

The parable at the heart of this passage is a head-scratcher, one of the most puzzling texts in the New Testament. A business manager (steward, *oikonomos*) engages in questionable conduct that damages his boss financially, yet wins praise. Really?

Chapter 16 of Luke presents two challenging parables dealing with economic relations, the first one starring this steward and the other depicting the dramatic reversal of fortunes for wealthy and destitute men (verses 19–31). Between the two parables, Luke places a set of sayings—also enigmatic—that relate the realm of God, entered through struggle, to the still-relevant claim of the law and the prophets (verses 14–18). Provocative as Jesus’ message about wealth and poverty may be (and this is a prominent narrative theme), Luke makes clear that it is not an innovation but continues a long-standing commitment of God and God’s people to social and economic justice.

The business manager: Dishonest or shrewd?

The parable begins by introducing a wealthy man who employs a steward, someone who manages his business affairs. All is not well, however: The steward is accused of mismanagement. It is unclear exactly what he has done, but it is worth noting that the description mimics the wealth-dissipating conduct of the prodigal son in the previous chapter (*skorpizein*, “squander,” in 15:13 and 16:1). Whatever the details, the wealthy owner (“master”: *kyrios*) acts without delay, firing his business manager and demanding he hand over all his financial records (verse 2).

Verses 3–7 then relate the fired manager’s response to the crisis he faces. An interior monologue articulates the man’s dilemma, with questions that invite readers into the story to contemplate what they would do in such a situation: “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” (verse 3, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition). Self-awareness informs a rapidly developing strategy, one designed to win the manager friends whose welcome will ensure his survival (verse 4).

So, one by one, he renegotiates the contracts of his former boss’s debtors, substantially reducing the amounts they owe (verses 5–7). The scale of the debts—“a hundred jugs of olive oil” and “a hundred containers of wheat” (verses 6–7, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)—indicates that the debtors have much to gain from such a renegotiation. If they are, as of yet, unaware of the manager’s release from employment, they would assume that the debt reduction has been authorized by their wealthy creditor, though the instruction to rewrite the contract “quickly” may seem curious.

It is customary to regard the steward’s conduct as dishonest. After all, the narrator of the parable (Jesus) calls him an “unrighteous manager” (verse 8, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition). Some interpreters, though, have attempted to defend his character. By reducing the contracted debts at the expense of his master, they suggest, he is not acting as a scoundrel but instead performing a virtuous act, whether removing unlawful interest built into the debt principal or voluntarily forfeiting his own agent’s commission.¹ However, the story doesn’t highlight his virtue;

rather, it turns on his shrewdness in surviving a desperate situation. Ironically, his plan results in more of the wealth-squandering that cost him his job in the first place.

The manager's crisis response proves successful: When the rich owner learns about it, he commends his former steward (verse 8). To be sure, he doesn't rehire the man, but he recognizes that the strategy has ingratiated the one-time steward with new friends. And to reinstate the debts in full, to cancel the transactions, would be unthinkable, as this would damage the owner's now glowing reputation in town. Honor and public esteem are more important even than money!

Responding to the parable: An appeal for trustworthy conduct

A strange story, this. The sayings that follow, beginning with verse 8b and continuing through verse 13, rein in the parable by making clear that the manager's praise does not mean that dishonest conduct is acceptable. Rather, all are urged to be utterly trustworthy in handling the affairs and resources entrusted to them. Even so, in commenting on the parable, Jesus laments that the people of God don't seem to be as savvy as others who are driven by self-interest—in the manner of this steward, for example (verse 8b). Albeit in a strange way, the parable points in a promising direction: Money may and often does entangle and corrupt, but it can also be a vehicle for forging relationships of value (verse 9). It is not about self-interest but contributing to the flourishing of others.

How might this passage contribute to Luke's insistent appeal for generous sharing of wealth with the under-resourced (for example, 12:13–21, 32–34; 14:7–24; 16:19–31; 18:18–25; 19:1–10)? How might 21st-century persons and communities of faith prove strategic and wise in forming and sustaining relationships that foster the well-being of others, especially those who experience oppressive debt burdens?

To be sure, we can't serve both God and wealth (16:13). Yet the parable and the ensuing sayings suggest that we **can** serve God by being strategic and wise—being faithful—in how we deal with the economic resources at our disposal. The enormous disparity in wealth between the rich and most others in many parts of the world today highlights the importance of creating more-just systems that make many more friends for us among under-resourced persons and communities. Jesus will pick up that thread more directly in the next parable, about Lazarus and the rich man (16:19–31).

Notes

1. So he exercises management in a domain that is unrighteous—money—rather than being unrighteous himself. See the summary of these proposals in John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 323–24.