

# FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

## TWO MASTERS

Year C - Trinity 14 - Luke 16: 1-13

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*16 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 account 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.'*

In his commentary of the Greek text of Luke's gospel, I. Howard Marshall writes: *"Few passages in the Gospel can have given rise to so many different interpretations as the parable of the prudent steward."*<sup>1</sup> So, inevitably, what follows can only hope to scratch the surface...

One thing that may strike us straightaway is that our natural inclination to decide whose side we are on is frustrated - because in this parable there is no hero to cheer for. We may start off believing that the master is the bad guy and sympathise with the manager. But then, when we find out that the manager is dishonest, and that the master commends him for acting shrewdly, we may, at the very least, feel irritated. Where, we may ask in exasperation, is the moral in this?!

Commentators have offered many interpretations. Of these, Marshall identifies two as worthy of note - firstly the traditional interpretation, namely that the manager was corrupt, had swindled his master and, having been found out, falsifies the accounts to obtain the goodwill of his master's debtors - and a second, that the manager, when reducing the amounts owed by the debtors, reduced them by his own commission - in other words, he lost what would have been his profit, but the master still got what was owed to him.

Joel Green highlights the size of the debts. For Jesus' listeners, these amounts would have been enormous - the produce is of an olive grove up to twenty-five times larger than that of an ordinary farmer. Green also notes that the large discounts may reflect hidden interest that was owed to the master, suggesting dishonesty on both sides<sup>3</sup>.

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1 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, A commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978)

2 Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections, Year C* (London, SPCK, 2003)

3 Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997)

Notably, N. T. Wright approaches it differently: this is strictly a parable – certainly not advice about financial management or approval of cheating. He writes:

*“Rabbinic parables about a master and a steward are about God and Israel. Jesus regularly charges his contemporaries with infidelity to their Commission: called to be the light of the world, they have kept the light for themselves and have turned it into darkness.”<sup>4</sup>*

On this reading, Jesus warns his contemporaries that they must act wisely or else risk being cast off by God – a warning reminiscent of Jeremiah’s call to repent before disaster.

Marshall is not persuaded by the traditional “corrupt steward” view. He argues that it fails to take account of verse 8a: *“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”* Instead, Marshall leans toward the second interpretation – that the steward forfeits his commission, becoming the benefactor of the debtors and thereby ensuring his future.<sup>5</sup>

But whichever interpretation we lean towards, it is important to notice this: it is the rich master who commends the dishonest manager, not Jesus. Jesus draws a different lesson: *“the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light”* (v.8b).

Green explains: *“‘Children of this age’ [Jesus] observes, understand how the world works and use it to their benefit; why do ‘children of light’ not understand the ways of the kingdom of God? If they did understand the ways of the new aeon [the age to come], how would this be manifest in their practices? Simply put, they would use ‘dishonest wealth’ to ‘make friends’ in order that they might be welcomed ‘into eternal homes’.”<sup>6</sup>*

The use of money to ‘make friends’ would have been understood by Jesus’ listeners as normal in the Greco-Roman world. Yet Jesus cannot be urging them to become benefactors in the worldly sense, for this would contradict his earlier teaching:

*“If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”* (Lk 6:34–36)

Jesus makes clear that faithfulness is faithfulness in everything: *“whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.”* Therefore, to *“make friends by means of dishonest wealth”* is surely about using wealth properly - about generosity, almsgiving, care for the poor, cancelling debts. This is what is expected of the *“children of light”*: the use of wealth to help build the kingdom of God.

It is worth noticing what lies just beyond our text. Luke continues: *“The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight’”* (vv.14-15).

No wonder, then, that Jesus closes with a warning: *“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.”*

Do we put our trust in “dishonest wealth,” or do we choose to be good stewards, putting our wealth at God’s disposal to build His kingdom? Which master do we choose? Jesus asks.

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4 N. T. Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Year C* (London: SPCK, 2000)

5 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, A commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978)

6 Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997)