

**“THE LONG GAME”**  
**A Sermon Preached at**  
**FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Belleville, IL**  
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(transcribed from audio file)

Today’s scripture is from Luke 16:1-13. The parable of the dishonest manager.

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth<sup>[b]</sup> so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*“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,<sup>[d]</sup> who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.”* NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I'm just goin' to name it. This is a confusing passage. It's tricky. It's a tricky parable to understand and there's a lot going on in here, so if you were just now thinking, "Huh?" you're not alone. There's no way we can cover all of it, but let's briefly talk about what's going on in this parable. You heard it once, but to really wrap your head around it we have to kind of talk through it.

There's a rich person, right? And they are also referred to as a master. They were most likely a landowner back in the day. They probably rented out land to a lot of people and those people then paid rent on that land with what they produced. The rich person or the master may have been present. They might have lived elsewhere. They might have been present. We don't really know. We have this rich person who is this master.

Then there is this other character, the manager. This is someone who is taking care of things for the master. Kind of like a property manager. So, if you rented an apartment, often you end up working with a property manager. They get your rent. They deal with any issues. They don't actually own the property.

So, we have this manager, and the manager is accused of squandering or wasting the master's stuff. So, the master tells him, hand over all the accounting. You're fired.

The manager then has this internal dialogue and he asks himself . . . This kind of feels like the prodigal son. There are some parallels for some of you who might have noticed that. He asks himself, what will I do? I couldn't possibly be, you know, a physical laborer and I'm too proud to beg. I know. I'll change the debts of everyone so people will help me when I lose my job. He then goes to the debtors and has them change the amount that they owe. The amounts are decreased. So that's what he does.

Then the response of the master to the manager is the master compliments the manager for his wise actions, which is confusing. Right? Because this is in the Bible and there's dishonesty, there's squandering. It's very, very confusing and we're not really sure what's happening. We don't understand if the manager, by reducing the debts, was dishonest, benevolent, or righteous. And all the scholars who have tried to figure out this passage say, we're not really sure. It could be any of those.

Because was the manager cheating the master out of money by reducing the debt and thus was a dishonest person? Well, we know he was dishonest from earlier, but was this action dishonest?

Perhaps the manager was reducing the debt to remove his commission. Maybe he got a percentage of it, so the amount of debt that was reduced was what he would have made on that. That's kind of benevolent. That's kind of generous and kind.

Or was the manager following a Jewish custom, a Jewish law that prohibited interest? And so that's technically, per Deuteronomy 23 that wasn't allowed. So maybe the manager was just being righteous on his way out the door.

We don't actually know, but that doesn't mean there isn't a lesson or two for us to take from this parable. Before we get to those lessons, I think there are two other things that some of you may be hung up on, or at least I was hung up on and will share with you.

So, the first is the word shrewd. We don't use that word very often. Not common in our vernacular. Shrewd is a cool word which means prudent or wise. When I looked up the Greek word for this, often when you look up a Greek word, you can see where else that word is used in the New Testament. You can see, for other contexts, how this word is used. This is the only time that Greek word is used in the New Testament, and it's translated as shrewd, which means prudent or wise. So, clear up that word.

The second thing that some of you might get hung up on is that you might have a little righteous indignation thinking about this manager being dishonest. And it's easy to get stuck on that because when we think of the Bible we think of righteousness and good people and great morals and lessons. But we know for sure that this guy at least squandered some of his master's possessions. And it's also possible that he just lied about how much folks owed when he was getting fired. So, how could there possibly be anything redeeming about this story?

While I think it's important to look at the entire Bible as a whole and remember that there is a lot of imperfect people in the Bible and there are a lot of parables that talk about mistakes people made and yet we have things to learn from them.

Remember Jacob? Jacob of the Bible. He tricked his father. Cheated his brother out of his inheritance and yet he's kind of a big deal – patriarch of our faith. So, we have repeated instances throughout the Bible where God uses someone who maybe

doesn't always make the best choices, who maybe doesn't always live honestly to teach us, to help us learn as Christians because throughout the Bible we have stories of humans and it's kind of like they're imperfect or something. Just like us.

So, I think we can get on board with, we might not agree with everything this guy did, but there are still things to learn from this parable.

So now that you're unstuck on all of those things, we cleared up at least a third of what you were confused on. I know again there's a lot in this passage, but we're gonna kind of focus on this parable. Now that you're unstuck, I want you to think about if you've ever been a parent, or watched a parent help their child learn about money. Kind of like that trajectory, right?

When they're really little, they get their hands on, these days, a couple dollars. Back in the day, it was probably some quarters, but we have inflation and candy is more expensive now. But they get their hands on a little bit of money and what do they immediately want to do? They want to buy candy. Right? They immediately get money and then they immediately want that instant gratification. They learn that money equals candy and this is a great time. Fantastic. Then they want more money so they can buy more things.

And then as they get older and as they grow, they start to plan ahead. They start to realize that toy costs \$80. I need to save up my money so that I can buy that toy that I really want. They might even start to set aside money for other people, to buy presents for family members. And then they might even start to plan for something that is far off, like college and set aside money.

You watch the little ones grow in their understanding of money and how to think of it. They go from wanting that instant gratification to thinking long term and planning ahead. In theory, in theory, we all have done that too. We all think long term about our resources and plan ahead and think about other people less fortunate than ourselves and don't give in to immediate gratification, in theory.

But our culture has made it hard for us to focus where we ought to focus. In reality, we sometimes still revert to thinking like a young child, wanting what we want and wanting it now. We start to become focused on making more money, getting more money so that we can have that immediate gratification and get what we want.

One of the lessons from our scripture passage is that we cannot serve two masters. We can't serve God and money. We have to pick. We have to choose. Are we a disciple of Jesus Christ or are we a disciple of the dollar?

To be a disciple means to follow someone. Are we following Jesus Christ or are we following money? Part of the problem I think we have today is that often we fall into the trap of trying to do both. We become divided. Our souls are divided trying to serve both masters and I think that a divided soul is a sick soul. It's unable to concentrate on one thing. It makes us upset and anxious because we have this inner turmoil, because we cannot serve both God and money.

So, one of the lessons from this scripture passage is that we have to choose whom we will serve. Everyone serves someone or something. We just have to decide what it will be.

So, who or what do you serve? That's something for you to ponder this week.

The other lesson I want you to notice in this passage is that as disciples of Jesus, we ought to play the long game. When the manager is fired, he plans ahead for his unemployment and he endures himself to his master's debtors. Whether he does this through sheer dishonesty or generosity or righteousness, we don't know. It's uncertain, but what is certain is that he is complimented on his wisdom in thinking ahead.

One commentary, I read a lot of commentaries on this one. One commentary put it this way, the parable challenges its hearers to be as clever and prudent as the manager in ensuring their future. In other words, a disciple of Jesus Christ's life is one that serves God, not money, by using what God has given to us to benefit our future instead of being self-absorbed and thinking about the present moment.

By playing the long game with our resources, we aren't storing up our treasures on earth, but we are storing up our treasures in heaven. We use our resources to help others because long game, big picture, that is what matters.

So, those are two lessons and up until this point I feel like there's just been a lot of wisdom that I've talked about but perhaps not necessarily good news. And I would like to leave you with some good news this morning. I think the good news in this scripture passage, or at least some of it, is that even though we can fall into the trap of serving both God and money, we aren't supposed to. We aren't supposed to serve two masters. We're not expected to serve two masters. That's not how we are called

to live. We're not supposed to try and divide our souls in half, serving material possessions and God. We aren't called to have to juggle conflicting priorities, to bend over backwards to make the next dollar and also try and be a good Christian.

The good news is that we only have to serve one master and that's God. And I think that is good news because that is so much better for our souls. And we do fall into that trap of juggling both, of trying to serve both and that makes us not well.

By serving one master, we become focused and concentrated and clear, not only in our daily actions, but in how we live our entire life. And that is good news.

Amen? Amen.