

How to Succeed in Stewardship Without Really Trying

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Luke 16:1-13

To start off with, no, I did not pick today's reading because today is pledge Sunday! And no, we did not make today pledge Sunday because this was today's reading! This is just yet another example of the lectionary mocking me. I take it very personally.

So, putting aside the discomfort of preaching about a dishonest steward of Mammon on the day we ask for pledges that in part pay my salary, this is a really strange parable to deal with.

The question of dealing with unrighteous money is an interesting one. While in seminary I attended a minor league baseball game. Our section of the park won free lottery tickets. Upon scratching off my \$1 ticket, I discovered that I was the winner of \$2! I decided to treat the experience as a case study in ethics. I took the ticket to the pastor of our rather conservative church. He didn't even want to touch the thing. It represented gambling — unrighteous money. I took it to a rather liberal professor of ethics at the seminary. He pondered the ticket for a few minutes and commented on the failed public policy of the lottery, its sham claims of funding education, and its disproportionate impact on the poor. He then suggested I put the ticket in the offering plate at my church.

In the five or six commentaries I consulted, I found seven or eight different interpretations of the parable — all seeking to understand how a shifty land manager becomes a hero. It helps to look at this as a classic "trickster" story.

Have you heard the one about Menno Simons? It may be apocryphal, but it is funny and therefore worth repeating. Menno was a prime target of Anabaptist hunters in the Netherlands. Once he was traveling by coach; instead of riding inside with the other passengers, he rode up top with the driver. A soldier galloped up alongside on horseback and asked if Menno Simons was in the coach. Menno leaned down and asked the passengers if Menno Simons was in the coach. They responded quite accurately that Menno Simons was not, in fact, inside the coach. The soldier went on his way. This and similar stories had enough of an impact that one Dutch term for “little white lie” translates as “Mennonite lie.” The point of a trickster tale is not that we emulate bad behavior, but that we think creatively about circumstances.

One of the conflicts in interpretation of this parable revolves around what exactly is given away when the steward reduces the debts of the tenant farmers. Is he cutting into the legitimate debt owed to the land owner? Is he eliminating interest that was allowed by a technicality in the law of the Pharisees, but considered immoral in Torah law? Was he returning his own legitimate portion of the profits, or perhaps returning what he had skimmed off the top?

Luke consistently presents Jesus’ actions as reflecting an understanding of “Jubilee.” This was the cycle of forgiveness of debts to be practiced every seventh and 50th year. Perhaps we’re supposed to see that even an unrighteous steward can follow Jubilee ideals and wonder how much more we could do.

The story itself features no less than four internal interpretations:

1. The children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light.
2. Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.
3. 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.
4. No slave can serve two masters.

The inclusion of four interpretations may be evidence that very early on there wasn't a consistent understanding of what in the world Jesus was talking about. All of these ideas — remission of debt, avoidance of interest charges, holding wealth lightly — have their place, and all are valid readings of this story. However, I don't think this is simply a parable about how to use money and manage debt. If it were, why introduce so many complicating factors? Why be obtuse about what exactly the steward was dishonest about? Why not give one simple, straight-forward "moral of the story" rather than four?

Another way to look at the story is to think in terms of character development. Not only "how does the steward develop through the story" but also how does the steward develop character. What are his aspirations? His hopes? What does he desire? Here's where the most interesting and obvious shifts occur within the story.

We are presented with a triple-decker stratified society. At the top is the wealthy land owner; at the bottom, the peasant farmers who work his land. And in the middle class, our hero the shifty steward. We see early on some of his

hopes and fears. He is presented as somehow defrauding people in order to acquire more wealth. I imagine that this middle manager has his eyes on something bigger — the boss' office, perhaps. He's living the Aramaic dream of upward mobility. His aspiration is to become more like the land owner.

We see his fear once he's caught in his mismanagement. He is not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. He fears downward mobility. Yet his actions reveal an interesting reversal of his priorities.

Let's assume for a moment that the amount of the debt forgiven was not legitimately the land owner's — that is, we'll take it to be either immoral interest, a surcharge applied as the steward's fee or money the steward was skimming off the top. I think any of these are reasonable assumptions given the owner's reaction. If the money was legitimately his and the steward gave it away, I cannot imagine the owner commending him for his shrewdness. So if the excess debt was the steward's to deal with (whether honestly acquired or not) he essentially had three options as to its disposal. The most obvious, perhaps, would have been to demand repayment on that part of the debt from each of the tenants. This would have provided him with some financial stability. But without a job and without a good reference, that money wouldn't have lasted long.

The second option, and what would have logically been an attractive one, would have been to present the owner with the accounts as demanded, and concede his 'share' of the profit to the owner. There are other parables, after all, where stewards are commended for increasing the wealth of the master. Might such a move have saved his position and ingratiated him to the owner?

Instead, the steward chooses an illogical third way. He forgives the debt of the poor tenant farmers. He chooses their favor over the favor of the master. An amount that to the owner might have seemed piddling would have meant a great deal to the debtors. I imagine having half or a third of my student loan debt expunged — that would be huge!

Why does the steward make this choice? He essentially casts his lot with the poor rather than the rich. He recognizes that he can rely on their support within his community more than he can hope in the generosity of an absent land owner. The wealthy do not depend upon or support one another. The poor are by necessity interdependent and rely on each other's generosity. The steward recognized which type of community he would need.

It was by giving up his fortune that he gained true wealth. The riches of relationship were of greater value than his unrighteous mammon. And in the moral of the story we're told that if even an unrighteous man can use his money in this way, we ought to as well. If a trickster can do good, we can do even better.

Do we acquire wealth as a means to improve our own lives, or as a tool to improve the world? Do we advance ourselves, or do we advance our community? Do we aspire to the independence of the rich, or the interdependence of the poor?