

*Admiring the Clever*  
**A Sermon on Luke 16:1-13**  
**Proper 20**  
**September 22, 2019**

## **Introduction**

Parables are supposed to surprise us. Parables compare everyday life to life in the kingdom of God. They have an unexpected twist. They challenge our assumptions and force us to recognize that the kingdom of God is different from the conventions of society.

This is a parable *par excellence*. We're still not sure what it means. This text is being preached in churches all over the world today. If you heard all the sermons, you might wonder if they were talking about the text, so many different interpretations are possible.

New Testament scholar Charles Cousar calls it one of the great exegetical mountains of Scripture that will never be fully understood. Another scholar, Justo Gonzalez, says that it undoes the notion that parables are nice stories about commendable people whom we ought to imitate.

This parable forces us to keep puzzling in our minds about what it is supposed to mean.

## **First Move: The Two Main Characters in the Story**

The first character we are introduced to is a certain man who was rich. Luke likes to refer to the characters in his parables as a certain man or some man.

The man is very rich; he needs an οἰκονόμος to manage all his possessions. I am going to give you a lot of Greek today because several words have different possible meanings that can lead to different interpretations of what the parable means. Οἰκονόμος is a combination of two words: οἶκος, which means house, and νόμος, which means law or rule. He rules the house and all its affairs for the rich man. It is usually translated as manager. I prefer to translate it as steward. That brings in the sense that he is managing someone else's property.

Commentators over the centuries have made the mistake of comparing the rich man to God. It is interpreted as a parable about stewardship. God has many possessions and makes us stewards to manage the possessions wisely.

Scholars today agree that Jesus did not intend for his parables to be read allegorically. It is a story about a certain man who was rich and his steward, not about God.

A first century audience would not have compared the rich man to God. Jesus' followers were mostly Galilean peasants. They would have negative stereotypes about a rich man. People in the first century assumed that there was a limited amount of goods to go around. If you were rich, you got more than your share of the pie. To be rich meant you were greedy. It is harder for a rich man to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

It is charged to the rich man that the steward is squandering his possessions. The verb for charged is διαβάλλω. The noun form is διάβολος, which means slanderer or accuser. In New Testament times it had come to mean the devil, Satan. Διαβάλλω can mean that the charges were brought with hostile intent; the text doesn't say who brought the charges or whether they were true. The steward may be innocent. The word for squandering is the same word that is used in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the story, immediately before today's text, to describe the Prodigal Son's squandering of his inheritance in dissolute living. The Greek verb, διασκορπίζω, means to scatter or disperse. Figuratively, it means to waste or squander. The text doesn't say how the steward scattered the rich man's property or whether he used it to enrich himself.

The steward through the centuries has been called the wicked manager or the unjust manager. The Greek adjective is ἄδικος. The first meaning in Greek dictionaries is someone who breaks the law. In a legal sense, it is a criminal. In a religious context, it is the unrighteous who violate God's law. It causes a break in the covenant between God and humans. Something needs to be done to restore the relationship. I translate it in today's text as the unrighteous steward. He has done something to damage his relationship with his master. He has fiduciary obligations to his master; he has a covenant to manage the possessions for the benefit of the master.

The rich man acts impetuously. He doesn't give the steward a chance to respond to the charges. He simply decides to fire him.

On the other hand, the rich man shows some leniency to the steward. He could have sent the steward to prison for squandering his wealth. Instead, the rich man tells the steward to prepare a list of accounts, then the rich man will fire him and give the list of accounts to a new steward. The rich man apparently will dismiss the steward quietly. The audience would have mixed feelings about the rich man.

## **Second Move: Responding to Crisis with Quick Wits**

The steward asks himself, “What should I do?” This is a question that Luke thinks is appropriate in a crisis. The rich fool asked himself the same question before he built more barns.

The steward wonders aloud where he will find work. He cannot be a farmer which would require him to dig and plow, and he cannot beg because he is too proud. The audience would initially sympathize with the steward, but they would be offended when he thinks of farming and begging as beneath him.

The steward comes up with a plan that will give him a place to stay when he is dismissed by his master. He summons all the debtors. The text doesn’t say whether they are tenants who farmed the rich man’s lands or debtors who had borrowed money from the rich man.

The first debtor owed the rich man 100 baths of olive oil. A bath was about nine gallons, so he owed 900 gallons of olive oil. It would take a large grove of olive trees to produce that much oil. Another creditor owes 100 kors of wheat. A kor may have been 1½ bushels. That could be the harvest for 15 acres, a more modest sum.

This is more evidence that the rich man is very rich. These are just two of his creditors.

The steward tells the first debtor to take out his letters and reduce the amount of his debt from 100 baths to 50 baths of olive oil. Letters are written proof of a debt, like a promissory note today. The debt instruments should be in the debtor’s handwriting to show that he agreed to be responsible for the debt. He tells the other debtor to cut the debt from 100 kors of wheat to 80.

There are three different interpretations of what the steward is doing by reducing the debt. The first is that he is continuing to scatter the property of the rich man by reducing the amount of money that the debtors owe him. The other two interpretations soften the punch of the parable. One interpretation is that the steward’s commission was built into the debt and that he was simply forgiving his own commission. Then he wouldn’t be cheating anybody; he would be giving away his own property. A third interpretation is that exorbitant interest was built into the debt. To avoid the laws against usury, debts were sometimes structured so that the interest was hidden by increasing the principal amount. When the steward reduced the debt, he was reducing it by the amount of the unlawful interest. He would be obeying the law.

The first interpretation makes the most sense to me: the steward is continuing to scatter the possessions of the rich man. It is the most difficult one to deal with. It forces us to think the most.

Whichever interpretation you choose, the steward is counting on the debtors to be grateful to him for cutting the debt. When he is released from his job as steward, he will be welcomed and supported by the debtors for reducing their debts.

The steward has forced his master into a box. The master is now confronted with two challenges to his honor: (1) a master who cannot control his subordinates is dishonored, and (2) the master cannot take back the gifts—that would be seen as dishonorable.

At the same time, the steward has increased the master's honor if he ratifies the steward's actions. The master enjoys a new reputation for generosity and kindness, surpassing the wealth he has lost. The cost in social capital would be greater if he tried to reinstate the debts.

The parable closes with the master's approval of the steward for his worldly wisdom. Here is another place where there is divided opinion among the interpreters. Master is a translation of the Greek word, κύριος; it is the same word as Lord. The master could be either the rich man or Jesus. Who approves of the steward's worldly wisdom, the rich man or Jesus?

It makes more sense to me to understand the master as the rich man. Then the parable begins and ends with actions by the rich man. The master approved of the unrighteous steward because he acted prudently. Acting prudently is a translation of the Greek verb, φρονέω, Aristotle defined φρονέω as practical wisdom. The master praises the steward because he responded cleverly to a crisis, bringing honor to the master and security for the steward.

The steward is praised for his cunning not his virtue. He is a trickster, which has a long history in the life of Israel as a nation, dating back to Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The parable cannot be taken as a straightforward moral teaching. The steward is still an ambiguous character: he is labeled as unrighteous and he is compared to a son of this age. Yet there is no doubt that Jesus is using the steward as an example of shrewdness that can be admired. The audience leans in to listen closely for more about how an unrighteous steward could be a role model.

### **Third Move: Street Smarts in the Kingdom**

Should we be unrighteous? Should we be tricksters? Should we try to fool politicians? Should we try to fool people into coming to church? No, the questions answer themselves. Jesus is not encouraging us to be unrighteous or to deceive people.

The steward was creative. He scattered the master's possessions in order to receive something back from those he benefitted. He used the master's possessions to give debt relief to his creditors. Wealth can corrupt, but it can also be used for good. Perhaps Jesus is encouraging his listeners to imitate the scattering of wealth to do good for people or perhaps he is simply encouraging the disciples to be creative.

Fred Craddock says that part of the problem lies in the anticerebral bias in the church and the unwillingness, if not inability, of many to conceive of thinking as a kingdom activity. What do street smarts in the kingdom look like?

If Christians take Christ seriously, they often are perceived as naive, do-gooders—the opposite of street smart. If you are against war, if you are against capital punishment, if you are against judging people, you will be patted on the head and thanked for your witness. Now step aside and let the adults handle this.

On the other hand, we can't go to the other extreme and say that we should run a church like a business. A church is not a business. The church is about filling people's lives with authentic meaning, not about making money. The church was seduced by the business model in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and congregations began structuring themselves as corporations, with a board of directors and committees. Robert's Rules of Order was used to govern parliamentary procedure during board meetings. We have only recently distanced ourselves from that model.

Business acumen is certainly a helpful thing. If we are going to sell part of our land, we need to know how to market the property and close a real estate deal. We have to retain an engineer to work with the Oklahoma City Planning Commission. Our land is our most significant financial asset and we need to maximize the return that we get for the sale of the land.

We do need skills in dealing with the system. The difference is that our starting point is Christ. How can we use these skills for the benefit of the kingdom instead of for self interest?

If we are going to be agents of reconciliation, we have to know how the system works. Mary wants to establish a relationship with ICE so that we can help get relief for refugees and immigrants who settle in Oklahoma. Cece and I want to work with Edmond Police to improve relations between the African American community and the police. We want to work with the Department of Corrections, the Governor's office and the Pardon and Parole Board to do what we can to improve conditions for people who have been incarcerated.

We are facing a crossroads in the life of this congregation. We need to grow to be sustainable. We must ask ourselves, "What should we do?"

We can scatter wealth from the sale of land. If we net \$400,000 from the sale of the land, we could take part of the money and contribute it to Disciples Mission Fund and the Regional Church. Disciples have Refugee and Immigration Centers all across the country. Refugees can't leave the detention centers on the border unless they have a physical address that they can report. Most of them go to refugee centers that are run by religious organizations. The nearest refugee center for Disciples is in Dallas. We could help start a center in Oklahoma City.

We can look for creative ways to enhance our presence on the road. We have always been handicapped by poor visibility from the road. People don't know we are here. We have talked about selling four acres and building a million dollar building on the road. Perhaps instead we can build a driveway from 178<sup>th</sup> Street into our parking lot. Build a retaining pond near the driveway and design it to look like fountains. Put in a new electronic sign and landscaping. We can put solar panels on our church building; it will virtually eliminate our electric bills and be a visible sign to the community that we are committed to being green. We can put in outdoor worship furniture that is handicap accessible and hold occasional services outside so that people from the street can see us worship.

## **Conclusion**

There is a place for street smarts in the kingdom. We can be creative in dealing with the system. We can be creative in making ourselves more visible to the community. We can be creative in scattering our possessions to support Disciples missions. We can be righteous stewards and clever.

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