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## Sermon

### ***Your Property is God's – Are you Trustworthy?***

**Luke 16:1-13**

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This is perhaps the most difficult of Jesus' parables! We struggle with it, don't we? The baddie is praised – fraud and deceit – what is going on here?

Well I can think of several parables where Jesus has a bad egg as the leading character – or maybe you would say, "But that isn't right!" Can you think of any?

- Workers in the vineyard – "It's not fair that they all get paid the same!"
- Talents – "But that's not fair! The rich get richer and poor get poorer!"
- Good Samaritan – "A *good* Samaritan!"
- Pharisee and the Tax collector – A tax collector heard by God when a Pharisee was not!

Somehow, none of these is as difficult for our Western minds as "The Dishonest Steward." Perhaps because the root of offence in the other parables is not so obvious to us. In our hearing, "Samaritan" has become a good word (because of this parable and more latterly the Distress line named after it). But to the Jews, the Samaritans were disdained. They were the descendants of foreigners brought into Northern Israel by the Assyrians who then adopted an impure form of Judaism. Jews would rather walk the long way around Samaria than pass through it. The shock of hearing that a Samaritan had stopped to help a wounded Jew would be similar to saying to a Northern Irish Protestant group during the troubles that a member of the IRA had stopped to help a wounded Presbyterian, or maybe to us that the hero was a member of a motorcycle gang.

With the Pharisee and the Tax collector praying, we have come to think of Pharisees as the baddies, but to the people of Jesus' day they were the really holy men – certainly God would hear their prayers, while the tax collector was a betrayer of his people to the occupying power – a Quisling and a profiteer.

Jesus sometimes used surprising or shocking ideas to get his point through to his hearers and to us. This is one of those occasions and it tells us that the point he was making is important and he wanted us to remember it.

#### **Henry Ford**

Henry Ford, was once asked to donate money for the construction of a new hospital. The billionaire pledged to donate \$5,000. The next day in the newspaper, the headline read, "Henry Ford contributes \$50,000 to the local hospital." Ford was on the phone immediately to complain to the fund-raiser that he had been misunderstood. The fund-raiser replied that they would print a retraction in the paper the following day to

read, "Henry Ford reduces his donation by \$45,000." Realizing the poor publicity that would result, the industrialist agreed to the \$50,000 contribution in return for the following: That above the entrance to the hospital was to be carved the biblical inscription: "I came among you and you took me in."

Jesus told this parable where a rich man has a steward looking after his property. Accusations reach the owner that the steward has been wasting his possessions. The word is the same as was used in the previous story of the Prodigal Son. This is extravagant behaviour – not wanted in a son, and certainly not in your manager looking after your farm and business. By the way, the Greek word for steward here is *oikonomos*, literally "home ruler," from which we get 'economy.'

So the master calls the steward in and confronts him. "Give the account of your management, because you are not able to be steward any longer."

The steward is in a fix – we hear his thoughts about it. He is not strong enough to dig and he is too proud to beg. Then he comes up with an idea "... so that people will welcome [him] into their homes."<sup>1</sup>

This last expression is Greek idiom for 'give me a job.' He hatches a plan; people do not yet know he is being dismissed – he still has the books until he returns to render that account to his master. So he could discount the bills of those who owe money to his master and then they would owe him a favour.

I have read that there are at least six explanations of what happens next. Here are two of them.

First: the manager (who we already know was dishonest) had padded the bills with profit for himself and so now he is reducing his personal margin to do a favour to the debtor but at no cost to his master.

Second: the manager is reducing the bill at his master's cost. The deal is done and no doubt the debtors would go home rejoicing and praising the generous owner. Like Henry Ford he is backed into a corner. He can refute the agreement made in his name by the steward but that would damage his reputation.

Either way, the steward has acted radically in a crisis for the long term gain. The parable continues with the owner (perhaps ruefully) praising the steward for his shrewdness – not for his dishonesty.

Jesus goes on to comment, that worldly people are often more shrewd in their dealings with each other than are righteous people. What he is urging is for us to take the long view with money – consider eternity in your financial decisions.

It is a consistent theme of Jesus' teaching that money can so easily control us.

<sup>13</sup> "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."

We can so easily find ourselves giving allegiance to the pursuit of money. It is one of three things which readily ensnare us. Richard Foster named them in his book: "Money, sex and power." That is why the monastic vows were to poverty, chastity and obedience.

What dethrones wealth from our lives? Nothing is as powerful as giving money away. That smashes greed's hold on our hearts. When God challenges you to give generously, there can be a giggling delight in the action. It is simply joy – joy of obedience to the lover of our souls.

So Jesus advises them and he advises us,

<sup>9</sup> I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Money is only for this life. As Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart."<sup>2</sup> You can't take it with you.

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 4

<sup>2</sup> Job 1:21

There is a joke about a wealthy man who was on friendly terms with all the local clergy. When he dies, the rabbi, priest and minister learn to their surprise, that his entire fortune has been divided equally among the three of them—with the understanding that EACH must put \$10,000 in the open coffin before it is lowered in the ground.

At the memorial service, the minister approaches the coffin, mutters a prayer, and puts \$10,000 in the coffin.

As the body is being moved to the hearse, the priest approaches the coffin, crosses himself and places \$10,000 in the coffin.

Right before the body is being placed in its grave, the rabbi approaches the coffin, grabs the \$20,000 and places a check for \$30,000 in the coffin.

You can't take it with you – and Jesus warns that what you have done with money here (how you have stewarded what God has entrusted to you) will affect your eternal future. He is not saying buy salvation, but as we have often seen before, our works show what our faith is really like.

### **Test of honesty**

There was an old custom to test the honesty of a new clerk by leaving a penny in the desk drawer. If he found it and offered it to his employer, they knew this was an honest man. If he kept it for himself, they knew they could not trust him. For as Jesus said, "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."<sup>3</sup> In those days a penny would buy a loaf of bread so equivalent to a few dollars now. Ask yourself, "If you find some money is it 'finders keepers' – or are you trustworthy to try to return another person's property to them?"

Jesus says that God looks at how we manage what he entrusts to us, to decide how much more to entrust to us. That applies here on earth, but also into eternity. If we are faithful to God in what we do with our responsibilities here on earth, then he will give us greater responsibilities here on earth, and if we are faithful in those, still more. And so on through this life into the next where there will be rewards of yet greater responsibilities.

<sup>10</sup> "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. <sup>11</sup> So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

So the question as I close, is: Do you show yourself trustworthy to God? Can he entrust you with more? Jesus was teaching specifically about money but the same applies to anything else he entrusts to you: your abilities, your spiritual gifts, your leadership and influence. Do you use these things for his service or for your own?

Are you willing to break the power of money over your life? Pray about what God wants you to do and be bold to do it!

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<sup>3</sup> Lk 16:10