of these can put us in the situation of the steward. And in such times your best asset may be your wits, your street sense, and a dose of theatrics.

The logic turns on the fact that while the steward is officially dismissed, there's a time lag concerning the firing. No one knows his authority is gone. He can still trade on appearances, but not for long. He risks everything on one hope, and if he's wrong, the judgment will more severe the second time. It's all or nothing.

In an act of sheer bravado he sends out servants to summon his master's clients one by one. Though the parable gives only two reports, they are typical of others. "So summoning his master's debtors *one by one* he said to the first, 'How much do you own *my master*?'” The gall! *My Master!* He knows what they owe and doesn't need to ask. The intent is dramatic effect. They state the amount wondering what the meeting's all about. When the note is reduced instead of demanded, they're overjoyed. The master is such a generous man. With the single stroke of a pen all contracts are renegotiated downward by a year-and-a-half to two years rent, huge sums. And none of it's in his own handwriting but theirs, "Take your bill and write eighty," he says. The steward is piling up chips he can cash in as he is received into the homes of tenants according to the principle of reciprocity. Word spreads through the streets the master has done the unthinkable, and the steward basks in the overflow of his master's kindness. Some of the ones who reported the steward's failure now have a new view of the man and his influence.

With a level of presumption and daring that makes one blush, the steward now fulfills the master's demand and turns in the accounts, only now the pile of contracts gives him much less money in his pocket but much more love and honor in the village. "Your most humble servant awaits your decision." The master reviews the altered contracts and reflects on his alternatives. Already in the village his praises are being sung as the most-generous of masters. To go to each one and claim, on technical grounds, that it's all a big mistake, is to have his image go from benefactor to miser. He and his family will be cursed for generations in the land of long memories. Or, he can keep silent and allow his clever ex-employee to ride the wave of public opinion with him. He looks up and with a backhanded compliment says, "You are a very wise and resourceful fellow," or as Luke puts it in verse 8, "Then the master commended the steward of unrighteousness because he acted shrewdly." Our scoundrel got everything wrong with one exception. Dr. Kenneth Bailey writes:

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“He risked everything on this aspect of the master’s nature. He won. Because the master was indeed most generous and merciful, he chose to pay the full price for his steward’s salvation.”<sup>11</sup>

Why did Jesus tell such a story to his friends? He wanted them to understand that in the crisis brought on by the inbreaking of the kingdom of God and its exposure of everyone, a wholehearted appeal to the mercy of God is the only safe place to hide. Jesus did not praise the steward for his dishonesty or shady character but for knowing where his salvation lay, in a radical appeal to the merciful character and public reputation of his master. So if this is the case with an earthly master concerned about money, how much more of God who is concerned about his children? When sin is exposed, when you’re found out, when life falls apart, when you slump in guilty silence, throw yourself on the mercy and kindness of God. This is what faith is, not having all the right answers, but appealing to something God is delighted to give which is his mercy.

Judgment is when I get what I deserve; mercy when I don’t get what I deserve, and grace when I get what I don’t deserve. In the initial scene the dishonest steward received the first two, judgment for his breach of trust and mercy by not being beaten or jailed. Only at the end is the grace made clear. The master paid the price of his servant’s salvation, and in Jesus we see God pay the price one Friday on Calvary. This is not a petty story about morality but an unforgettable display of the character of God. We’re all found out and exposed. We’re all called to account. None of our excuses saves us. Only the mercy of God can save us, a mercy which, once accepted, makes us into new persons who live in thanks for God’s kindness. If I have any faith at all it is that I constantly pray *The Jesus Prayer* from the Orthodox tradition, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” To make sure the disciples got the point, Jesus adds a mild rebuke in the second half of verse 8, “for the sons of this world are shrewder than the sons of light in their own generation.” Outsiders sometimes shame us Christians in that they take radical actions for their worldly security while we do not act as cleverly and decisively concerning eternal wealth. To meet the mercy of God and not change is what’s damnable. Did our sly scoundrel change his ways? We don’t know; the story’s left open ended. The Spanish author Cervantes wrote, “Among the attributes of God, although they are all equal, mercy shines with even more brilliancy than justice.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, *Poet*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Hewett, *Illustrations*, 346.

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**Luke 16:1-13 ..... 11**

When young employee secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars of his firm’s money, he was called upstairs to the senior partner’s office. He trudged slowly up the stairs, heavy-hearted. He would be fired and might face legal action. His world was collapsing under the weight of his own cracked character.

Once there he was questioned, “Are the allegations true?”

“Yes they are.”

Then the senior partner asked a surprising question, “If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?”

There was a pause, a gulp and then, “Yes sir, you surely can. I’ve learned my lesson.”

The executive responded, “I’m not going to press charges, and you can continue in your present responsibilities. I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to theft and was shown mercy. I was the first. What you have done, I have done. The mercy you are receiving is the same I once received, and it is only the grace of God that can keep us both.”<sup>13</sup>

Receive mercy from God; extend mercy for God. Is there a debt you can forgive? Forgive it for no other reason than to practice mercy. Remove the burden off someone’s shoulders and watch your own heart sing and take wings. It is practicing the very character of God. Then you will live in a place of security and blessedness few ever know. You will know where your salvation lies, not in money or what it can buy, but in God alone. All stuff will fail; God’s mercy will never fail. “Be merciful,” said Jesus, “as your Father in heaven is merciful.” A life of mercy is an open door to heaven. The church of Jesus Christ is the place of truth-telling where sin is named and the place of mercy-showing where people are bound to God by the love they’ve received. That is the only reason we exist. The world is offended by both these topics. The world wants to earn its way and receive from no one so as to live in regal independence. Talk of sin and talk of mercy doesn’t make sense in this world because both assume a transcendent God to whom we are ultimately accountable.

**B. A Poem On Mammon, Truth, And Love (vv. 9-13)**

For years I was comfortable with the image of Jesus as teller of parables and spinner of yarns. But when I saw he was also a poet, it added something. He wanted his stuff to be both beautiful and remembered. So to *The Parable Of The Unjust Steward*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 347.

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**Luke 16:1-13 ..... 12**

Luke has added a three stanza poem or ballad that both comments on and extends the impact of the parable.

“Use money to make friends,” is a crude way of putting it. But that is precisely the meaning of the first half of verse 9, “I say to you: for yourselves make friends from worldly wealth,” what Jesus calls *unrighteous mammon*. But in the second half of the same verse there’s a surprise. Who are the friends of whom Jesus speaks? Neighbors? The needy? Sure, but also more. There are two levels here. And when does money fail? When is its power no more? At death, when all is left behind and we appear as a naked soul before the God who knows all. What then? If we have been generous here, then God will be generous there, and *they* (i.e. God and the angels) will say, “We’ve been looking forward to your arrival. Welcome to an eternal dwelling. You have many friends here.” Money is not to hoard. It’s to be used to show love for God and other people. It is a sacramental means of expressing love. Helmut Thielecke wrote that “Our pocketbooks have more to do with heaven and hell than our hymn books.” John Wesley was a radical in the matter, “When I have money, I get rid of it quickly, lest it find a way into my heart.” Someone else wrote, “Money is like manure. Stack it up and it stinks; spread it around and it makes things grow.”<sup>14</sup> What kind of friends are you making with your money? The angels see what others do not.

Can you buy your way to heaven? Of course not, but there’s no better indicator of the current state of your relationship with God than what you do with your resources. One who has received mercy and knows it is generous. One who thinks he has received little from God is stingy. It’s wrong to think that if I have excess I’m justified in spending it all on myself. That may be American way; it’s not heaven’s way. We only keep what we give away. Tithe to the church as a faithful beginning. Relieve human misery wherever you can. Surprise people. Cancel debits wherever you can because God has so blessed you. Let people off the hook. Ask God to review with you your check book and net worth. Pray over your financial plan. Martin Luther said that God made hands with fingers so that money could slip through. Genuine generosity with no motive but the joy of it is a sign heaven is already in your heart. But if when you feel the call of generosity you argue and fume and make excuses and feel resentment, it’s a sign you’re trusting in that which cannot save and that you think you lose when you give something away. Your own heart is sending you a warning you may have *cirrhosis of the giver!*

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<sup>14</sup> Wells, *Quotes*, 145.

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But there's another issue here, and I put it as a question: What can God trust you with? If you are not tithing at present, can God trust you with more, or would that simply raise the percentage of your unfaithfulness and sink you further into sin? But if you tithe when times are tight, if you are faithful in a little, perhaps God can trust you to be faithful with more because it will not corrupt you. Once character is established, it doesn't matter what the issue is. Big or little, you can remain faithful. But if character is not established, nothing matters because everything is corrupted. We establish godly character in the little things first, and it's there the battle is won or lost. "The one faithful in little also in much is faithful, and the one in little unfaithful also in much is unfaithful." It's a law of the universe.

More than anything the tithe, giving ten percent to God through the church, is a symbol and reminder that all is God's. But if we limit thinking about God's blessing to money, it reveals how small our understanding is. I would much rather have a twenty percent increase in the spiritual gift of discernment or prophecy or revelation or healing through prayer than a twenty percent raise in salary. I would rather see ten new converts than ten thousand dollars in my pocket. I would rather be blessed with a new hunger for prayer than satisfy my hankering for a new car or some other consumer item. The *real stuff* is not money. The *true stuff*, the true riches of which Jesus spoke in verse 12, is the knowledge and power that allows us to participate in what God's doing in the world. Financial stewardship is merely the preliminary training ground, the boot camp of the Holy Spirit. Money is not the end of stewardship, only the beginning. The good stuff comes later, but many never reach it because they are unfaithful in the unimportant stuff which is money. At the center of the second stanza of the poem, in verse 11, Jesus lays it out, "If therefore in the worldly wealth you are not faithful, *the truth* who will to you entrust?" What could be more precious than for God to be able to trust us with the truth in any situation because we are faithful? Gifts of wisdom and knowledge and love and healing from above cannot be purchased. We practice for our real inheritance by being good managers of someone else's stuff, meaning whatever part of God's resources are entrusted to us. Do a good job there, and God may give you some of the stuff you were made for, *what is your own, what is designed for you*. One of the great regrets of life will be standing at the gates of the next world with the knowledge of all the good we missed in this life because we thought stuff was status and security instead of a test of character.

What were you made for when God dreamed you up? What spiritual gifts from heaven, when blended with your personality and history, would make you a powerful outlet for the kingdom of God on this earth? Jesus teaches there is a level

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of adventure with God *on the other side of money*. Yes, money will always be there crying to be a God in my life and promising more than can ever be delivered. But only a fool would take money over answered prayers. Only a fool would take money over a call from God.

The disciples left everything to follow Jesus, and it was the best deal of their lives. They were entrusted with the truths of divine revelation shown in Jesus Christ. They even shared in his healing and deliverance ministry. Once you've touched *the real stuff*, the love and kingdom of God flowing *to you* and *through you to others* in the power of the Spirit, not much else matters. It's a whole new playground. You know why you're alive. God has something special for you. Do you know what it is? Is your use and misuse of money standing in way? You won't get *the good stuff* until you learn to trust God and steward *the green stuff*. Between you and the dream God has for you is the issue of stewardship. We need an extra thirty thousand dollars to fix our roof, and when we've done it do you know what we will have? A better building. One that doesn't leak as often. Whoopee! But what we need we can't buy; it's not for sale here or in heaven. What we need and cannot buy is an outpouring of the presence of God that wakes us up and moves us past inherited, stale religion. Faithful stewardship cannot make it happen, but it is a step of trust the prepares us to trust God for *the real stuff*. It digs the wells only God can fill.

If God took away a bunch of your stuff, would you be mad? Would it mess with your sense of security and well-being? Imagine half of what you own gone in a moment Are you less secure? It could be a good thing if it exposes where your trust lies. It's *either/or* said Jesus, God or Stuff. One or the other you will worship, a God you can't control or the old Syrian god of riches, Mammon, that you can- at least until it fails. It's dangerous to pray, "O Lord, show me who I am serving?"

So to sum it all up, this is it. We are all crooked stewards, and it is a grace that we are exposed before it's too late. The only reliable place to hide is the mercy of God, and God is pleased when we count on this form of his love with all we are. Our use of money is a key spiritual barometer, and if we are faithful here in *the little stuff*, then perhaps God will treat us to some of *the real stuff*, not just in heaven but now. God is jealous for our attention, but he will not force us to give up the false God of *Stuff*. He will, however, let us find out it cannot save. Jesus is our opening into the heart of God. He spins parables and composes poems to shake us loose for our old ways of thinking that we may live in his world even in the midst of this one.

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CONCLUSION

Once there was a very rich man who bombarded the throne of God with petitions, asking for the right to take his wealth with him at death. Each time he cried out God replied, “There’s no need to take it with you.”

Finally, however, God relented, “Since you refuse to listen. I will allow you to take a portion of what you have with you, as much as you can carry in a single suitcase.”

The man was happy the Lord had yielded and immediately purchased the largest steamer trunk made. Then he began determining what of his assets would go in the trunk. “If I take stocks or bonds, it might be impossible to redeem them. And if currency, it is not clear whether it should be pounds or marks or francs or yen.” He finally decided on gold, “There’s always a market for gold.” He sold his goods, bought bullion by the brick, and filled the trunk. Then he lay down to die.

There he stood before the heavenly gates, trunk in tow. St. Peter said, “Sorry. People who enter these gates must come empty-handed.”

“I have special permission,” the man insisted.

After pouring over the record books St. Pete was amazed. “Never seen this before. Permission is granted at the highest level. Mind if I take a look?”

“No, not at all,” and he proudly opened the trunk. In the light of heaven it gleamed a glorious gold.

St. Peter looked absolutely fuddled. “Paving stones,” he said shaking his head, “You brought paving stones?”<sup>15</sup>

Yes, I want you to give because it’s one way to grow in your relationship with God. Giving is a spiritual discipline. It’s also a doorway, a test of character you have to pass. But it’s because I want something *for you* and *for us*, not something *from you* or *for me*. Giving of ourselves and our stuff is the only way to get to the good stuff, the kingdom stuff that’s on the other side of giving. There are no shortages in the kingdom of God. Jesus lived and loved and healed out of an abundance that was beyond description, and to those who follow him as stewards, he reveals his riches.

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<sup>15</sup> William White, *Stories for the Gathering* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1997), 129.

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