

DISHONEST WEALTH
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Text: Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.”

○ F ALL THE PARABLES JESUS tells, the parable of the so-called “dishonest manager” just might be the most confusing. At first glance, it looks like Jesus is praising someone for being a crook, and somehow that just doesn’t seem right.

A rich man finds out his manager has been “squandering his property,” so he calls him in and says, “That’s it—you’re done. You’re fired.” The manager panics. He thinks, I’m not strong enough to dig ditches, and I’m ashamed to beg. What am I going to do? Then he gets an idea. He calls in all the people who are indebted to his master, and he cuts what they owe by as much as half. He figures if he takes care of them now, maybe later, when he’s out of work, they’ll take care of him.

It seems like a pretty shady move, and we expect there to be some kind of consequence. But instead, he’s commended for acting shrewdly. And the moral of the story is that we

should do the same. We should make friends for ourselves, Jesus says, “by means of dishonest wealth.”

So, what’s going on here? It sounds like Jesus is saying we should lie, cheat and swindle in order to save our own skins. But I think it’s safe to assume that’s not what he’s saying. So how do we understand this? Well, the key to unlocking this parable is figuring out what Jesus means by “dishonest wealth.” What wealth is he talking about, and why is it dishonest?

Most people assume Jesus is referring to the wealth the manager takes away from his master by reducing people’s debts, and it’s dishonest because it’s basically stealing. But that’s not what he means. This parable really isn’t about the manager’s scheme to provide himself with a soft landing when he loses his job. It’s about something much bigger. It’s about the system the manager is a part of—a system that abuses the poor to benefit the rich.

So, what we need to do is look at that system and understand a little bit about how it worked. Which means we have to talk about the Roman Empire. And I know I talk about that a lot, and you probably get tired of hearing about it. But the fact is, the Roman occupation of Palestine looms over just about everything that happens in the gospels. And that's especially true of this parable. It only makes sense when you see it against that backdrop.

The first thing you have to know is that when Rome took over a territory, they wanted two things. They wanted goods—grain, oil, wine—and they wanted money, which they extracted in the form of taxes. Lots and lots of taxes. But it was a deeply unfair system because the poor ended up paying most of the taxes, while the rich got away with paying very little.

The second thing you have to know is how the population was distributed geographically. The rich mostly lived in the southern part of Palestine, where the capital was, and where all the power was concentrated; while most of the people in the northern part of Palestine were poor farmers, who lived harvest to harvest and were never more than one bad year away from starvation.

And this is how things worked. The Romans wanted the produce that came from the north. And you'd think that would be a good thing for all the farmers up there—having a market for their crops. But the Romans also taxed the farmers up to their eyeballs. And what would happen was, their rich neighbors to the south, smelling an opportunity, would come to them and say: Have we got a deal for you! We'll pay your tax bill, and all you have to do is sign over the deeds to your property. But don't worry. We'll let you stay in your homes, and you can continue farming our land, and we'll just take a percentage of your harvest every year from now on.

You can guess how that turned out. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. The rich acquired huge tracts of land that generated enormous amounts of income, while the poor lost their farms and became sharecroppers. It was a process called "latifundialization," and yes, that will be on the exam.

Now, there's one more little thing you have to know before we get to the parable. When one of these wealthy people from the south wanted to collect their percentage of the harvest, they didn't do it themselves. They sent someone in their place. They sent a representative, a middleman, and that person would go around to each farm with a ledger and say, You owe this many containers of wheat, and You owe this many jugs of olive oil, until all the debts are paid.

SO NOW WE KNOW WHO'S who in the parable and what's really going on. The rich man is one of those wealthy southerners, and the manager is his representative, acting on his behalf. And when the rich man accuses the manager of squandering his property, he doesn't mean he's being wasteful or careless. He means he's not being ruthless enough. He's not squeezing the farmers hard enough. He's not using threats and violence to get them to pay up.

So, the rich man fires him. And the manager realizes something. He realizes he's been helping this guy get rich, and all that wealth is dishonest wealth because all of it has come from exploiting the poor, and taking advantage of their vulnerability, and making their lives miserable. And now, just because he showed a little mercy, just because he didn't go around breaking people's legs, he's getting tossed out on the street, with nowhere to go, and no way to support himself.

So, he thinks, Why not use some of that dishonest wealth to do some good for a change? Why not use some of it to keep these farmers, and myself, from losing everything we have? And that's exactly what he does. He puts all of their lives, and his own life, ahead of his master's profits, and he slashes everyone's debts. And when you see it like that, it's really not surprising that Jesus would tell us to do the same—to stand against injustice.

THIS PARABLE, THEN, IS NOT an invitation to lie, cheat and swindle. It's an invitation to be compassionate and courageous. It's an invitation to stop going along with systems that grind people down and start using whatever power we have to oppose those systems, just

like the manager did. Which may seem pretty daunting, but there are lots of ways we can do it.

We can do it with our money—by supporting companies that treat workers fairly, by giving to good causes, by being generous with what we have. We can do it with our voices—by speaking out against abuses, by encouraging people who are struggling, by holding our leaders accountable. We can do it with our time—by investing in relationships, by getting to know our neighbors, by learning about the issues that affect them. And we can do it with our faith—by following the path Jesus showed us, by answering his call to serve, and by trusting in his presence.

That's where this parable connects with our lives. Every day we're surrounded by systems that reward selfishness and punish compassion. But Jesus is telling us: Don't just go along with it. Be bold. Be creative. Take the world's dishonest wealth and turn it into a blessing for others. When we do that, we're living into the joy and freedom of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. We're showing the world what it looks like when love has the final say.

Pray with me:

God of justice and mercy, you call us to live, not by the world's values, but by the values of your kingdom. Take what we have—our money, our voices, our time, and our faith—and help us use it for your good purposes, to resist what harms, embrace what heals, and follow the way of Jesus with courage and love. Amen.