

lifeLines reference
CLEARLY CONNECTING
One Kingdom: Eternal Value

WORD

(You are welcome to gather in groups of 3 or 4 for all or part of this discussion.)

Read Luke 16:1-13

If you knew your job was going to end, what would you do?

How does the dishonest manager's plan depend on his master's debtors? On his master?

How are the rich man's responses (manager wasting his possessions and then the manager's shrewdness) different from what you might expect, or how you would respond?

What do we learn about the rich man?

How is God challenging your use of possessions, in light of the Kingdom?

Commentary Just, A. A., Jr. (1997). Concordia Commentary [Luke 9:51–24:53](#)

Commentary

Lk 16:1–31 opens with one story unique to Luke (the steward of unrighteousness) and closes with another (the rich man and Lazarus). In each story the disciple's attitude toward possessions is an important theme. While they are not labeled as parables, they are among many such illustrative stories that function in the same way as parables, and so they are commonly called parables (see textual notes on 4:23 and 8:4). Appended behind the first parable are words of application about serving God and mammon (16:9 [or 10] to 13). There is an overall flow to the thought: "Sons of light" are prudent about the coming of the kingdom, and the Pharisees would be too, if they heeded the witness of Moses and the Prophets to the kingdom and the King.

It would appear that the parable found in 16:1–8 is difficult, for it has spawned many different interpretations. The following exposition will not rehash and dispute all the various interpretations. Rather, it aspires to offer one that is consistent with the surface meaning of the text and also provides a theological reading of the parable that places it within the flow of Jesus' catechetical teachings.

At 16:1 the discourse continues, but the audience shifts from the tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes of Luke 15 to Jesus' disciples.

Lk 16:1–31 is one of three major sections in the journey narrative discussing possessions. The others are 12:13–34 and 18:18–30. It serves to amplify Jesus' saying near the beginning of this discourse: "Every one of you who does not take leave of all his own possessions, he is not able to be my disciple" (14:33). This discourse begins with a parable about the proper use of possessions (16:1–8). Next, some sayings give practical application of the truth of that parable (16:9–13).

The Parable of the Prudent Steward of Unrighteousness (16:1–8)

The narrative line is quite simple and straightforward. The parable is framed by the interaction between the lord and his steward, with the lord calling his steward to render a concluding account of his management (16:2) and then at the end commending him for his prudence (16:8a). In between the steward wrestles with the problem that he has been fired, is out of work, has no place to stay, and has no hope of future employment (16:3). He dismisses physical labor or begging, because he is incapable of either. In the midst of his despair, he has an insight into how he might solve his problem. This is the center of the story (16:4). The solution is shrewd and effective (16:5–7): **he will change his lord's accounts so that both he and his lord will be commended by the community.** It is his shrewdness that leads to both the praise of his lord and Jesus' final saying that summarizes the parable (16:8b).

If this were a secular story, the interpretation would be self-evident. Faced with a crisis, the steward is clever though dishonest in solving his problems. The apparent dilemma is that this is a parable of Jesus in which he seems to be commending dishonesty to his followers. A similar dilemma occurs in the parable of 18:1–8, where the unrighteous judge is the God figure, and in 19:12, where the severe king is the Christ figure. But this is a false dilemma, a problem only if one dwells on the steward and his dishonesty. This parable and the appended sayings are addressed to Jesus' disciples. This is prime catechetical material. (Only later does the hearer find out [16:14] that the Pharisees are eavesdropping on this teaching.) **This teaching will inform the disciples first and foremost about God, and only secondarily about their response to God.**

If one considers the parable from the lord's perspective, then the focus of the parable is *not* on the *dishonesty* of the steward, **but on the *mercy* of the lord.** This assumes that the lord is an honorable man, which seems to be the pattern of the households in Jesus' parables. The rich lord's mercy to the steward who *squandered* the lord's estate (16:1; διασκορπίζων) is parallel to the father's mercy to the prodigal who *squandered* the father's inheritance (15:13; διεσκόρπισεν). **The purpose of the parable, then, is to reveal the lord's *mercy*.** The following comments from that perspective draw on the insightful analysis of K. Bailey.

The steward most likely is a salaried estate agent. The debtors in the parable probably rent property from the lord to grow crops, and the debt is a predetermined portion of the harvest, whether it be olive oil or wheat. When the report about wastefulness comes, the lord tells the steward he is fired, but he does *not* throw him into jail or punish him in any way. This would have been the lord's right, but he is a merciful man. *It is this mercy that the steward banks on in deciding upon the solution to his problem.*¹⁰ When one chooses to focus on the mercy of the lord, the question of the dishonesty of the steward in squandering the lord's possessions becomes a moot point. It also lessens the significance

of the exact arrangements the steward made with the lord's debtors. K. Bailey is probably closest to reflecting the first-century context by describing the lord as an honorable man who shows his integrity and his concern for his estate.

With this understanding of the context, the actions of the steward and the response of the lord are plausible. When the steward hears of his firing, he does not protest but deliberates over his future. (This is prudence.) His first reaction is to approach the crisis from a human point of view. What can *he* do, humanly speaking, to extricate himself from this mess he has caused? He is so overwhelmed that he even contemplates two alternatives (digging or begging) that are in reality impossibilities. Like the prodigal son who desired to eat pig food, the unrighteous steward has hit the bottom and realizes that he can do nothing for himself. Humanly speaking, there is no escape from his crisis.

The steward's great insight is to see that the solution must come from outside himself. His entire plan is based on his assumption that the lord is an honorable man who will respond in mercy, as he has done in the past. The steward trusts that the lord will allow a brief span of time, an opportunity to prepare for the imminent reckoning and reversal. The significance of the seemingly innocuous adverb "quickly" (ταχέως; 16:6) cannot be overemphasized. The steward must act in haste so that the lord's debtors will think that the adjustments in the accounts stem from the lord's mercy and not the steward's desperation. The readiness of the debtors to accept the steward's rewriting of their bills indicates that they believe this comes from the lord's hand, perhaps under the gentle persuasion of the wise steward who is looking out for the renters. The community is dependent on the "generous and merciful" lord¹³ and has come to expect this sort of mercy from him, and the steward benefits in that he is an extension of the lord. The lord is a perfect example of Jesus' exhortations in the Sermon on the Plain to be generous and merciful: "Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (6:35) and "Become merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6:36).

When the lord discovers what the steward has done, he is in a bind with two options. He can reverse the steward's decisions to adjust the accounts, but in doing so, he will receive wrath from his renters and force them to reassess whether he really is a "generous and merciful" lord. If he lets the adjustments stand, he has further secured the goodwill of his renters. That, then, is the obvious choice for the lord, if he is to be consistent with his own character. He must commend the steward for shrewdly managing his personal crisis since *the steward trusted the character of his lord and staked everything on the lord's mercy*. The steward was not disappointed.

Clearly Jesus is still narrating the parable in 16:8a. ὁ κύριος, "the lord," is the lord in the parable who, Jesus says, commends the steward for his prudence. But he is commending him as a "steward of unrighteousness" (16:8). To fully understand the significance of this commendation, "prudently" (φρονίμως), "unrighteousness" (ἀδικία), and "praised" (ἐπῆνεσεν) must be carefully studied.

"Prudently" may be understood from Hebrew and Septuagintal sources as bearing eschatological connotations, "cleverness and skill deployed in self-preservation." "Unrighteousness" (ἀδικίας) and "unrighteous" (ἄδικος) are used throughout this section to describe mammon (16:9, 11) and a life of unrighteousness (16:10: "The one who is unrighteous in a very little is also unrighteous in much"). Various attempts have been made

to nuance these words, e.g., to translate “dishonest” in 16:8a and 16:10 and “worldly” in 16:9 and 16:11. But both words mean essentially the same thing throughout the parable, namely, unrighteousness inherent in life in a wicked world.¹⁸ The word “praise” also opens the possibility of moving from the scene of the parable into the eschatological realm:

Thus the Greek word, on the level of the story itself, carries the meaning of simple approval of what the steward has done. At the same time, on a theological level this word provides additional evidence for interpreting the parable as being primarily concerned with eschatology.

These three words in the conclusion to the parable show the eschatological aspect and indicate that the steward is praised because when faced with a crisis of eschatological proportions (his very survival in the imminent day of reckoning), he cleverly uses resources available to him in a wicked world in the context of his trust that his lord will treat him with the same mercy that he had shown in the past.

But this is not the only conclusion. There is an addendum that comments on this in a Christian context: “because the sons of this present age are more prudent in their own generation than the sons of light” (16:8b). This saying would be acute to the disciples, who are the audience for this parable (although the Pharisees also overheard these words). Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the steward, but not by being unrighteous. “The sons of this present age” are “more prudent” in worldly matters because they know how to be unrighteous—to bend the rules, play the game, or beat the system—in order to accomplish their goals. But Jesus wants his disciples to be ignorant or unlearned in the practice of such unrighteousness, because it is advantageous only in “this present age” and actually is harmful for those whose hope is in the age to come. “The sons of light” are to be prudent by recognizing the eschatological moment and focusing carefully on where God’s mercy resides.

For the disciples and the Pharisees, the inbreaking of God’s merciful kingdom has been clearly announced to them by Jesus, particularly through his person, his teaching, and his miracles. The sayings of Jesus in Luke 12, where Jesus told another parable about a steward, but a faithful one (12:41–48), should be ringing in the hearers’ ears. This is particularly true of Jesus’ pointed exhortation about the present time of his visitation: “You hypocrites, the face of the earth and of the heaven you know how to examine, but how is it you do not know to examine this critical time?” (12:56).

Teachings about God and Mammon (16:9–13)

The sayings that follow the parable of the prudent steward are almost as challenging as the parable itself. They are connected to the parable—but how?

The link between these two sections is in the theme of this chapter: the proper use of possessions. How shall the children of the light be prudent in this world? The steward was commended for using “mammon” wisely; now the disciples are instructed by Jesus on how they might use “mammon” wisely for the sake of the kingdom. This is catechetical material. There are echoes from Luke 12, where possessions were shown to be a real stumbling block for Christians (along with persecution that elicits hypocrisy). Possessions may tempt Christians to become distracted from the main focus of their salvation. Instead of looking to a merciful God in whom they can put their trust, they see in their possessions a secure foundation that gives them certainty in an uncertain world. It becomes an alternate means of salvation. Note that possessions are not condemned, but the idolatrous use of them is.

Already in Luke 12, Jesus has given clear instructions on how the Christian should view the possessions that God has given him:

Seek his kingdom, and all these things will be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, because your Father graciously willed to give to you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions and give alms; make for yourselves purses that do not wear out, unfailing treasure in the heavens, where thief does not come near nor moth destroy; for where your treasure is, there also your heart will be (12:31–34).

With this background from Luke 12, these three sayings may be related to the parable of the prudent steward. In the first teaching (16:9), Jesus commands his disciples to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon” (16:9a). A loan word from Aramaic, “mammon” refers to money or possessions. Jesus is exhorting the disciples to follow in the footsteps of the prudent steward, who used mammon generously to make friends for himself. If the mammon was used wisely, that is, if it was used to make friends, then when it is exhausted those friends may receive (δέξωνται) you into the eternal tents. This also mirrors the account of the prudent steward, even in some verbal parallels. At the center of the story, his great insight is that when his stewardship (the source of his unrighteous mammon) runs out, his new friends that he made by doctoring the accounts may receive (δέξωνται) him into their homes (εἰς τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν). In 16:9 the unrighteous mammon is also described as failing—a clear reference to death, when possessions become meaningless. But because unrighteous mammon was used to make friends, they may receive those who thus made use of the mammon into their eternal tents (εἰς τὰς αἰωνίουσ σκηνάς), even as the steward was hoping to be received into the homes of his friends.

Making friends by means of unrighteous mammon no doubt refers to almsgiving in fulfillment of Jesus’ exhortation to “sell your possessions and give alms” (12:33). Those who receive the alms become your friends because you are merciful to them in times of want, even as the Father in heaven is merciful to you (6:36). Just as the lord in the parable was known as a man of mercy, the steward imitated his lord’s mercy in the settling of his accounts. He used mammon mercifully, and that is why he was praised as prudent. The reward for those who make such friends by sharing possessions is an eschatological one: instead of only being received into the homes of the friends, as in 16:4, they will be received into the eternal tents of the merciful Father. Jesus is not teaching works-righteousness here when he says “make.” Rather, he is enjoining the display of merciful generosity by those who have been shown generous mercy by God.

In the second saying (16:10–12), “unrighteous mammon” is compared with “the true thing” (16:11). The issue is faithfulness. The section begins by describing both “faithfulness” and unfaithfulness (“unrighteousness”) in two general principles that are paralleled: if you are faithful in little things you will be faithful in big ones; if you are unrighteous in little things you will be unrighteous in big things (16:10). The unrighteous steward is an example of one who is unrighteous in both little and big things. But he is also faithful in little and big things, as was evidenced by his unswerving faith in his lord’s mercy (the big thing) and his faith that the debtors would trust that his changing the accounts (a little thing) was a reflection of his lord’s mercy. On the other side of the center of this passage, unrighteous mammon is described as “that belonging to another,” reflecting the biblical idea that the things of this world come from God and are not ours, and “the true thing” is described as

“what is yours” (16:12). The language of faithfulness is used here as well, but first as an indictment of Jesus’ listeners that they might not have been faithful in “that belonging to another,” i.e., unrighteous mammon, and then as a question by Jesus whether their unfaithfulness in unrighteous mammon will lead to unfaithfulness in “what is yours,” i.e., “the true thing.”

What becomes evident in this structure is that the interpretation depends on what “the true thing” represents. It might well be translated “the true riches” instead of “the true thing,” reminding us again of “treasure in the heavens” (12:33). The interpretation in Luke 12 suggested that Christ is the heavenly treasure, and heavenly treasures are those things that incorporate us into Christ, that is, catechesis, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. So, to be rich toward God is to be a member of Christ’s kingdom through catechesis, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. To be a faithful steward of “the true thing” is to be a faithful steward of the mysteries, i.e., of catechesis that leads toward Baptism and then invites to the Supper. This interpretation corresponds with the interpretation of the parable of the faithful steward, where stewardship of the Lord’s gifts was the theme. **Jesus tells his disciples in no uncertain terms that how one administers the things of this world is parallel to how one will administer the things of God’s kingdom.**

Jesus includes one final teaching (16:13), in chiasmic form (see the following diagram), that concludes with a well-known and well-used saying: “You are not able to serve God and mammon.” This sums up this entire section. Both the basic definition of mammon, i.e., “that in which one puts one’s trust,” and its meaning in this section as money or possessions apply in this final saying. The other side of the frame of this verse describes the dilemma: “No domestic servant is able to serve two lords.” This puts this question to the disciples: “Are you trusting in money/possessions or in God? Are you trying to serve them both?” Recall that this section began with unrighteous mammon as a means toward making friends so that one may be received into eternal tents (16:9). Mammon is not evil in itself but becomes evil when it becomes the object of one’s service, i.e., when one worships mammon instead of God. To serve (worship) both is impossible.

When Jesus poses these two stark alternatives, he gives wonderful pastoral advice. Anyone who tries to have it both ways will either hate one and love the other or be attached to one and despise the other. Love/attachment and hatred/despising stand at the center of the chiasm. There is even another chiasm within the larger chiasm, as the following diagram shows:

The steward was commended because he chose to serve his lord, who he trusted would be merciful. He used unrighteous mammon to achieve his goal, though he trusted not in the mammon, but in his merciful lord. Luke 12 echoes again, “For where your treasure is, there also your heart will be” (12:34). Faithful disciples will be commended for seeing that Jesus is their treasure and for trusting in his mercy.

PRAY

Read Luke 12:29-34 and pray from it. Pray for those who are worried, pray for those in need, and pray that God would help you with your worries so that you can be one of His answers for those who are in need.

LOVE

What is one way you will use your possessions for the kingdom? (How can you practice relying on God's provision and mercy? How can you keep from putting your trust in your own savings account and retirement plans?)

