

Proper 20C
Luke 16:1-13
September 21, 2025

“Debts and Dishonest Managers”
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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. ² 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.’ ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ 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.’ ⁸ 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. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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.”

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The strongman at a circus squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He then said to the audience, “I will offer \$200 to anyone in the audience who can squeeze another drop from this lemon.” A thin scholarly looking woman came forward, picked up the lemon, strained hard and managed to get a drop. The strongman was amazed. He paid the woman and asked, “What is the secret of your strength?” “Practice,” the woman answered. “I was the treasurer of a Lutheran church for 32 years!”¹

Some people really do know how to squeeze the very last drop out of you, don’t they? Unfortunately for him, that wasn’t the case with the manager in the parable Jesus told from Luke’s gospel. Jesus liked to talk about money. In fact, one out of every seven verses in Luke’s gospel deals with money. He talked about money more than he talked about heaven or hell—in fact, more than heaven and hell combined!

Today’s tale centers on a certain manager. The boss was unhappy with his work performance and decided an audit was in order. Knowing he was about to be sacked, the manager worked to build some good will among the locals and he collected the boss’ debts at dramatically reduced rates, cutting some by half. Now the most popular guy in town on account of his new-found generosity, the boss wasn’t angry with the *dishonest* manager; he was impressed! The parable concludes with the boss praising the dishonest manager’s shrewdness.

I’m not going to lie—and I’ve made that a general policy with you—this is a weird story. It’s weird enough on its own, but it’s even weirder because Jesus joined the boss in praising the dishonest manager! He went

¹ “Don’t Mess with Church Ladies,” Vancopayments.com: <https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/blog/funny-stories-about-tithes-and-offering>.

on to say some stuff about children of light, making friends through dishonest wealth, true riches, and the impossibility of serving God and wealth. But Jesus actually praised the dishonest manager, commending him to the disciples as an example of shrewdness for them to follow. Jesus *had* promised to make them fishers of people and it feels like he was telling them to use whatever bait they wanted as long as they reel in the fish.

The whole thing just kinda leaves me feeling squeamish. It's a bit like those prosperity preachers that promise health, heaven, and a new car if you repent and give a sizeable donation to their ministry. Would Jesus praise them? After all, their methods work and they seem to reel in a lot of fish, I guess. But no—I don't think Jesus would praise them. I don't think Jesus was advocating deception to get converts. It doesn't track with the rest of what we know about him in the gospels.

Perhaps the key to understanding the parable is in the part that it leaves out. What happened next to this dishonest manager? I'm willing to bet the boss still fired him. And when he did, the manager would have had all kinds of new friends to help and support him until he was back on his feet. The money, the generosity, the debts forgiven all served a purpose. Perhaps Jesus' message was really a simple one: that money was just a means to an end and that money used to build relationships, to cancel debts, to care for others, is money well and rightly spent. We should use our resources as shrewdly and wisely, as the manger did, but to a nobler end than just accumulating wealth. Because if wealth is our goal, it will end up being our master.

At this point, rather than going in the obvious direction, I'll save the stewardship sermon for October. I'd like to focus on method the manager employed to ingratiate himself to his boss' debtors: he forgave debts. The fact that they weren't his debts to forgive is beside the point. He forgave debts. While on the surface Jesus' teaching here is about money, it's also about forgiveness. And that's something else Jesus expects from us.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus taught the disciples to pray, he said, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It's worth noting that Jesus did not say, "forgive us our debts as we contemplate forgiveness, as we consider forgiving, as we work on forgiveness." Jesus' prayer assumed that forgiveness is a given—and not just for outstanding financial responsibilities. He was referring to the shortcomings for which we hold ourselves and others accountable. He was referring to pardoning an offense, the absolution of guilt, and the exercise of mercy, to ourselves and to others—to focusing on love and letting the rest go.

In this *quid pro quo* world of ours, forgiveness is a radical thing. He taught his disciples to ask for it, to dole it out (seven times seventy times, if necessary), and he even begged for it on his executioners' behalf. Forgiveness mattered to Jesus. And I can think of few other things that should matter as much to us right now.

Forgiveness should matter to us because it *is* good for us. Medical and psychological professionals tell us that, "People who forgive show less depression, anger and stress and more hopefulness so it can help save on the wear and tear on our organs, reduce the wearing out of the immune system and allow people to feel more vital."² Forgiveness should matter to us because it's good for others: for our churches, our relationships, our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. Forgiveness gives us a chance at wholeness, a chance at peace.

While forgiveness doesn't always erase consequences, it does allow us to move on without carrying the weight of regret, or hatred, or anger, or betrayal. Those things may still sting, but they won't fester. Healing becomes a real possibility.

Gathered together here today and going forth once more, may we use our resources well and forgive freely. Amen.

² Frederic Luskin, Ph.D. "Forgive for Good," San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003.