

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: In God We Trust**

(Generosity and Stewardship)

#### **Material Witnesses**

(Luke 16:1-15)

Study #3

#### **Introduction: When opportunity knocks...**

During my years in High School, I was presented with a golden opportunity. I bronzed it.

Like all Texas High Schoolers, I was required to take a foreign language. Like most Texas High Schoolers, I opted for Spanish. I took Spanish for three years.

Now, can you imagine, given that Kathy and I have lived in San Antonio for forty years, how valuable a working knowledge of Spanish would have been?

Just think of the doors that being bi-lingual would have opened here in San Antonio and on trips to Mexico and Uruguay and Chile and Nicaragua, to say nothing of how it would have helped in serving Encuentro.

It would have been great. But in High School I didn't study hard to learn Spanish. I am now a very typical English-only American.

My recent efforts to learn Spanish only prove that language acquisition is far, far easier when one is young.

I am so sad when I look back on my wasted High School Spanish classes. The opportunity to learn Spanish knocked, and I didn't answer.

Every day we come face to face with opportunities. Doors open to us to learn, to serve those around us, to love, or to take a step forward into some new venture.

Maybe like me, you've bronzed a few golden opportunities.

Or maybe you've done something else. Maybe you heard the knock of opportunity and flung the door wide open. You took advantage of the opportunity and were opportunistic.

This morning, we're going to listen as Jesus tells a very clever little story (a parable). This story's point is that when we are presented with opportunities for Jesus, we should be opportunists. Open the door. Grab opportunity by the throat.

I've chosen to look at this parable this morning because it fits perfectly into a series of messages about generosity and stewardship.<sup>1</sup>

*Setting the context...*

The parables of Jesus are found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John included no parables in his Gospel.

And today's parable is only found in Luke. We locate it right in the mid-section of Luke's Gospel.

We might even call this section of Luke's Gospel the "heart" of his book, because the parables found here (Luke 14-16) reveal just how much Jesus loves people who are far from God.

Scholars believe that these parables were given at roughly the same time (not long before His final trip to Jerusalem) and while Jesus was in the region of Perea, an area just north of Judea on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

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<sup>1</sup> Usually referred to as "The Parable Of The Unrighteous Steward."

In this section of Luke, we read about a great dinner party God is throwing. He wants all the invited guests to attend (Luke 14:16-24).

Then there are three parables in which Jesus describes God's love for those who are far off by telling stories of a lost and then found sheep, coin, and son. (Luke 15)

The next parable Luke records is the one we're going to look at now. Jesus gave it directly to His first disciples and He's speaking to us, today through this parable.<sup>2</sup>

We can easily identify with the story because it's filled with practices that we hear about in our own day. There is a dishonest employee, kickbacks, and a price-fixing scheme.

Jesus used this story to give a life-changing lesson in Kingdom-of-God centered opportunism.

### **Unrighteous Opportunism (vv. 1-8a)**

#### **A Rich Boss Discovers a Cheater on the Payroll (vv. 1-2)**

*The cheater is exposed (v. 1)*

Jesus' story revolves around the actions of a manager - a CFO - who had been hired by a wealthy man to oversee his business affairs.<sup>3</sup>

The manager wasn't rich. He simply managed the wealth of his boss. His only job was to protect and to prosper his boss' assets.

In the first century, managers had a lot of responsibility and lots of latitude as to how they carried out their responsibilities.

And, clearly, this manager had very little oversight. Using that lack of oversight to the max, he helped himself to his boss' riches.

***[1] Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions."***

This manager was lining his own pockets with his master's money. He was enjoying the lifestyle of the rich and famous with what was supposed to be his boss' money.

Unfortunately for him, his boss discovered what he was doing.

*The cheater is fired! (v. 2)*

***[2] "And he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'***

Clearly, the boss was upset. And we totally understand why. His most trusted employee was cooking the books and was swindling him out of his riches.

The manager didn't have a leg to stand on. He couldn't deny his crime. He was guilty as charged.

As Jesus continues with the story, the focus shifts from the anger of the rich man to the painful plight (even if self-inflicted) of the dishonest manager.

He's not only concerned with how he is going to maintain the lifestyle to which he has become accustomed. He is concerned with survival because his sugar daddy is gone.

#### **The Dishonest Manager Worries about His Future (v. 3)**

***[3] "And the manager said to himself, 'What am I to do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.'***

<sup>2</sup> They were likely in Perea, an area just north of Judea on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Jesus and His followers were just about to start making their way to Jerusalem for the final time, where He will give His life on the cross.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word that is used here for "steward" is the word from which we derive our English word "economics."

There is obviously no question that he's concerned. But don't think that he's sorry about his sinful ways. There is no repentance here.

He is simply a dishonest bookkeeper caught red-handed who is trying to think of a way out of the hard times around the corner.

For years, his M.O. has been to skim money off the top and keep as much as he could for himself without actually having to do any W-O-R-K (horrible, four-letter word.).

He's looking for a way to maintain that M.O and to figure out how to keep from starving while still avoiding work.

So, he figured and he figured. And after a while he figured out a genius plan. Desperation gave birth to a creative brainstorm that was wonderfully opportunistic.<sup>4</sup>

#### **The Manager's Ingenious Plan (vv. 4-7)**

*A self-protecting brainstorm (v. 4)*

**[4] 'I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'**

The point of the scheme is to provide for his needs when the roof caves in on his comfortable life. He is going to arrange things so that he'll be supported by "**people**" who will be glad to help him.

Here is what he dreamed up.

*The plan in action (vv. 5-7)*

He called everyone who owed his boss any money to a secret meeting with a very shady agenda.

Let the reader beware!

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<sup>4</sup> I have read, "*anxiety is the essential condition of intellectual creativity.*" Maybe that is why cramming for exams works so well. (not that it worked for me...)

Just because this story is found in the Bible and just because Jesus is telling the story, don't try to make this manager a model of morality. He is as dishonest as the day is long.

He didn't call these debtors in to ask them for jobs or to ask them for prayer. He called them all together to place them in his debt.

**[5] "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'**

The man answered, **[6a] "A hundred jugs of oil."**

That was a lot of olive oil. In first-century Israel, a *jug* (or *bath*) of oil equaled about nine gallons / thirty-four liters.<sup>5</sup>

So, this first debtor owed about nine hundred gallons of olive oil to the rich man. The manager told this debtor, **[6b] 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'**

No, of course the just-fired manager had no authority to do this.

But he's not concerned about doing the right thing. Integrity is the last thing he's concerned about. And he couldn't have cared less about protecting his boss' interests. He was out to protect his own hide.

I suspect that the other debtors were standing around watching this first deal with keen interest, hoping for the same deal. And sure enough, the dishonest manager repeated the same gimmicky scheme with them all.

**[7] "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' and he said, 'A hundred kors of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'**

The manager was going to need friends - soon! - and he's buying them up as fast as he can.

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<sup>5</sup> The word for "measure" is taken from the Hebrew word for daughter, (Hebrew - *bat*) implying that the amount of water a young woman could carry from the well to her home became standardized as the *measure*.

We don't know how many debtors there were, or how much they each owed. But we are to understand that they all had their debts substantially cut.

By the end of the day, I'm betting that they were all feeling very friendly toward the dishonest manager.

I mean, how would you feel toward someone who, with a stroke, reduced your total indebtedness by 50%? Grateful? Friendly? Open to helping him out? Sure!

After this scheming, the manager now has "*people*" who will welcome him into their homes when he is unemployed.

There is one final scene in this parable we've got to see. It's the "exit interview" between the manager and the boss.

### **The Boss' Surprising Response (v. 8a)**

Over the years of his employ, this manager has cost his boss lots of money by squandering his master's wealth. More recently, his debt-reducing plan had done even more damage to his boss' net worth.

But as Jesus ends this parable the rich man is not angry.

I picture the dishonest manager reclining in his boss' office chair with his feet on the coffee table, filing his fingernails, and smiling ear to ear. He is no longer afraid of the future because he knows that he will be taken care of.

While giving his former manager a knowing smile, the boss shakes his head. This is what Jesus said: **[8a] "And his master complimented the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly."**

Or "*You son of a gun, you did it to me again.*"

The manager acted shrewdly, *opportunistically*. And THAT is Jesus' parable.

In this parable, the boss is the minor character. We know that he was wealthy, and we've seen that he was a man of action.

And just now we've learned that he recognized and commended creativity when he saw it, even when the creativity was exercised to his disadvantage.

But it is the manager who is the focus of Jesus' closing comments as He now explains the parable to us.

Backing out of story-telling mode, it is now Jesus who commends the dishonest manager.

Jesus is going to teach us spiritual lessons based on the actions of the dishonest manager.<sup>6</sup>

### **Righteous Opportunism (vv. 8b-9)**

#### **A Word to the Wise (v. 8b)**

**[8b] "For the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light."**

Now, we might understand Jesus to be saying, "*Business people are more shrewd in their business dealings than non-business people.*"

Maybe. But that wouldn't be very profound. It would be like saying that owls see in the dark better than people do, or that fish swim better than cats.

More likely, He is saying something like this: "*People who are immersed in the affairs of how to get along in the world are better at pushing their agendas forward than believers are at pushing God's purposes forward.*"

And, if I can add a little color to those lines, I think Jesus is also saying that people who aren't spiritually minded at all are frequently

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<sup>6</sup> Bible scholar Darrell Bock writes, "Luke 16:8 is perhaps the most difficult verse in the entire Gospel of Luke."

more enthusiastic and more opportunistic about promoting their agenda than believers are in promoting the Lord's agenda.

Opportunity came to the dishonest manager in the form of unemployment. He answered that challenge with creativity, twisting the situation to his benefit.

And opportunities come to us to press the good news of Jesus into our world. Those opportunities come in the form of a casual conversation or even in a crisis that demands a response.

These are all opportunities knocking. And we are to answer that "knock" with creativity, twisting the situation to Jesus' purposes.

Jesus wants you and me to imitate the manager. Not for his dishonesty. We are to be as creative and shrewd in living for and speaking about Jesus as the manager was about solving his unemployment problem.

If you're not drawn to that way of looking at the parable, and if you think that my interpretation gives too much credit to the dishonest manager, brace yourself for what Jesus says next.

### **The Best Friends Money Can Buy (v. 9a)**

***[9a] "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness..."***

The manager in the parable made friends by the use of money.

When he provided kickbacks to those who owed his boss money, he knew that out of gratitude they would take care of him when he had nowhere else to go.

Jesus says we - His followers - are to do the same thing.

Again, He is not suggesting that we do our friends a dishonest favor so we can blackmail them into helping us when our backs are against the wall.

He is speaking to opportunities that are all around us to share God's love by the use of our resources - our resources of time and energy, and yes, cold hard cash.

When we lovingly sharing our material wealth with others, we open doors for the Gospel.

### **Eternal Dividends from Earthy Investments (v. 9)**

***[9] And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it is all gone, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings."***

So, what in the world does that mean? And who in the world are "**they**"?

Well, here's what I think. I think that "**they**" are people who are far from God whom we bless and befriend by the use of our money.<sup>7</sup>

And if I'm right, this is what Jesus is saying:

*"Use every resource you have at your disposal - including \$\$\$ - to make friends for yourself. Invest materially in people. Of course, money, and everything it can buy will fail.*

*"But **"when [the money] is all gone"**<sup>8</sup> - and it will eventually be all gone! - the investments you have made in people will be compounded, yielding eternal dividends.*

*"There will be a host of people waiting to welcome you into heaven. And some of them will be there because you showed love to them on earth, by being a material witness. They trusted the loving Christ they saw in you."*

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<sup>7</sup> Some say that "**they**" refer to angels (although I don't know where they get that idea.). Others are of the opinion that a better translation would be a simple, impersonal, "**that you may be received.**" Literally, it is "**they will receive you.**"

<sup>8</sup> Richard Trench reads this phrase "**that when you fail**" and makes it equivalent to "**when you die.**" But grammatically, the statement is better understood, "**that when IT fails,**" that is, "**when money fails.**"

Does that sound crass? *“Use money to make friends.”*

It is not crass at all. It puts money and material possessions in their proper place.

Some time when you want a fascinating Bible study, survey Jesus’ teaching about wealth. You’ll find that He always blasted the use of spiritual things to gain material advantage. That was the sin of the Pharisees.

Then you’ll see that He always applauded the use of material things to bring spiritual blessing to others.

Yes, it’s crass and ugly to use your friends to make money. It is precisely loving and perfectly right to use money to make friends and to bless those friends in Jesus’ Name.

Before we consider some practical takeaways from this parable, I’d like for us all to listen to what Jesus says next.

He’s still talking about money. And the point of what follows is that if we’re going to apply His parable wholeheartedly, we’ll need to “get” this. First, a thought about the relative value of money.

### **The Parable’s Follow-Up: Money, 101**

#### **Money’s Just a Little Thing (vv. 10-12)**

***[10] “The one who is faithful in a very little thing is also faithful in much; and the one who is unrighteous in a very little thing is also unrighteous in much.***

***[11] Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth<sup>9</sup>, who will entrust the true wealth to you? [12] And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”***

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<sup>9</sup> *“The wealth of unrighteousness”* (often translated *“unrighteous mammon”*) is not material things which are intrinsically unrighteous because they are material but are *“unrighteous”* in comparison to the *“true riches.”* (v. 11)

There are all kinds of nuggets to take away from this gold mine of wisdom from Jesus:

- He speaks about responsibility.
- He speaks about faithfulness.
- He speaks about graduating from small things to big things, and from caring for the things of another to being given things of your own.

But here’s what I want us to notice out of Jesus’ words here. Look at what He identifies as the small stuff. He refers to money (*“unrighteous wealth”*) as a *“very little thing.”*

In the grand scheme of things, money is minor. It is a tool that can be used to accomplish big things. But wealth is not a big thing.

Neither wealth nor its lack determines happiness. Wealth is not an indicator of integrity. The wealthy and the poor can be crabby. Both selfishness and love can grow in the hearts of the poor and of the rich.

God is a big thing. The eternal soul of every person you’ve ever met is a big thing. Money? Not so much.

First, Jesus wants us to see the relative importance of money. Second, He wants us to see that money is a great servant and a terrible master.

#### **Money’s a Terrible Master (v. 13)**

***[13] “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”***

Truer words have never been uttered. Trying to give allegiance to two masters at the same time is crazy making.

And we who have received God’s grace in Jesus owe Him our allegiance. We owe money and the things money can buy nothing.

Jesus is Lord. And Jesus is alerting each of us to the danger of trying to tightrope along in life, giving our allegiance to God AND money. It won't work.

Jesus' message to the disciples to whom He gave this parable and to all of us here today is to use our money and every other resource we have to serve our Lord.

So, how are we to respond to Jesus' parable?

### **Conclusion:**

Here's the exciting assignment that comes with the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward: We are to serve the Lord Jesus by befriending people in His Name for eternity's sake.

OK. How will we respond to that assignment? Well, if we keep on reading in Luke, we will see one potential response.

The parable and the teaching on money were given to the disciples. (See verse 1).

But standing a little distance away, eavesdropping, were the Pharisees. Listen to the Pharisees' response.

*One terrible response to this parable...*

***[14] Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and were ridiculing Him.***

That is really not surprising.

The kind of life Jesus urges here, where we keep a loose grip on material possessions doesn't seem practical in 2022 and it didn't seem "practical" in the cold, hard cash world of first century Israel.

You and I are currently living in a time of high inflation, rising interest rates, a plunging market, and global economic uncertainty and volatility.

Given all of that, it is easy to slip into a hoarding mindset, to live as if money was all-important. That's why Jesus pointedly referred to it as "***a very little thing.***" He is reminding us that there are lots of things way more important than money.

It is easy to slip into the mindset that says, "*I can serve Jesus fully AND still full devote myself to money and stuff.*" Jesus says, "No." You can't fully serve two masters.

It is so easy to slip into these wrong ways of thinking and living. So easy that this parable offers an opportunity this morning.

For everyone who has received God's grace through faith in Jesus and may have forgotten what is most important in life and who may have even forgotten who is Lord of all, today provides an opportunity to confess and to repent.

Keeping in mind all that we have seen, let's each of us turn reflective and ask God to search our hearts.

If any of us have slipped into the damaging mindset of over-valuing money or undervaluing the Lordship of Jesus, this short, honest prayer is for us:

I confess to you, Jesus, my Savior, the One to whom I owe everything, that I have often put money and the pursuit of money above serving You. I turn from that now and I turn to You.

I confess that You, Jesus, are Lord of all. I submit myself to You as MY Lord.

And I have tried to walk the tightrope of giving my allegiance to You AND to money. In this moment, I see the folly of that, and I pledge my allegiance to You alone.

I release my grip on my money and my things and offer it to You. Please use all of my resources for Your purposes.

If our response has looked like the response of the Pharisees, we repent and look to another model for applying what we have seen in Scripture today.

It is to the eternally superior response of the first disciples that we turn now. And we'll look at it more fully next Sunday.

*An eternally superior response to the parable...*

As we've already noted, when Jesus gave this parable, He was addressing the disciples.

And, if you were to trace through the book of Acts you would find those first disciples putting the ideas of this parable into shoe leather.

They were generous, compassionate, and giving. They invested heavily in people.

And the result was just what Jesus said it would be.

Many, many people turned to faith in Christ through the double-edged witness of the early Christians who *talked about* Jesus and who *loved like* Jesus. Their lives became walking advertisements for life with God.

For you and me, figuring out how to apply this parable is really one of the simpler assignments in Scripture.

We apply this parable when we:

- send money to support missionaries who are taking the Gospel to people who have never heard.
- use our money to send Bibles to those who don't have access to them.
- use our financial resources to support local Christian works.
- give money to support the work of this church.

- use our money to help those all around us who are in material need.

Jesus wants our lives to be so marked by generosity, that those who have never tasted God's grace, will taste it from us, whetting their appetite for His banquet feast.