

Today in View of Tomorrow

Introduction

The Text

¹ He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ ³ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management 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 removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ ⁷ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” ¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. (Luke 16:1–14)

A Difficult Text

A. You may already be sensing it, even after a simple read through, but what we have in front of us this morning, is widely regarded as one of the most difficult texts in all the Bible to understand aright. One commentator outlines at least 16 different interpretations that have given to this single parable over the years.

1. Even still, at the end of the day, while some of the secondary matters of interpretation and things are a bit complicated and debatable, I really don’t think the essential message is that difficult to grasp. As we go along, I hope you come to see that as well.

B. There are three things on the agenda for this morning: (1) Getting Straight the Story (vv. 1-7); (2) Airing out the Question (v. 8a); and (3) Making Plain the Point (vv. 8b-14).

(1) Getting Straight the Story (vv. 1-7)

What Sort of Man Is This?

- A. The first thing to do here is simply make sure we get the story itself straight. And as I do this I want to focus in on this “manager” in particular and make sure we’re clear on the sort of man that he is.

Verse 1: Wasteful and Irresponsible

- A. So, there in v. 1, we are introduced to a wealthy landowner. And often it would be the case in these days that men of such stature would appoint others as managers or stewards over their estates to care for the daily affairs and oversee things on their behalf.
 - 1. And that’s what the main character in our parable has been commissioned to do. But we learn there at the end of v. 1 that he’s doing a terrible job: “this man was wasting his [the rich man’s] possessions.”
 - a. So here’s the first thing we come to learn of this manager: he is wasteful, irresponsible, unfaithful, careless, frivolous . . . things like these.

Verses 2-3: Slothful and Proud

- A. Well, the landowner hears of it and lets this man know that he’s soon to be removed from his post. He gives him time to get his accounts and things together, but that is the end of it.
- B. Now the steward, sensing the urgency of the situation, the impending crisis looming on the horizon, begins to strategize and scheme. He knows that once he is removed from his position and place in the house he will have nothing for himself and his family—nowhere to live, no means of provision. So he takes a quick survey of his various options: “And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg’” (v. 3).
 - 1. Two more things we learn of him here. For one thing, he is soft and, perhaps even slothful. “I am not strong enough to dig.” “I’ve never had to work like that. And I don’t want to.”
 - 2. But we also see something of his pride here too don’t we? “I am ashamed to beg.” The idea is: “It’s beneath me. I will not stoop to such a level. I will not be seen with the other desperate, incompetent beggars. I’d just as soon die before I’d ever hold out a cup for someone else’s coins.”

Verses 4-7: Self-Centered and Manipulative

- A. So the portrait of this man is filling out and it’s not a flattering image. And, really, it only gets worse.
- B. In v. 4 he hatches a plan. He’s going to reduce the debts owed to his master by others in hopes that it might put him in their good favor. The idea is that, when he’s lost his job and is out on the street, he can come knocking on these guys’ doors and say: “Hey there Jim. You remember when I cut your debt in half? Yeah, om, about that . . . you owe me. I’m moving in!”

1. The move here, it seems to me, is self-centered and manipulative. There's even something of embezzlement going on as he's misappropriating the master's funds and things to his own advantage.

C. This guy is a weasel. Are we clear on that yet?

(2) Airing out the Question (v. 8a)

The Master Commended?!

A. Now, all of this was simply to set us up for the first part of v. 8, because that's really where things start to get a bit confusing.

1. Because, after all of this nonsense, we would expect Jesus to say that the landowner comes with a vengeance against the manager and throws him out of his house in a fit of rage or something of the sort (cf. [Luke 12:46](#)).

B. But that's not what we see, is it?! Instead we come to v. 8 and read this: "[The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.](#)"

1. And we say: "Commended?! How can that be? Chastised, I should expect. Crucified, maybe so. But commended? Come again? How? Why?"

C. Well, if you noticed, we were told why. The dishonest manager was commended "[for his shrewdness.](#)"

1. Our English dictionary defines shrewd as "[the quality of having or showing good powers of judgment.](#)" In the Greek, it's derived from a word which means "[pertaining to understanding associated with insight and wisdom, sensible, thoughtful, prudent, wise](#)" (BDAG).

- a. So, again, we look at this man and we say: "Shrewd? Showing good powers of judgment? Understanding? Insight? Wisdom? Okay Jesus. Where is that?"

D. Well, certainly we must understand that Jesus is not here commending this man for his dishonesty. Far from it, as we shall soon see.

1. But I do think we must grant that, however corrupt this man is, he is indeed shrewd. In view of the approaching dilemma—namely, that he was going to lose his job and be kicked out onto the street—he did something to prepare for it. He ordered today's affairs in view of tomorrow's crisis. He made arrangements so that he would be ready to handle it.

- a. Here is the exemplary point. It's not what he decided to do per se, but that he decided to do something. He caught wind of impending trouble and ordered his life in light of it. Whatever else that may be, it is most certainly shrewd.

(3) Making Plain the Point (vv. 8b-14)

Transition towards Interpretation and Application

- A. So here I've already tipped my hand towards what I believe to be the proper interpretation and application of this parable. But now as we come to [vv. 8b-15](#), we reach the place in our text where Jesus Himself begins to transition us towards this in earnest.
 - 1. With the ["for"](#) there in the middle of [v. 8](#) He pulls us out from the world of this parable and starts to make plain for us His point in it all.
- B. Admittedly, there are still places of confusion in what He says next, so let me at least point out one observation from the context that's really going to guide and constrain my interpretation of these words.
 - 1. I wonder if you noticed. Near the very end of our text, after Jesus has shared the parable and drawn out His lesson for us from it, we see in [v. 14](#) the Pharisees reaction to it. Look at that again: ["The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him."](#)
- C. Now, here's why I bring this up. The Pharisees get what Jesus is saying. They are picking up what He is putting down. In other words, they understand how to interpret this text aright. And, whatever it is that Jesus is saying here, because they ["were lovers of money,"](#) they were troubled by it, they were shaken by it, they hated it . . . and they hated Him for saying it.
 - 1. Therefore, here's what we can conclude: we'll know we're on the right track if our interpretation of this text would be upsetting to the Pharisees particularly because they love money.
 - a. Frankly, we'll know we're on the right track, if those in this room who have an unhealthy attachment to and longing for money start to feel a bit uncomfortable, the heat gets turned up, you feel pressed in a corner, you don't like what I'm saying . . . you might even not like me!

An Ascending Staircase

- A. Now, as we dive into these next verses, it seems to me we enter upon a sort of ascending staircase as it were. Jesus' thought here really does seem to build on itself and take us somewhere quite profound. And I want to get there verse by verse, step by step. So let's approach it together that way.

Stairstep #1: Verse 8b

- A. Let's read the latter part of [v. 8](#) again together. After noting that the rich man commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, Jesus abruptly, even aggressively, pushes us towards the point He's trying to make in this: ["For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."](#)

- B. What we have here is a lesser-to-greater, a how-much-more, argument that we see Jesus often makes use of, even with some his other parables.
1. Perhaps the clearest example comes in [Luke 18:1-8](#) where He tells this parable about a widow and an unrighteous judge. Do you remember this? This widow keeps coming and begging this judge for justice, and he's not interested in helping at all. He doesn't care about her or her case or justice being served. But finally she so nags on him that he eventually does what she's requesting just to get her off his back.
 - a. And Jesus' point in this is: if even this corrupt, worldly, unrighteous judge will do what the widow is asking because she keeps asking and asking, how much more will your heavenly Father—who is righteous and good and delights to care for you—attend to and answer your prayers?! Don't lose hope in your praying!
- C. And that's the sort of thing He's doing with our parable this morning. If I could simply sum up what He is getting at here in [v. 8](#), I would put it like this: if even this worldly scoundrel, this “[son of this world](#)” (as Jesus refers to him), knows how to order his daily affairs in view of tomorrow and its coming crisis, how much more should the children of God, the “[sons of light](#)” (as Jesus calls them) be ordering their lives in view of eternity and the coming day of judgment?
1. And yet, I think His point is, they aren't. We so often aren't. These secular, worldly, unbelieving folks, are often better at applying this basic principle than we are.
- D. To be clear: He is certainly not saying that we should learn to cheat and swindle to make good for ourselves here.
1. He is saying that we ought to be prioritizing our life in view of the kingdom of God and the great realities of heaven and hell and sin and judgment and grace and redemption and God and His glory. Those ought to be the impending realities of tomorrow that constrain and compel and press in on the way we handle ourselves today!
 - a. And this is really what He brings out even more clearly for us next in [v. 9](#).

Stairstep #2: Verse 9

- A. Read it again: “[And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.](#)”
- B. In this verse, if you noticed, the earthly, temporary fixtures of the parable start to give way with concern for heavenly, eternal matters.
1. With the idea here of “[eternal dwellings](#)” we understand that we are coming into the realm of God's kingdom, of eternity, of heaven.
- C. Here Jesus explicitly ties this shrewdness that was commendable in the manager to us (cf. [vv. 4, 8a](#)). He used his money and job and things to make friends for himself who would welcome him when all else fell through. And Jesus is saying, in an analogical sort of way, so should we!

1. I think commentator Michael Wilcock provides a helpful summary for us on this point: “The steward was faced . . . with dismissal. The one thing that was certain in his future was that he would shortly find himself out of work (16:3). He had just one means of ensuring that when that day came he would not be stranded: his employer’s books were still, for the moment, under his control. Those books he tampered with, in such a way as to reduce greatly a number of debts owed to his employer, and thus to earn the gratitude of the various debtors, who in their turn could be relied on to help him when he had to leave his present sphere of work.
In the same way, one thing is certain in every man’s future: his ‘dismissal’ from his present sphere into the unknown regions of eternity. And one means is available for ensuring now that he will have ‘an eternal home’ (16:9, neb) to go to then: the right use of the opportunities of daily life” (TBST).
 - a. In other words, what you do now with this “unrighteous wealth” will, in some way, influence and ultimately determine what will happen to you then when you die and come to face God in eternity.
- D. The question we still have in this though, I know, is what exactly is meant by this talk of “unrighteous wealth.”
 1. Certainly we are not to think of Jesus here as somehow condoning our accumulation and use of wealth in an unrighteous manner. Such a notion has nothing to commend it in all the rest of the Bible.
 2. Rather, it seems to me that, by “unrighteous wealth,” Jesus is here referring to that wealth that exists and operates within the sphere of this unrighteous world—meaning: while money itself is not evil, it is part and parcel of this evil age. Hence, later in v. 11, it is contrasted with the “true riches [wealth]” that will characterize the age to come.
- E. Again, Wilcock is helpful on the matter: “In this passage [‘unrighteous wealth’] refer[s] not only to money, but to all the goods of this world, and indeed to everything that we have here but shall not be able to take with us into the next life. Although these things—your property, ability, time—belong to this life only, says Jesus, yet what will happen to you then, when you pass into that life, will depend on what you are doing with them here and now. Make sure that your use of them brings you into a fellowship of friends which will survive beyond death.”
- F. I love what he brings out there in that last line. And it’s worthy of a moment’s reflection. “Make sure that your use of them brings you into a fellowship of friends which will survive beyond death.”
 1. Here he highlights something in our passage that we are, perhaps, prone to read over in the midst of all the other confusing phrases and things. And that is that heaven is here described by Jesus as an eternal fellowship of friends.
 - a. And, of course, chief of all friendships is that friendship we have, in Christ, with God Himself! “I have called you friends” (John 15:15).
- G. You see, we often mistake material wealth as an end in itself. We act as if therein we will find some sort of fulfillment. But it doesn’t work that way. Our hearts don’t work that way. We long

ultimately, not for stuff, but for love. That's why you can be filthy rich . . . and miserable. Because you don't have relationships. You don't have love. You don't know God.

1. This is the sort of thing the author of Proverbs is getting at when he says: "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it" (Prov 15:17). It's not the stuff of this world that gives our lives meaning and our hearts satisfaction. It is relationships, friendships, love.
2. And this is why, I think, when Jesus tries to describe what our entrance into heaven will be like, He describes it as "enter[ing] into the joy of [our] master." "Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt 25:21).
 - a. Pause on that for a moment. Heaven is heaven, ultimately, not because there are streets of gold or mansions in the sky, or whatever else. Heaven is heaven because at long last we shall, in Christ, be fully received as a friend of God and we shall live together under the sunshine of His smiling face forever. "Enter into the joy of your master."
 - i. That's what the human heart is longing for. And that is what Jesus is saying we must now be living for.
- H. We get so caught up in our other worldly pursuits that we fail to prepare ourselves for eternity. And Jesus is saying among the children of light it must not be. Handle your worldly affairs in view of these heavenly realities. Release your money and stuff for kingdom purposes, in love for God and others, and in that way, as Peter says, "there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:11).
 1. Such is the essence of shrewdness!

Stairstep #3: Verses 10-12

- A. We take another step up into these matters now as we come to vv. 10-12. I'm going to take these three verses as a unit because the basic idea here is one and the same. It's the idea that all of life is stewardship of that which has been given us by God.
- B. V. 10 begins the idea by saying that the kind of steward we are with a little will be the kind of steward we are with a lot. God often tests the heart of a person with a little before entrusting them with more.
- C. V. 11 continues this idea but puts a bit more of a sharper point on it: "If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"
 1. Here now we see plainly, first, the contrast between the wealth of this age that is only temporary and that of the next that is eternal and everlasting.
 2. But, again, there is more than contrast here. There is a sort of connection of sorts if you noticed it. How is it that God will determine if you are worthy of being entrusted with the "true riches" of the age to come?

- a. Well, the logic is plain: He determines it on the basis of how you handled the riches and possessions and wealth of this present age.
- D. V. 12 really gives this idea of stewardship its clearest expression: “And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?”
 1. The contrast and connection is still made here between that which you have now in this age and that which you shall be given later in the age to come. But here Jesus makes plain the point that all we have in this age is Another’s—“that which is another’s.” And on this we need to really pause and consider.
- E. We are Americans. We like to think of ourselves as self-made individuals. We like to think that whatever we have we have it because we reached out and took it, we worked hard for it.
 1. And I’m not trying to say that many of us haven’t overcome serious odds and worked hard for the things we have. I only mean to say with Jesus here that, ultimately, everything you have—from your job and home and possessions all the way back to the very breath in your lungs has been gifted to you, entrusted to you, by God.
 - a. It’s as Paul says in 1 Cor 4:7: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”
 - b. It’s as John the Baptist says in John 3:27: “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”
 - c. It’s as Peter says in 1 Pet 4:10: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”
 - d. And, perhaps most eloquently of all, it’s as David says in 1 Chr 29:16: “O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have . . . comes from your hand and is all your own.”
- F. All of life is stewardship. It is all God’s gift to us. Our money. Our possessions. Our jobs. Our spouses. Our kids. Our breath. So what are we doing with it? That is the most pressing question here.
 1. Are we, on the one hand, acting as if all this stuff is our own? Are we accumulating more and more for ourselves here and now?
 2. Or, on the other hand, are we, like the shrewd manager from our parable, living in light of the temporality of this place, the uncertainty of riches, the certainty of death and judgment, and ordering our worldly affairs with a view to the world that’s to come?
 - a. Are we living like we’re going to give an account to the Owner of these things for how we’ve treated them? Are we handling all of this in the way that the Master of the house would be happy with?

Stairstep #4: Verse 13

- A. As we come to v. 13, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, quite literally: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”
1. The essence of what Jesus is saying here is this: Does God have your heart or does money? You can’t divide your loyalties on this point. There is no room for both/and. It’s either/or. Either you will release your money and worldly wealth in service of God or you will try to manipulate God into serving your love for money and wealth.

Conclusion

You Don’t Have to Be Upset!

- A. As we draw things to a close now, let me say I do believe that the interpretations we’ve come to here certainly align with that initial observation I was concerned with. No doubt, the conclusions we’ve been drawing here would make the Pharisees, “who were lovers of money,” feel threatened, angry, upset.
- B. But I sure hope all of this hasn’t made you feel that way. In the end, remember, Jesus is not trying to upset us, He’s trying to save us. Even as He says the hard words, He’s saying them in love.
- C. You noticed didn’t you, what He said earlier, about unrighteous wealth? I didn’t make much of it then, but I should like to draw your attention to it now. It will fail you—“make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails . . .” (v. 9)—not if, but when it fails.
1. Jesus is here begging us to stop building our lives on foundations of sand and start building on the rock.
- D. I was trying to think why is this so hard for us? Why is our heart always going after money? What do we think it’s going to do for us? Three things immediately sprang to mind: satisfaction, security, status.
1. Now, obviously I don’t have time to discuss these things in detail, but with a little reflection it should occur to even the simplest minds that money can’t deliver these things, that it doesn’t deliver on these things—that it ultimately fails us.
- E. And the amazing thing is that these are the very things that are freely and lastingly made available to us in the gospel. Jesus gives His life for sinners so that we can be brought back into relationship with the God who made us and loves us.
1. And in the context of that relationship we find satisfaction—we’re loved; security—because we have a Father who’s caring for us; and status—as we’re called His kids and given the Spirit of adoption. There we find everything that money promises us but never provides.
- F. Let me tell you something, you come to Jesus like this, you let Him love you like this, and money loses its allure. It slips back into its proper place. It becomes simply a tool to be used for the advancement of God’s kingdom not an idol to be bowed down to and worshiped.

G. This is the story of Zacchaeus that we'll come to in a couple of chapters.

1. His life was all about the money. He would cheat and manipulate and swindle to get it.
2. But then grace comes in. Then He gets a taste of the love of Christ for Him. The satisfaction, the security, the status that comes with a new relationship to God through Christ. And it transforms His heart. It loosens His grip on the stuff of this world. Suddenly he's releasing his money and wanting to use it to pay back those he's cheated and share with them this love he's now come to know.

H. The way to become a better steward for God isn't to just flex your will and make it happen. It's to come to the cross, and let the only true good steward of God, Jesus, love you. When you come to know that love, you'll find yourself able to let go of your stuff in love for Him.