



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 16:1-13

To understand more about the parable of the dishonest manager.

The Best Policy

I remember growing up and hearing over and over again as a child: “Honesty is the best policy.” In an effort to make us value honesty over self-preservation, my generation was constantly reminded of the value of honesty in even the smallest of circumstances. As it turns out, it wasn’t just a proverb for my generation; it can be traced back to the 16th century. While most people assume it originated in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, it was first penned by Sir Edwin Sandys, an official for the Virginia Company in Jamestown (yes, like the Jamestown in the horribly inaccurate but wonderfully enjoyable Pocahontas). He wrote in his work *Europae Speculum* in 1599: “Our grosse conceipts, who think honestie the best policie.” It is funny because while honesty was (and to an extent still is) so emphasized to children, we also pressure them into acting excited about birthday gift that they don’t like in order to make other people feel good about themselves. Honesty is the best policy unless it might embarrass someone.

In Luke 16:1-13, Jesus tells a parable about a dishonest manager or steward and the shrewdness with which he acts when he is caught mishandling his master’s funds. Jesus then uses this parable to illustrate something about the “sons of this world” that the “sons of light” fail to accomplish.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

Beginning in Luke 16:1, Jesus pivots away from the audience of religious leaders to which He had previously been speaking (Lk. 15:1-3) and moves back to His “disciples (Lk. 16:1). He begins to tell yet another parable,

this time about a dishonest steward that was about to be terminated by his rich employer. The term for “manager” in Greek is οἰκονόμος (oikonomos), and it means something like “the manager of a household; a steward,” and was often a position filled by a household slave. Below is a breakdown of the different aspects of the parable.

SELF-PRESERVATION

The parable really deals with how the steward will preserve his life and welfare following what seems like an almost certain termination. The steward, after thinking for a moment cries out: “I have decided what to do,” but it is in a dramatic aorist tense and could be understood, “I’ve got it!” He then goes to some of the people who owe his master money and has them give an account of what they owe, and then lowers their debt. It seems like a petty move to hurt his master by robbing him of the actual money that is owed to him, and certainly that is likely in play, but the real motivation in this is that will ingratiate himself to those who have just saved a lot of money. Since they have agreed to his machinations and filled out a paper with new lower and false amount of debt, they are complicit in the crime and thus the steward can hold this over them. Verse 4 confirms this: “I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, *people may receive me into their houses.*” In having these debtor’s complicit in his crime, he has built a network of people who will feel obligated to take him in and care for him once he is finally terminated and rendered unable to care for himself.

SHREWD DEALINGS

The amount of debt he is able to falsely forgive is pretty astounding, as well. The first debtor owes “a hundred measures of oil” (Lk. 16:6). A measure or “bath” of oil measured out to roughly 9 gallons, which in full would have been round 900 gallons of oil, or nearly a year’s worth of wages. This was a fairly sizable debt that the steward cuts in half. The next debtor owes “A hundred measures of wheat” (Lk. 16:7), or “a thousand bushels” as the NIV translates it with a modern reading of the amount owed. This time, he cuts 20% off, but that amount would have likely amounted to several year’s wages as it was an astounding amount of wheat.

A SURPRISING RESPONSE

In verse 8, the master finds out what the steward has done and surprisingly commends him for it, and it is at this point that Jesus begins to make the teaching connection to this parable: “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light” (Lk. 16:8b). And then Jesus makes His point in verse 9: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (NIV).

This is a strange thing for Jesus to say unless we understand exactly what He is referring to. The term “worldly wealth” is literally, “mammon of unrighteousness.” The term “mammon” comes from Aramaic and it means simply “money or possession.” For Jesus, any and all wealth that is earned in the world is “unrighteous” in that it holds no real eternal value. Jesus is not telling His disciples to act dishonestly in the same way that the dishonest steward acted, but He is suggesting to use wealth for the sake of making and providing for friends an a way that makes an eternal impact.

This then raises the question: “What did Jesus mean by the sons of the world being more shrewd than the sons of light?” The dishonest manager has no eternal hope as a son of the world, but what little future he does have, he acts with urgent wisdom in order to secure himself welfare for the time. In the same way, Christians should act with urgency in securing heavenly reward, and yet we are often complacent.

Faithfulness Matters

This parable then launches Jesus into two more quick lessons regarding how we relate to what is given to us. The first one is a well-known wisdom saying from Jesus: “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Lk. 16:10). Jesus makes this simple and yet challenging statement concerning how you can tell whether or not someone is truly faithful. A truly faithful person will act with faithfulness even when it comes to seemingly small and insignificant things. Those who show complacency to honesty and faithfulness in small things cannot really be trusted with larger things. In verse 11, Jesus draws the connection of faithfulness to worldly wealth with more weightier, eternal realities: “If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” How we behave with worldly matters in some ways conveys how we will behave with eternal ones. This is likely why the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are so concerned with more earthly qualities such as how a man relates to his family and the outside world. Those are indicators of whether or not he will steward God’s church well.

Only One Master

Next, Jesus makes a second and yet equally powerful statement: “No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money” (Lk. 16:13). Lest Christians become too obsessed with worldly wealth, Jesus warns them to not become enslaved to it either. Inevitably, your devotion to money will put you at odds with what God would have you do for His kingdom.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the importance for Christians to act shrewdly with regard to eternal matters. We must never grow complacent to issues that have eternal consequences to them. Another takeaway is the importance of demonstrating faithfulness in any matter, big or small. Finally, this passage provides a firm warning against putting too much trust and security in worldly wealth.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 16:1-2. Who are the characters in this parable? What does the one say to the other?

2. Read Luke 16:3. What does the manager say to himself? What is his predicament?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 16:4. What is the primary motivating factor behind the steward’s plan?

2. Read Luke 16:5-7. In your own words, describe what the steward does.

Day Three

1. Read Luke 16:8. How did the master respond to the steward? What does Jesus say the “sons of this world” do better than the “sons of light?”

2. Read Luke 16:9. What does Jesus then direct His disciples to do?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 16:10-12. In your own words, summarize Jesus’ teaching in this passage.

2. Read Luke 16:13. In your own words, summarize Jesus’ teaching in this verse.

Week 58 Discussion: Money, Money, Money

In Luke 16:1-13, Jesus tells a parable and then moves into a time of teaching concerning money or wealth earned this present life in the world, and drives home the importance of acting with the right kind of faithfulness when it comes to worldly wealth. Talk as a group about the importance of having a healthy relationship to your possessions.

1. Icebreaker: Of all of your possessions, what is your most favorite or prized possession?
2. Do you find it difficult to not become overly concerned with material goods?
3. Do you believe giving money to the local church and additional ministries is an act of faithfulness? Why or why not?
4. How difficult would it be to give up your possessions for the sake of the kingdom?
5. What percentage of your stress comes from money related problems?
6. How can the church better equip disciples to have a healthy relationship with worldly wealth?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus tells the parable of the dishonest manager.
2. The parable illustrates the importance of shrewdness and reveals how important our faithfulness to what God gives us is.
3. Jesus teaches us that we cannot serve God and money.