

## God or Mammon?

Craig Atwood, September 21, 2025

### Luke 16:1-13

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. 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.' 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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 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.' 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.

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. "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. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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."

### STORY

Let me start by confessing that since I started reading as a boy, I have loved mysteries and detective stories, especially English ones. On Friday, Julie and I saw our own Karen Bell Chandler acting in a mystery. I also like watching detective shows, especially the ones that are clever rather than grisly. What people call "cozy mysteries." Over the summer we watched an English show about two detectives named Shakespeare and Hathaway. One episode was about a man who had amnesia.

Eventually they figure out that he was a billionaire who had been pushed out of the window of the luxury hotel he owned. Like the owner in our parable, the billionaire owner paid someone to manage his hotel. The hotel was thriving under her supervision because she was treating the workers with respect and paying them well. Guests appreciated the service and revenues were up. But the only way the manager could pay her staff more was by embezzling from the owner and paying them under the table. Or, as our parable this morning put it, the manager was squandering the owner's possessions, and when he found out he was planning to fire her. Like the manager in our parable, this would have ruined her life.

But then one of the employees pushed the greedy owner out of the window because he was harassing one of the women. He did not die from the fall, but he lost his memory. While trying to regain his memory, the billionaire discovers how much people hated and feared him. He also saw how wisely the manager was handling the hotel. The staff were productive and the hotel was thriving. Of course, it ends well. The billionaire commends his manager for her wisdom and does not have her arrested.

## PARABLE

That TV show came to mind this week as I pondered our gospel lesson. This is another one of those difficult parables of Jesus. If you were having trouble making sense of this parable as I was reading it, you are not alone. Unlike Aesop's Fables that always end with a pithy "moral," such as slow and steady wins the race, this parable seems to encourage people to be dishonest. Even brilliant theologians like St Augustine were a bit mystified. Is there a moral to this story?

As Ginny said in her sermon last week, preachers often make the mistake of thinking that God is the main character of every parable. It is also a mistake to treat parables like allegories in which everything in the story represents something spiritual. People have tried to do that with this story, but not very successfully. I think that sometimes an estate manager in a parable is just an estate manager. But, if we dig enough, there is a spiritual or moral message in the parable. We need to be like the detectives in that TV show

## INTERPRETATIONS

Let's start with different interpretations. Many biblical scholars have argued that the manager was fundamentally dishonest, and when he reduced the amount debtors

owed, he was cheating his master in an effort to please the debtors. That seems like a straight-forward reading of the text. The manager is being dismissed for mismanagement and in revenge he reduces the estate owner's income. This would be like someone getting fired from a company and then marking customers' bills as fully paid. It is a terrible thing to do, and we cannot imagine that any owner would commend such fraud.

Another popular way of interpreting this story is to claim that the manager merely reduced the commission that he would have received from the payment or removed the illegal interest that had accrued. Many sermons have been preached about the manager being righteous and sacrificial, and that this self-sacrifice is what the owner commends. This could be true, but this is reading a lot into the parable. Also, I think that if you were losing your job the last thing you would do is give up income that is due you.

## SHREWD OR WISE

My Bible titles this passage the Shrewd Manager, which colors the way we read it. Most modern English versions say that the manager acted "shrewdly," which implies that he was deceptive, selfish, and clever. Shrewd executives find hidden loopholes in contracts to cheat their customers or avoid taxes. In movies, the Wolf of Wall Street and Gordon Gekko were shrewd. Many people read this parable as the story of a shrewd manager who manipulates the situation to avoid paying the consequences for his actions. Some biblical scholars argue that this parable is a like "trickster tale" from folklore where a weaker person outfoxes a more powerful person. There are trickster tales in the Bible, such as the story of Jacob who outwitted his brother and uncle and everyone else except God.

That may be what this story is about, but, as you know, translation is a tricky business and words have various meanings. The Greek word translated "shrewdly" is *phronimos*. Almost everywhere else in the New Testament, it is translated as wise instead of shrewd. For example, Jesus tells his disciples to be as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents. Wise is a much more positive term than shrewd. A wise person is someone who has amassed knowledge of the world and makes good decisions in a difficult situation. Whereas Jacob was shrewd, his son Joseph became wise. So, maybe this parable is about a wise manager whose wisdom is commended by his master.

## TENANT FARMING

Let me propose a different way of reading this story. I'll warn you that I didn't find any biblical scholars who agree with me, but I think this is an intriguing possibility. First, we shouldn't assume that the debts owed to the wealthy man were to repay loans. Who would repay a loan with olive oil or wheat? It makes more sense to sell your crops and repay the loan in cash. But if you were a farmer whose farmlands were part of a wealthy man's estate, then you would be obligated to pay rent to the owner of the land by giving him a set amount of your harvest. What you owe the owner is a percentage of what you produce.

This type of tenant farming continued into modern times. Here in North Carolina after the Civil War, for instance, it was called share-cropping. Freed slaves worked the old plantation fields and "shared" their crop with the land owner. The details of tenant farming were different in every age, but the fundamental idea was the same even in Jesus' day. If I own the land that you live on and labor on, then you owe me part of what you grow.

The system worked for businesses as well. I own the olive press that you need to process your olives into oil, and so you pay me with olive oil. The estate owner in our story had lands that he did not farm. He was so wealthy, he didn't even manage his estate himself. He had a slave or servant do that for him. The manager was supposed to maximize the owner's profits, which meant squeezing the farmers for as much as he could get.

We are told that the man who harvested and pressed olives into oil had to pay about 800 *gallons* of olive oil to the estate owner. In Italy today, that is over \$50,000 of oil, and it is much easier to make olive oil now than it was then. In Jesus' day this much oil was worth over 2000 denarii, which was a year's salary for at least five people. In other words, these clients owed the wealthy man a lot.

## INTERPRETATION

With that in mind, let's look at the start of the parable. Someone had accused the manager of squandering his master's wealth. We shouldn't assume the accusation is true, but if it was true, what did it mean? How could the manager have squandered money? Maybe the manager was living large on profits that belonged to his master. We see that all the time in our country where some executives line their own pockets rather than focusing on their company's well-being.

But there is another possibility that makes more sense to me. What if the owner of the estate learned that the manager was not doing enough to collect the debts that his clients owed him. Rather than impoverishing the farmers by taking every gallon of oil or bushel of wheat they had, maybe the manager was letting them benefit from the fruits of their own labor. The enormity of the debts in the parable indicate that this may have been going on for years. It all worked and the owner didn't notice until someone accused the manager. When the owner demanded an explanation, the wise manager fixed the accounts for the benefit of the farmers. Knowing that he was going to be cast out on the streets, he protected the farmers. They were the ones who benefitted most from his actions. Can you see why I thought of the TV show about a billionaire who own a hotel?

The shocking twist in the story is that when the owner finds out what the manager did he commended him. Rather than being angry, he recognized the wisdom of what the manager was doing. We can presume that the manager kept his job, and all was well. The wise manager showed the wealthy estate owner that he didn't need to demand so much from his tenant farmers. He was still wealthy, but the wise manager showed him that he could also be generous and merciful.

I may be wrong, but in the Gospel of Luke this parable comes right after the story of the Prodigal Son, which is also about a wealthy estate owner who learns that love for his son is more important than the property that his son had squandered.

## GOD AND MAMMON

This leads us to the most important part of our gospel lesson for today, which is Jesus' final statement that no one can serve two masters. Jesus says bluntly that no one can be a servant of God and a slave of money at the same time. The gospel of Matthew quotes this same statement of Jesus, but in a different context. It is only Luke who uses this statement as a summary of this parable about the wise manager.

The word translated as money in our translation is Mammon, which is a great word. It comes from the Hebrew word for riches, treasures, or wealth. Money is a weak translation because in the modern world we all need money to live. Mammon isn't just money; it is excessive amounts of money. It is so much more money than a person could ever enjoy.

Early Christian scholars sometimes translated this word as greed, which was one of the seven deadly sins. Jesus is talking about the danger of being a slave to greed or

wealth. He knew, as we know today, that people with lots of possessions, power, and property often spend their time trying to amass even more possessions, power, and property. They are like the dragon Smaug in the Hobbit who sits on his fabulous hoard of gold and jewels and thinks of nothing else all day but his wealth and the need to protect it. Rather than serving God and using their resources to improve the lives of others, they just keep adding to their hoard of wealth.

## CONCLUSION

When Jesus says that you cannot serve God and Mammon, he was not condemning people for making wise decisions about money or saving for retirement. Jesus was telling us something profound and simple. If all you care about is your wealth, your status, your property, and your power, you will not care about anything else. But if you serve God, you will live wisely and be generous to others. The question for us today is simple. Will we be slaves to Mammon or servants of God?

Amen.