

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Sharpening Discipleship's Focus

(Learning from the Gospel of Luke)

Material Witnesses - Lessons from a Crook Study #5

(Luke 16:1-14)

Introduction: Putting my money where my mouth is...

I read yesterday that an estimated \$1.4 billion will be spent on today's game by people gambling on all aspects of the New Orleans Super Bowl LIX. They'll be betting on the game itself, the halftime show, and, probably, on how much will actually be bet.

A lot of these bets will be placed by non-fans who just want to get in on the action.

But some bets will be placed by Chiefs and Eagles fans who are putting their money where their trash-talking mouths have been for the past two weeks leading up to The Game. They're going to prove their fanaticism by putting money down.

Now, don't misunderstand. I'm not challenging anybody here to a bet. I'm not encouraging gambling.

But what if I was? What if I was saying that using the people who prove that that they're true fans by betting on their team can serve as a fine opening illustration to a sermon about following Jesus?

Would that be wrong? Should I have found a different opening illustration this morning?

Or is it possible to wring a lesson about discipleship from a dicey practice like gambling?

Today, by telling a very dicey parable, Jesus challenges you and me to put feet to our claim that we love people who are far from God.

Setting the context:

We find all of the parables of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.¹ Some of the parables are only included by one of the books. The one we're looking at today we only find in Luke.

When Jesus gave this parable - and it was targeted to His disciples - scholars believe that He in the region of Perea (an area just north of Judea on the eastern side of the Jordan River) and was about to head south to Jerusalem for the last time.

He's going there to die for you and for me on the cross. Jesus is sober-minded about what's in front of Him and is speaking from the heart to His disciples about things that mean a lot to Him.²

That's the setting for this parable. And it's a parable you and I can easily identify with this because it's a story filled with practices that we hear about in our own day.

There is a dishonest employee, kick-backs, and a price-fixing scheme. Jesus is going to use THIS story to give a life-changing lesson about loving people who are far from God.

Dishonest Opportunism (16:1-8a)

A Cheating Manager, from Happy to Unemployed (vv. 1-2)

A cheater - discovered (v. 1)

The backstory to this parable is that there was a wealthy man who had hired a manager to oversee his business affairs.

The manager was not rich. He simply managed the riches of his boss. His sole responsibility was to look after his boss' resources.³

¹ For some reason, the Apostle John didn't include any parables in his Gospel.

² See Appendix at the end for a list of passages in Luke that highlight Jesus' heart for lost people.

In the first century, managers like this one had a lot of latitude in how they carried out their responsibilities. Evidently, this manager also had very little oversight. That was a problem.

[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.”

The manager was wasting his boss’ wealth. We can picture him lavishing wealth on himself.

He was enjoying the lifestyle of the rich and famous, without being rich or famous, by means of his boss’ money.

When the boss discovered what his manager was doing, he was not amused.

The cheater - fired! (v. 2)

[2] “And he (the rich man) summoned him (the manager) and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management...’

Understandably, he was really upset by being taken advantage of by a trusted employee. So, the end of this short interview was the end of the manager’s job.

He fired the manager. ‘...**you can no longer be manager!**’

And that manager knew that he was guilty as charged. He didn’t have a leg to stand on.

But that was not the end of Jesus’ story. It continued as the Lord turns our attention from the justifiable anger of the rich man to the painful (even if self-inflicted) plight of the manager.

He was, all of a sudden, concerned with survival. And he didn’t only want to survive. Even though he has lost his job, he still wanted to maintain the lifestyle to which had become accustomed.

Since the gravy train won’t be stopping at his place anymore, he had to take stock of his situation.

A Cheating Manager, Now Worried (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.’

Yes, he was concerned. But it wasn’t at all that he was sorry for his sinful ways. He was a dishonest accountant who is now forced to think about what he should do with hard times just around the corner.

His M.O. had 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.

Now he’s got to figure out a way to keep from starving AND he definitely still doesn’t want to work. So, he came up with a genius plan.

We’ve heard that “*necessity is the mother of invention.*” So, we aren’t surprised that this guy’s necessity gave birth to a wonderfully creative and opportunistic plan.

The Cheating 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 manager designed a scheme to provide for his needs when the roof caved in on his comfortable life. He will arrange things so that he’ll be supported by “**people**” who will be glad to help him.

Here is his plan.

The plan in action (vv. 5-7)

³ The Greek word that is used here for “manager” is the word from which we derive our English word “*economics*.”

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

Spoiler alert: Just because we read this story in the Bible and just because Jesus is telling it, don't try to make this manager a model of morality. He was as dishonest as the day is long. He probably would have gambled on the Super Bowl.

He didn't call these debtors in to ask them for jobs. He didn't want them to pray for him. 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 first debtor answered, **[6a] “A hundred jugs of oil.”**

Now that was a lot of olive oil. In first century Israel, a “jug” of oil equaled about six gallons.⁴

So, this first debtor owed a lot of oil to the rich man. The manager told him, **[6b] “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’**

And just like that, the spreadsheet now reads, “*Debtor #1 owes fifty measures of oil.*”

Of course, the manager had no authority to do this.

But he wasn't concerned about doing the right thing. Integrity was never his strong suit. The only thing he was concerned about was protecting his own hide.

I suspect that the other debtors were standing around watching this first deal with keen interest. They were all hoping that the manager would do the same for them.

⁴ 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*.

Sure enough, **[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.’**

We don't know how many debtors there were, or how much they owed - only that the manager lowered each one's debt burden.

So, by the end of the day, all of them were feeling friendly toward the manager. I mean, how would you feel toward someone who, with a stroke of a pen, reduced your total indebtedness by 50%?

Grateful? Open to helping him out? Sure! The manager needed friends. So, he bought some friends as fast as he could.

And now he has “*people*” who will welcome him into their homes when he could easily be on the street.

There is one final scene in this parable we've got to see. It's the “exit interview” between the manager and the boss. I would have loved to have been there for this meeting.

Commended By the Cheated Boss (v. 8a)

Over the years of his employ, this manager has cost his boss lots of money.

He had been guilty of shady deals and money wasting. His recent debt-reducing plan had done even more damage to his boss' net worth.

Surprisingly, as Jesus ended this parable the rich man wasn't angry at all.

I picture the manager sitting in his boss' office with his feet up on the coffee table and grinning from ear to ear. He has no fear of the future because he knows that he will be taken care of.

The boss shakes his head with a smile and, Jesus tells us, **[8a] “And his master complimented the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly.”** (“*You son of a gun. You did it to me again.*”

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

There were two characters in this parable. First, the boss. All we know about him is that he was wealthy (he had a manager) and that he was a man of action (he immediately fired the dishonest manager).

Now we know that he recognized and commended creativity and ingenuity, even when it was exercised to his own hurt.

But the boss is the minor of the two players here. 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, Jesus commended the crook. Yes, Jesus is actually going to teach us a spiritual lesson through what the manager did.⁵

Jesus-Centered 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, it might be that Jesus was saying, "*Business people are more shrewd in their business dealings than non-business people in their business dealings.*"

That would be like saying, "*Owls see in the dark better than people do.*" or "*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 (like the manager) are very often better at pushing their agendas forward than God's people are at pushing His purposes forward.*"

I wonder if Jesus was also saying that people who aren't spiritually minded are often more passionate about promoting their agenda than believers are passionate about promoting God's agenda.

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

In the same way, opportunities for pressing the Gospel into our world come to us in a normal conversation, a person in need, 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.

You and I are to imitate the manager. Of course, NOT for his dishonesty. No. We are to be as creative in speaking about Jesus as he was about solving his need for housing.

I think that's an exciting and a challenging challenge from an somewhat strange little parable. If you agree, brace yourself for what the Lord 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..."

Boil it all down, and we can say that the manager in the parable made friends by the use of money.

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

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

And again, He is not saying that we are to get our friends involved in some crooked scheme so we can blackmail them into helping us when our backs are against the wall.

⁵ Bock writes, "Luke 16:8 is perhaps the most difficult verse in the entire Gospel."

He is telling us to take advantage of opportunities that are all around us by the use of our resources - our resources of time and energy, and yes, our cold hard cash - for the Gospel.

Lovingly share resources of all kinds with others and watch as doors open 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.

It is my opinion that the “they” of that verse are people who are far from God whom we bless and befriend by the use of our money.⁶

Here is my paraphrase of Jesus’ words:

“Use every resource at your disposal - including \$\$\$ - to make friends for yourself. Invest your resources of time and energy and material wealth in people. Of course, money, and everything it can buy will fail. But ‘when it fails’⁷ - and it will! - 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 because you showed love to them on earth, and they trusted the loving Christ they saw in you.”

Does it sound crass to say, “Use money to make friends.”? It is not crass at all. It puts money and material possessions in their place.

Some time when you want a fascinating Bible study, survey Jesus’ teaching about wealth.

One thing you’ll find is that He always blasted people who used spiritual things to gain material advantage. That was the sin of the Pharisees.

⁶ Some say that “they” refer to angels (I see no evidence pointing to this 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.”

⁷ Richard Trench reads this phrase “that when you fail” and makes it equivalent to “when you die.” Grammatically, the statement is better understood, “that when IT fails,” that is, “when money fails.”

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

Yes, it’s crass to use friends to make money. It is loving to use money to make friends. It’s godly to bless those friends in Jesus’ Name with the things money can buy.

Before we consider some practical takeaways from this parable, let’s listen to what Jesus said next, after the parable.

He was still talking about money. He knew that if we are going to apply His parable, we’ll need to “get” what He says here.

The Parable’s Postscript (Money, 101)

Money: Just a Little Thing (vv. 10-12)

[10] “The one who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also 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, 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?”

There are all kinds of nuggets to take away from this gold mine of wisdom from Jesus about money.

He speaks about responsibility. He speaks about the need for faithfulness.

But here’s what I want us to notice out of Jesus’ words today. Look at what He identifies as the small stuff. He calls money (“**unrighteous wealth**”) 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 itself is not a big thing.

- Wealth or its lack doesn’t determine happiness.
- Wealthy people can be crabby and so can non-wealthy people.
- Selfishness or love can co-exist with poverty or with wealth.

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

So, Jesus wants us to come to grips with the relative unimportance of money.

He also wants us to beware of the danger of money. While it is a wonderful servant, money is a terrible master.

Money: A Terrible Master, a Wonderful Servant (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."⁸

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. We owe our unalloyed allegiance to Jesus.

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

So, as Jesus was challenging His disciples when He gave this parable, so He is challenging you and me today, who have received His grace: Submit to Jesus. And use your money and all your other resources to serve Jesus by serving people in His Name.

Now, this parable we've seen today brings with it a very exciting assignment. We are to use our personal resources to befriend people in Jesus' Name and for Jesus' sake.

⁸ The word translated "**wealth**" here is the Greek word "**mammon.**" (*mamwna*) It definitely refers to material wealth. But the thought is not that wealth is, intrinsically unrighteous, but that it is not unusual that unrighteous people use wealth for wicked purposes. As Jesus makes clear, "**material wealth**" is, in comparison to "**true riches,**" devoid of righteousness. Compare with Matthew 6:24.

How will we respond to that assignment? Well, if we keep on reading, we will see one possible response.

Conclusion:

One possible, terrible response to this parable...

As we saw at the beginning, the parable and the teaching on money were given to the disciples. (See verse 1). Evidently, standing a little distance away, eavesdropping, were some Pharisees.

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

Luke writes as if it was common knowledge that the Pharisees loved money.

I would have hoped for better for them. But it makes sense, given some of the things Jesus had to say about them that they would be materialists. Pragmatists. Money lovers.

And to Pharisees, Jesus' call to keep a loose grip on money and possessions would seem impractical, nutty, foolish, in the hard-scrabble world of first century Israel.

Such a call can seem the same to us in 2025.

It is easy to slip into the mindset that says, "*I can serve Jesus fully AND still devote myself to the pursuit of what Jesus calls "the unrighteousness of wealth."*"

Jesus says, "*No. You can't.*"

One reason that we might try to serve two masters is that we allow ourselves to believe that money is really, really important.

Remember. Jesus called it "**a very little thing.**" He says that there are a few things that are waaaay more important than money.

Since it is easy to slip into a Pharisaic / “having money is the biggest game in town” way of thinking, and since I have often slipped into this way of thinking, let’s camp out here for a bit.

To all who are here today who have believed in Jesus and have received God’s gift of eternal life AND have forgotten what is most important, here is an opportunity to reflect and to confess.

We would confess to those who have not yet received the grace of God.

We who believe have often been guilty of behaving as if money was the most important thing around. We haven’t used our money as well as we could to meet needs in Jesus’ Name and to make friends and to bless friends.

We’re really sorry about this.

We would want to say to those who don’t yet know Jesus is that what we really believe is that you are worth more than our money and our things. We care more about you than we care about our money.

We just forget sometimes.

We are remembering now. And we intend to remember and to use the resources God has provided us to do good to you.

We intend to lavish value on you by our words, our time, and our service so that you’ll see that we love you - and that Jesus love you.

We also confess to You, Jesus, our Savior, and the One to whom we owe everything, that we have often put money and the pursuit of money above serving You.

We turn from that now. We have tried to walk the tightrope of giving allegiance to You AND to money. Today we see the folly of that and pledge our allegiance to You alone.

If our response to your parable today has looked like the response of the Pharisees, we repent.

Now, to wrap up, let’s look to another model for applying what we have seen in Scripture today. It is the infinitely better response of the first disciples.

An infinitely and eternally better response to the parable...

When Jesus gave this parable, while the Pharisees heard and made fun of Him, He was addressing the disciples. (See verse 1) It was given pointedly to them.

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

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

In Acts, chapter 6, there was a great conflict in the church at Jerusalem because the Hellenistic Jews were being overlooked in the daily service of food.

Well, the church realized how important it was to get this matter resolved, so that these women’s needs were met.

And we read that after the feeding of the widows issue was resolved, ***[Acts 6:7]...a great many of the [Jewish] priests were becoming obedient to the faith.***

The Jewish leaders saw the material witness the early believers in Jesus were, and the result was just what Jesus said it would be.

They 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 one of the simpler assignments in Scripture.

We are applying this parable when we:

- participated in the recent Double Matching Initiative which allowed our church to provide about \$200,000 to local and global ministries outside the ministries of Northwest.

- send money to support missionaries who are taking the Gospel to foreign lands.
- give money to support the work of our church.
- use our money to provide for those who are in material need.

Having neighbors over for dinner, loaning tools to people on the street, providing rides to friends without transportation, and bringing meals to the sick is what this parable is talking about.

So is giving groceries to the Food Pantry and designating money to the Benevolence Fund.

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.

4:14-30 - Jesus' first recorded message to His friends and neighbors at the Nazareth synagogue where He quotes Isaiah 61's promise of a ministry to the poor, captives, blind, and oppressed. (7:18-23 - carrying out this ministry was proof that Jesus told John the Baptist's followers to tell John about.)

4:31-37 - Jesus' heart for the lost extended to those who were in need in familiar places, like synagogues, in which there was a demon-possessed man from whom He cast out the demon.

5:12-16 - Jesus' heart for the outcast and unclean is seen by His cleansing a leper. (Also by His curing a woman with a twelve year-long hemorrhage; 8:43-48)

5:27-39 - Jesus' heart for the sinner was seen in His calling Levi / Matthew to follow Him and then in attending a big reception at Levi's house where there were also tax collectors and others identified by the Pharisees and scribes as "*sinner*s."

7:1-10 - Jesus' healing of the slave of a centurion in Capernaum showed His heart for the Gentiles.

7:36-50 - Jesus' saving a notoriously sinful woman after she anointed Him with expensive perfume speaks to His love for the outcast and for the sinful.

8:26-39 - Jesus' casting the "legion" of demons from the Gerasene demoniac shows His love for unclean Gentiles.

14:12-4 - Jesus showed His love for the least, the last, and the lost by instructing those who throw parties to invite these (the least, lost, and last), rather than those who can invite them back.

15:1-32 - Jesus' three parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son(s) shows His heart for those who are lost and who return to God.

17:11-18 - He cleansed ten lepers, one of whom was a Samaritan.

19:1-10 - Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus, a hated tax-collector, and brought him to salvation.

19:45-48 - He cleaned out the part of the temple precincts reserved for Gentiles.

Appendix: Indicators of Jesus' lost for the lost as seen in Luke's Gospel

3:23-38 - The genealogy of Jesus in Luke traces His line back to Adam, a universal all-of-mankind view of Jesus' lineage, as opposed to Matthew's, which was to prove His descent from Abraham, the first Jew.