

Briefing Document: The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)

I. Executive Summary

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (also known as the Unjust Steward) from Luke 16:1-13 is a notoriously perplexing biblical text that has challenged interpreters for centuries. This briefing document synthesizes insights from biblical excerpts, sermons, and commentaries to illuminate the main themes and most important ideas related to this parable.

While the story appears to commend a dishonest act, its core message, especially when understood in its original cultural context, is not an endorsement of dishonesty. Instead, it serves as a powerful call to shrewdness, foresight, and strategic use of resources – particularly "dishonest wealth" – to forge beneficial relationships and secure "eternal homes." The parable ultimately emphasizes faithfulness in all matters, the impossibility of serving both God and wealth, and the profound mercy of God in the face of human failings.

II. Core Narrative and Initial Puzzlement

The parable introduces a "rich man who had a manager" accused of "squandering his property." Facing dismissal, the manager, unable to dig and ashamed to beg, devises a plan: he summons his master's debtors and significantly reduces their outstanding bills (e.g., "a hundred jugs of olive oil" becomes "fifty," "a hundred containers of wheat" becomes "eighty"). Surprisingly, "his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." This commendation of a seemingly dishonest act is the central point of contention and difficulty for many readers. As the "2013 Sermon" notes, "Most of us here today are honest, or at least make every effort to be honest. I don't know about you, but I resent the fact that Jesus seems to commend a dishonest steward for his actions." John T. Carroll echoes this, calling it "a head-scratcher, one of the most puzzling texts in the New Testament."

III. Key Themes and Interpretations

A. Shrewdness vs. Dishonesty: The Master's Commendation

The central interpretive challenge is the master's praise. The sources consistently argue that the commendation is for the manager's *shrewdness* or *prudence*, not his dishonesty.

- **Cultural Context (Kenneth E. Bailey's Work):** The "2013 St. Peter's Sermon," relying heavily on Kenneth E. Bailey, provides crucial cultural context. The manager acted swiftly *before* his firing was public knowledge, making the debtors believe the reductions were authorized by the rich man himself, perhaps as a "bonus" due to poor harvests. To reverse these transactions would damage the master's "now glowing reputation in town." Therefore, "Honor and public esteem are more important even than money!" The master "praised Clarence for knowing that he could trust in my mercy, not because of his dishonesty."
- **Focus on Ingenuity:** Lois Malcolm suggests the commendation is for "responding shrewdly to a difficult circumstance." The manager "transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others." The poems on the unjust steward consistently highlight this aspect: "The Master praised his worldly wit, His foresight and his cunning scheme, Not for the fraud, but for the fit Example of a worldly theme" (Thomas Davis).

- **The "Children of This Age":** The parable states, "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." This comparison suggests disciples should learn to be as strategic in spiritual matters as worldly individuals are in their temporal affairs.

B. Using "Dishonest Wealth" to "Make Friends" for "Eternal Homes"

Jesus' direct exhortation immediately following the parable is pivotal: "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."

- **Forging Relationships of Value:** John T. Carroll highlights that "Money may and often does entangle and corrupt, but it can also be a vehicle for forging relationships of value." This is not about self-interest but "contributing to the flourishing of others."
- **Reciprocity and Egalitarianism:** Lois Malcolm elaborates that using "dishonest wealth" (often interpreted as earthly, transient wealth, or wealth acquired in an imperfect world) to "make friends" means establishing "new kind of reciprocity with them," perhaps akin to the Filipino concept of *utang na loob* (a "debt of inner gratitude"). This fosters "egalitarian relationships of friends" rather than vertical lender-debtor relationships.
- **Dependence on God's Mercy:** The "2013 Sermon from St. Peter's" frames the manager's actions as a desperate act of trust in the master's mercy, a model for our own reliance on God. "You have no option but to trust in God's mercy, trusting that Helmut will pay the price for you to be saved from certain disaster and ruin."

C. Faithfulness in Little and Much; Serving God vs. Wealth

The sayings immediately following the parable reinforce foundational ethical principles.

- **Integrity Across Spheres:** "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?" This emphasizes that integrity in handling earthly resources (even "dishonest wealth" or "what belongs to another") reflects one's capacity for "true riches" and stewardship of "what is your own."
- **Exclusive Service:** "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." This is presented as a "capstone" theme by Lois Malcolm, emphasizing that "the kingdom of God entails giving up all other commitments, including the commitment to economic security."

D. Social and Economic Justice, Reversal of Status

Luke's Gospel frequently addresses themes of wealth, poverty, and social justice, and this parable serves as a "bridge" between the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

- **Squandering and Reversal:** Lois Malcolm notes the parallel between the manager "squandering" property and the prodigal son's actions. She further connects this to Luke's theme of "reversals of status... when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear. The proud are

'scattered'... The powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted; the hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty."

- **Critique of Wealth and Slavery:** **Mitzi J. Smith** offers a critical perspective on the use of slavery in parables, noting the inherent power imbalance and the problematic nature of comparing loyalty to God with faithfulness to an enslaver. She points out 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." She suggests Jesus might be "sid[ing] with the slave manager, given the dilemma that slaves face and since the slave is not the owner of the dishonest wealth."

IV. Artistic and Poetic Interpretations

Artistic and poetic works largely reflect the tension between the manager's dishonesty and his commended shrewdness, often focusing on the lesson for "children of light."

- **Narrative Focus:** Early woodcuts (Unknown Artist, Hans Schäufelein) emphasize the direct narrative, illustrating the steward's actions of altering the bills. Marinus van Reymerswaele's painting captures the "master's expression of 'surprise yet delight' and the steward's calculating look," underscoring the central theme of shrewdness.
- **Moral and Lesson:** Poets like Thomas Davis and William Alexander Percy directly interpret the master's praise as for "worldly wit" and "cunning scheme," not the "fraud." They consistently urge "children of light" to "use your wealth with timely care" to "make of Mammon's fading might, A friend against the final snare." George Herbert's devotional poem explicitly states, "Let me not be a servant to my store, But make my store a servant unto me; And use my Mammon... To build a house for all eternity."

V. Conclusion

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager, while initially unsettling, serves as a profound teaching on the strategic use of earthly resources and the ultimate priority of serving God. It challenges disciples to exhibit "shrewdness" in spiritual matters, to leverage their temporal wealth to cultivate relationships, and to act with foresight to secure their eternal well-being. Far from commending dishonesty, the parable, especially through its cultural lens, highlights the master's ultimate mercy and the importance of integrity in stewardship, while also prompting a critical reflection on the origins and uses of wealth in light of God's call for justice and love.