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Luke 16:1-13 is a parable peculiar to Luke's Gospel.

It is a parable that Jesus shares with his disciples and is preceded by another Lucan parable about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In both parables a subordinate, either a younger son or a slave manager (*oikonomos*), is said to have squandered (*diaskopizo*) possessions or resources that belong(ed) to the master or father (15:13b; 16:1b). In the parable of the prodigal son, the elder son, who would have received his father's inheritance had he not given it to the younger son, compares himself to a slave. He worked for his father for nothing and never disobeyed him (or squandered resources).

But the elder son is not an enslaved man like the manager in our text, which I presume is based on Luke 16:13, the master language, and relationship in the parable. Fathers tend to forgive sons who complain and feel neglected and sons who leave home and squander property. Enslaved persons are expected to always act in the best interest of their masters, to turn a profit; otherwise, they can be accused of squandering the master's property. I find it problematic that Jesus would use slave parables without critiquing the institution of slavery and its evils; Rome was a slave society. Perhaps, in this case, Jesus at least sides with the slave.

In our parable an unknown third-party accuses the slave manager of squandering the rich master's resources. Because of the rumor, the master accuses the slave manager of dishonesty, of cooking the books, and demands that he give an account (*logos*) of the property (Luke 16:2). No external audit is done, which suggests that any account that the slave provides would not be considered credible, regardless.

By default, slaves were considered dishonest. In fact, they could not serve as witnesses in court except under torture; it was believed they would not give credible testimony unless tortured. Masters needed to trust their slave managers; an untrustworthy slave manager would be demoted to hard labor or field work, as the slave knew (Luke 16:3). But he was neither fit for manual labor nor wanted to become a beggar. It is possible that the slave master set aside a *peculium* (wages) for the slave's services, but even so the master always controlled such commission or earnings. Enslaved persons often possessed useful skills when conquered and bought or were trained to perform duties profitable to slave masters.

We often regard some people as more trustworthy than others based on their social position in church and society. Often persons in positions of power, authority, and high social status get a pass when they mistreat or abuse others who have less or little power, authority, and social capital in our neighborhoods, churches, and larger society.

The disgraced and perhaps falsely accused slave devises a plan that might allow him to remain useful to other enslavers (Luke 16:4). The slave manager offers his master's debtors a deal they cannot refuse; he reduces their debt in exchange for immediate payment (16:5-7). Many shrewd or

dishonest businessmen—or masters—overcharge for good and services and pay laborers little or nothing to amass wealth. Money in hand is preferable to IOUs.

It is unclear how the slave manager decided by how much to reduce the debts. One was offered a 50 percent reduction on a hundred jugs of oil, and another only 20 percent off a hundred containers of wheat, but they were “dishonest” transactions that the master commends (Luke 16:6-8). The slave manager is not called dishonest until after he reduced the debts owed. Did he lie about the amount each debtor owed, pretending to reduce their debt? Newly freed slaves in the South were often treated fraudulently in this manner, and some poor people are defrauded similarly today.

Perhaps the slave manager decided to behave as he had been accused but to benefit the master. Slave masters do not mind dishonesty if it benefits them; they prefer dishonesty when it demonstrates loyalty to the master’s interests. Apparently, Jesus commends the slave manager and his method for getting dishonest *wealth* for his master as a model for “children of light” (Luke 16:8-9). Jesus seems to side with the slave manager, given the dilemma that slaves face and since the slave is not the owner of the dishonest wealth. Perhaps this is how we should read the verses that follow. Luke’s Jesus often sides with folks considered “sinners and tax collectors” (5:30-32; 7:34).

In verses 10-13, the slightest dishonesty, regardless of context, is troublesome for Jesus. Jesus’ disciples are expected to be faithful or trustworthy even with wealth or resources gotten dishonestly and that belong to others, even slave masters (Luke 16:11-12). Otherwise, disciples should not be surprised when true wealth evades them.

Slave parables like this one had been used to encourage submission and loyalty among enslaved Africans in the antebellum South. The twentieth-century African American theologian, mystic, teacher, preacher, and prolific author, Howard Thurman, whose grandmother was a former slave, lived in the Jim Crow south and wrote in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited* that disinherited African Americans should never be deceptive or else they will become the deception to practice.¹ But as Cheryl Sanders argues in *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People*, enslaved Africans sometimes deceived slave owners to survive; they stole food to feed their families and themselves but condemned dishonesty generally, especially within the slave community.² The oppressed and women are often held to a higher ethical standard than their oppressors. In the parable, the rich master who owns enslaved peoples and commends dishonesty for the sake of profits is not condemned (see also Luke 16:19-31; 18:18-27; 19:1-10). This is typical of slave parables; slavery and enslavers are never condemned, only enslaved people who fail to be good slaves (12:34-40, 41-48).

Finally, the Lucan Jesus asserts that a slave can only serve one master at a time or the slave will end up hating one (no absolute submission) and loving the other (absolute loyalty to the detriment of the other). It is problematic to compare loyalty to God with faithfulness to the enslaver/enslaved relationship because of the cruelty of enslavement and how it benefits only enslavers. It is less troubling that the Lucan Jesus creates a dichotomy between slaving (*douleuo*) for God and for wealth, given that wealth is generally built upon the backs of the enslaved, women, the poor, and the oppressed; that wealth for one usually presumes poverty for many. The larger the wealth gap in favor of a few, the more people are impoverished. We should choose to be more conscious and strategic in our daily transactions and speech so that we contribute less to the pursuit of wealth for

ourselves and others, particularly in the service of greed and creation of poverty and at the expense of equality and the justice and love of God.

Notes:

1. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Beacon, 1996).
2. Cheryl Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Fortress, 1995).