

A Puzzling Parable with a Sharp Point

Luke 16:1-13

This parable is a puzzle. It is a mystery in many respects. How could a shrewd manager who cheats his master be held up as an example?

One of the first clues to unraveling the mystery of the dishonest manager is found in verse 14, "The Pharisees who were lovers of money, heard all this and ridiculed Jesus".

Here we have a clue to help us unravel the mystery of this parable. The wise mother's advice to her son was: "You can be very fond of the wrong things." The Pharisees were very fond of money. The parable about the inordinate love of money disturbed the Pharisees because they were very fond of the wrong thing. No wonder they sneered.

The sneer of the Pharisees is a clue to getting at the heart of this parable. The sneer comes because the Pharisees try to justify themselves before the eyes of men, forgetting that God knows what is in the heart. Jesus' parable is about money. The Pharisees loved money too much. By focusing on money, they had missed the real focus of life which is God. "No slave can serve two masters for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth".

That statement is the one that gave rise to sneers and ridicule. In trying to interpret a puzzling parable, sometimes we should look for a clue at the end of the story. At the end of this parable Jesus shows that money can be a distracting attraction in life, causing us to miss the meaning of life. The meaning of life is to be found in our relationship with God. It's not money that is the problem, but an inordinate focus on money that can be our undoing. Being overly fond of money, is the root of the problem for the Pharisees in our story and the root of the problem many people have today.

What we have here is a reversal of values. What is highly valued among people is possessions, land, honor, and money. What is highly valued in the kingdom of God? A relationship with God and relationships with people that include gracious acts toward them, faith in them, love for them, and forgiveness of them when they offend us — these are the things Jesus says have real value. Money is not meant to give us superiority over others but is to be used to help people. Using one's possessions for people is called good stewardship. Understanding the biblical concept of stewardship is a big clue in solving the mystery of this puzzling parable.

When we think about stewardship, it is always helpful to think of the heroes and heroines of the faith who set good examples by the way they used money and possessions to meet the needs of people. Saint Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta come to mind.

It's possible to be "really fond" of the right things in life. It's also possible to be "really fond" of the wrong things. That brings us to another clue to solving the mystery of the puzzling parable with a sharp point. A good question to ask about all the parables is, "What is Jesus trying to do here?"

In many of his parables, Jesus is trying to upset the equilibrium of his hearers. That's certainly true with this parable. Jesus is trying to work a reversal, upsetting his hearers with a big kingdom surprise. He is trying to pop preconceptions that will only get his hearers into trouble. He's doing it on purpose. He wants to help his hearers think about their value systems. People have trouble making changes in their lives,

especially big changes. Change isn't easy. One man described change like this: "I don't have any problems making changes in my life as long as I don't have to act differently."

The nature of Jesus' parables is to serve as wake-up calls to people who are missing the purpose of life. The parables of Jesus are like a bucket of cold water thrown in our faces to wake us up to what life is about.

If this parable of the shrewd manager was a moral example, we'd be in real trouble. The hero of this parable is an unjust rascal who is trying to save his own neck by working a compromise settlement with his master's debtors. Where is the moral example? Why should we hold up a man who is "cooking the books" and then wiggles out of his troubles by compromised settlements? What is Jesus' point?

Jesus tells the story of the shrewd steward who "cooked the books" not because the man is a good moral example, but because he wants to tell us about real values in the kingdom of God compared to the false values of this world. In a parable, the thing to look for is the point of tension to which the parable is addressed.

Here, that point of tension is a distorted view of money and possessions. We are stewards, not owners. If we think of ourselves as owners, our possessions will possess us. "You cannot serve God and mammon," Jesus says.

The parable is aimed at points of tension in our lives today. The parables of Jesus are stories to remember. If we let them do their job, they will come rushing out of the past and wake us up today. If we really listen to what Jesus is saying, we actualize the past and experience the power and presence of God today. To understand this parable, we need to hear the words as if we are hearing them addressed to us today. To hear a parable of Jesus in the right way, we must hear it from the inside, as participants.

All this talk about participation and finding the focus notwithstanding, what do we do with the steward who is a rascal, making deals with shady debtors and a master who commends the shrewdness of his steward for the deals he makes? What's the point Jesus is trying to make?

The point of this parable is that the master commends the use of money for people, instead of for pride, power, position, and possessions. In other words, the value of money and possession comes to a dead end when we die. Money and possessions will do us no good when we face the judgment of God.

Helmut Thielicke puts it this way: "It is made perfectly clear to us that one day every one of us will be left destitute. The day will come when we shall stand naked before God. We shall be stripped of all things in which we put our confidence here below. We shall stand before the throne of God without title, without money, without home, without reputation — in utter poverty."

That's the point of this powerful parable. One day we will all stand before the throne of God in utter poverty. Where all values have been turned upside down, and the importance of relationships with God and people will be clear.

The parable of the bad man's good example is about a steward who is a rascal in many respects. He is a servant who is left in charge of the estate of the absentee landlord. Guilty of embezzlement, he is hardly a hero. Yet, he did one thing right. He used money for people. Jesus is not urging us to be like this man, but

to be wise in this one way, using our money and possessions for God and people. That makes an eternal difference.