

Sermon: Shock Therapy

Year C, Proper 20

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13](#)

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So now that you've heard all of Luke 16:1-13, you can see why this is a shocking story. It just doesn't sound like a story that Jesus would tell. Why would Jesus tell us to emulate a scoundrel like the manager? One of the ways to search for a handle on a tricky piece of Scripture is just to walk through it more slowly and see what we notice.

16:1 Then Jesus said to the disciples,

The "then" tells us that something happened immediately before. What was it? Jesus was having dinner and the sinners and the tax collectors began to draw near. The Pharisees and scribes that Jesus was eating with thought it was outrageous that Jesus would eat with such undesirable people. Jesus responds by telling three parables in a row, all about lost things being found: one sheep out of 100, one coin out of ten, one brother out of two. (Luke 15). Jesus had been talking to the whole group about restoring the community and rejoicing in its restoration.

When we hit the "then Jesus said to the disciples", we're getting a signal that Jesus is narrowing his focus. He's about to deliver a more subtle, more complicated lesson, so we should brace ourselves. Jesus is still in public, and everyone can still hear him, but we're getting a warning that the master class is going to begin.

16:1 There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

In the social structure of first century Palestine, a vanishingly small percentage of the population, less than 1%, were rich, a tiny portion, less than 5%, were not rich or poor, and the rest were poor, a good percentage 20-30% were desperately so.¹ The rich man would own the land but probably not live on it. The manager would run the farm, make all the deals, collect the rents. His compensation would come as a percentage of what the farm produced.

You can see how this would be a situation ripe for corruption. If the rich man doesn't have a good feel for what the land should produce, the manager can squeeze more and more out of the people who work the land. But like any corruption, a manager who gets too greedy or takes too much is going to gain a reputation. In a small community like the great number of towns and villages that make up first century Palestine, a reputation for corruption is something you're never going to shake.

If a gaining a reputation is something you'll never shake, what happens to you when someone starts falsely accusing you? No one is going to be surprised that a manager is corrupt. So if someone goes to the rich man and whispers in the landowner's ear, how can an honest manager prove he's done nothing wrong? It's really hard to prove a negative. It's hard to prove that while there are obvious opportunities for skimming a little extra off the top, you didn't.

One thing to note here is that the word for "squandering" in this story is the same word used to describe what the younger son was doing in the story about the Prodigal Son. It's a sense of

¹ Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 1966.

wastefulness, of throwing money away, but it doesn't necessarily imply that the money isn't yours to spend. It might be crazy to spend it that way, but it's not criminal.²

16:2 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.'

Maybe the manager has done something criminal. Maybe he hasn't. The rich man is willing to act on hearsay.³ The rich man isn't going to confront the manager with his accuser. We've all seen it done and there may be a really good reason for it. If the manager is guilty, it's probably ok. If he's not, it makes it even harder to defend himself.

One other thing to note. The rich man asks to see the books. Think about that for a second. If you really think the manager is scamming you, what's the point in asking to see the books?⁴ That's the best place to hide what the manager stole. Cook the books, it's much harder to prove the crime or even figure out what has been taken.

At this point in the story, we don't know exactly what is going on. But the rich man is upset enough that he's ready to fire his manager.

16:3-4: 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.'

The manager is right. If he gets fired, it's game over. He'll never be hired by anyone else as a manager. He'll have to survive through the strength of his back or the mercy of his neighbors. If he's been squeezing them over the years to get a little something extra for himself, they may not feel too merciful. This rich man will certainly not hire him again, even as a day laborer, so he'll have to find someone else who will hire him.

16:5-7 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.'

At the most basic level, what's he doing? He's reducing the debts owed to the rich man. There's no disagreement that that is what the manager is doing. It's worth noticing that however much he reduces the debts and however much good will he generates from the guy with the olive oil and the guy with the wheat, it can't be enough to support him indefinitely.⁵ It might buy him some time, but doesn't really solve his problem. Maybe he's just playing for time, but it's not going to keep him from digging or begging long term.

16:8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;

² Scott Bader-Saye, "Proper 20, Theological Perspective, Luke 16:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 94.

³ G. Penny Nixon, "Proper 20, Homiletical Perspective, Luke 16:1-13" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 95.

⁴ John K. Goodrich, "Voluntary Debt Remission and the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 3 (2012): 563.

⁵ David T. Landry and Ben May, "Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000): 301.

How does that make sense? It just doesn't. And it's followed by

16:8 for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

The "children of light" are the followers of Jesus. Jesus wraps up the story he's telling and begins to address his disciples directly

16:9 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.

There's a slight translation problem there are the end; "eternal homes" should be "eternal tents",⁶ but that doesn't really change how strange this is. It really sounds like Jesus wants us to rip people off, spread the ill-gotten gains around and become more popular. And that just doesn't sound like Mr. Render-unto-Caesar-What-Is-Caesar's at all.

So let's go back to where the whole thing went off the track. How could the rich man commend the manager for reducing what people owe the rich man? Well there are a number of ways to look at that.

Could be that the rich man is an idiot. The old joke of someone complaining about a senator, saying that the senator was an idiot. The reply came back, "Yes, but there are a lot of them in this country, and they're entitled to representation." It could be that the rich man's an idiot, but that doesn't really help us with what Jesus says next.

Could be that the rich man looks at what the manager has done and thinks he's pretty clever.⁷ In my corporate career, I have seen plenty of slick and clever people go a long way. It's better to have them working for you than against you and they often build careers using their desire to feather their own nests to help the organization achieve its goals. The manager for a rich man needed to be skilled at a lot of things, including keeping accounts, so it might be hard to find someone as good as the guy in the story, especially if he's shown that he can keep making deals even when his back is to the wall. That interpretation is reasonable for the manager, but again, it doesn't really help us match what Jesus says next with the rest of Jesus' ministry. Maybe we can't get a match. There are plenty of times when Jesus says things that are just plain upsetting. This could be one of them.

The manager is definitely forgiving debts. Every week in this church we ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. The word in Greek that we translate as "trespass" is more literally "debt". I know some of you, like me, grew up, asking to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Now that's 100% Jesus. No one would be surprised if a manager was leaning on the people of the estate to produce more so the manager could skim off more. In the same way, no one would be surprised if the land owner was demanding far more production than the tenants could possibly come up with. It's not unreasonable to think that when the manager is cutting down the debts of the tenants, he's actually reducing some of the dishonest wealth the rich man is trying to wring out of the poor people on his estate.⁸ You could

⁶ Bader-Saye, 94.

⁷ George Arthur Buttrick, "The Gospel According to St. Luke : Exposition Chs. 13-18," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 281.

⁸ Nixon, 95.

even leave the rich man out of it and say that the manager was reducing the debts by the manager's own share.⁹

We're getting somewhere. Let's keep going. The manager needed a decent reputation in order to keep doing his job. But he's not the only one whose reputation matters. What does it say about a CEO when they have corruption in their firm? Either they're incompetent because they didn't set up a system to let them know OR they're corrupt too because they did know and did nothing about it. In the first verse of this story, rumors were beginning to circulate putting the rich man's reputation at stake.

The rumors may be true, they may be false, they may be an exaggeration of some underlying nugget of truth. But whatever the case, the rich man's reputation is also being hurt. Frankly, the rich man would pay far more than 50 jugs of oil or 20 containers of wheat to restore his reputation.¹⁰ And there was that asking to see the books, a really strange request if you think that the manager is really dishonest. Rumors can be vicious and damaging even if they are not true, especially in small communities. Right? So perhaps the manager's act to forgive debts is less a financial and more a reputational move. An honest manager, falsely accused, might take some actions that show the rich man in a better light. It solves the rich man's problem, keeps the manager in his job and cuts off the rumors.

Now you may want to object, "Your honor, assumes facts not in evidence". But remember that this is the master class. A parable works by getting us to go along and go along and recognize an entirely familiar territory. And then, amidst all that is oh so familiar, there is a moment where the light from the Kingdom of God breaks through.

No one is surprised that rich men are brought rumors by people trying to ingratiate themselves. No one is surprised that rich men act capriciously on hearsay. No one is surprised that when your job is threatened, you might get creative to find ways to keep it. Perhaps it is surprising to hear someone praised for reducing what is owed to the person who offering the praise.

Keep going through to the end of this story.

16:10-13: "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."

You cannot serve God and wealth? How many of us try to do exactly that every day? Millions, billions? 99%? 99.9999999999%? Don't be shocked because the rich man praises the manager for being shrewd when the manager reduced what was owed to the rich man. No one is saying that the manager didn't act in his own self-interest. The manager himself is very explicit that that is exactly what he is doing. But if we walk carefully through the text, we may see a way in which, as shocking as his actions were, that shock is only meant to wake us up to the real shocker. We have been trying to serve God and wealth and we haven't been shrewd about it. If we really want to look after our own self-interests, we need to start forgiving some debts.

⁹ Nixon, 95.

¹⁰ Landry and May, 303.

Because we want to be welcomed into the eternal tents of God's people who are not tied down with possessions. We want to be part of that eternal and growing tribe of those who are constantly moving in God's service. Sometimes we need to be shocked in order to get back on the even more shocking path we are to walk. With our tents and a bit of oil and wheat we owe each other.