

*Entrusted with True Riches*  
September 18, 2016  
Luke 16:1-13  
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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. 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." 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.'*

There is a big, heavy solid-wood hutch that I purchased nearly 20 years ago for a bargain from a friend's recycled wood furniture store. It has been used as a tv cabinet in the living room, a decorative piece for the guest room, and storage unit in the dining room throughout the years. Though it's a beautiful piece, the drawers on the top stick when opening them, and the bottom of one of the drawers has fallen out and needs to be popped back in.

Last year we did some reshuffling of furniture in the house and it was determined that the hutch was too now big for our space and no longer fit in any of the rooms. I put it on craigslist, the online want-ad website, for \$300. It sat for a week with no

response, so I lowered the price to \$150. Still, no response. My two weight-lifting sons and their weight-lifting friend moved it to the garage, where it has become a shelf for old boxes, gardening supplies, and odds and ends. (More on the hutch later. Let's talk about the Bible.)

In today's passage, a wealthy man hears that his manager has been squandering his property, so he calls him to an accounting of the balance sheets and concurrently fires him on the spot. The manager, suddenly out of a job, comes up with a plan to call in the debtors of his former employer and slash their debts, so that in his unemployment he may have friends to turn to and take care of him, because, after all, he's too weak to work manual labor and too proud to beg.

The parable is often referred to as "The Dishonest Steward." "Dishonest" because he squandered his employer's money and dishonest because he gave away what likely wasn't his to give away to save himself. Shockingly, not only does the former employer commend the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, but Jesus does as well. In fact, Jesus says that his disciples would do well to take some lessons from the manager, for he is wiser than the "children of the light," or those on the spiritual path. What are we to make of this?

There's a number of things we don't exactly know from the passage; for example, we don't know exactly what the manager has done to mismanage the money, or whether he actually has – it comes to the rich man as here say. We don't know whether in slashing the debts owed to the employer, if the manager actually impacted the rich man's estate. It could be that the new reduced amount was the actual amount owed to the employer – that the original amount was either dishonestly added by the manager for his own taking, or whether it was part of the corrupt system going on at the time, whereby landowners rented to their sharecroppers and then charged such exorbitant rates with interest that the sharecroppers were forever indebted and unable to ever earn enough to pay the landowner back.

What we do know is that the manager found himself in a predicament -- he had been accused of mismanaging the accounting and was fired. So he assessed the situation, and took a risk to make use of the resources to which he had access, in order to secure his future. And he is praised for his cleverness. Forget about whatever disloyalties he had shown in the past with the accounting books, or whether in his new role as "former employee" that he had the authority to make up a new figure that was owed of the debtors. He is now admired by his former employer.

And this could be for a number of reasons. Perhaps the debtors had been disgruntled, and now, with less debt, they were going to be more productive to the employer, who will then recoup his temporary losses. Or perhaps the employer realized that even with the debt reduction, he still had plenty, that the loss really hadn't really made a dent in his estate. Was it that the employer was actually just a

really nice guy, and the manager's actions brought to light a solution that could benefit all? That he actually really cared about the manager, and now will consider re-employing him, or will be happy knowing that he has made friends that will take him in? Any and all of these scenarios are possible.

After the parable, Jesus says "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." What do we make of Jesus use of what is translated as "dishonest wealth?"

Dishonest wealth is also translated as "worldly wealth" or "unrighteous mammon," mammon being that to which we give value. When you think if it, we bestow incredible value and power upon what really amounts to pieces of paper (\$20 dollar bill) and pieces of metal (quarter) or plastic (credit card). Giving value to these types of things, these objects, is giving value to that which really has no value. It is "unrighteous mammon," or "dishonest wealth." The passage is about giving value to that which is truly valuable – our relationships. Taking what really has no value and using it to take care of what is really valuable, which is one another.

Make friends with the right use of worldly wealth – by helping the poor, making others healthier, leading people to God – so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the place where we are truly and fully satisfied. Because the worldly wealth on which people set their hearts WILL fail and will not ultimately sustain. Money is not bad, evil, or terrible in itself. However, when we assign it with utmost value and power, it does have the potential to tempt people to worship it above other things, and can be destructive by deceiving the soul with empty promises and temptations.

As the hutch sat in my garage collecting dust and car-washing rags, I happened to see a posting on Nextdoor, which is a website that updates neighbors about various goings-on, including things for sale, rent, or free. A neighbor a couple of doors down was giving away a gorgeous oversized chair and ottoman, the perfect color for my house. I had been desiring a new chair in my son's room where his desk had been, which had been moved to another room where the big hutch had been that now sat in the garage. I walked to my neighbor's house, and she cheerfully gave me the chair, joyful and happy to see it taken away from her and being put to good use.

I decided to post the hutch that sat in my garage on Nextdoor, for free. Within 3 minutes, I had a response, a woman who said she wanted to come by to take it. No sooner had I hung up with her, than the doorbell rang and she was there with her SUV and 8 year-old daughter to collect the hutch.

We tried and tried to lift and maneuver the heavy hutch into the back of her SUV, of which the opening was just too narrow about 2 inches. Her daughter watched from the passenger seat. How did you get it here? She asked. And how are we going to get it inside our house? She asked.

As my husband was out of town for another week and my sons were now both away at college, I considered strong neighbors I could ask to help and came up blank. They were either on vacation or at work, or not the types I would want to ask to lift a heavy piece of furniture. I asked the woman if she knew of anyone who could help... and she looked me in the eye and shook her head. "No. I have no one." Her eyes pleaded with me a bit as her 8 year old daughter looked backwards at us from the front passenger seat. The woman looked me in the eye and said, "I'm a single mom and this is the nicest piece of furniture I will have ever owned." She said she knew a handyman and maybe he could come by with his truck. I wished her luck as she drove away.

There were 5 new email responses in that time period of trying to load the hutch, people who said they would love to come by immediately and take it. I prayed that the woman with the SUV would find a way. I wanted her to have it. Within minutes, a truck backed down my driveway. She had borrowed it from a friend. She and I lifted and pushed the hutch easily into the truck. I gave a thumbs-up to the daughter and said, "You have an amazing mom—she's superwoman!" And the daughter said, "Did you tell her yet?" And the mom said to me, "Oh! I'm a dog walker. Here's my card. I would love to walk your dog for you anytime, in gratitude of what you have done for us." She sent me an email a bit later saying that her neighbor and his son moved the hutch inside her house, and she was so happy.

I had put the hutch on craigslist for \$300 and never got a bite. I reduced it to \$150 and still no takers. But the joy I have in knowing that this mom is so delighted... is worth more than the money I would have received otherwise. Obviously, the piece had sat in my garage for 6 months and so the money was not going to make or break me.

I did not come up with this idea on my own. It was only because a neighbor had posted for free a big, comfy chair of which I was the fortunate recipient... And now I'm wondering if perhaps I'll offer to walk her dog...?

Here's how I see the hutch and our Bible passage relate. I was offered a chair that I didn't deserve through someone's mercy and generosity. And it inspired me to be merciful and generous. And then it inspired another to be merciful and generous. We all benefitted.

The wisdom of the manager is that his need was and will be met with mercy because he learned to be merciful when he had the chance to be. Like the prodigal son, who squanders his inheritance and when he's down and out turns back to home and is graciously welcomed with celebration, so the manager who was lost and then quickly makes good use of his resource, is graciously celebrated. These are both examples, which appear consecutively in Luke, to illustrate a God who forgives even though it seems completely inappropriate. It's extravagant mercy.

Disciples of Jesus are called to be just as brilliant in the ways we use money and our possessions and handle debts as this dishonest manager. It's about finding ways to use money to reduce debt in every form and increase joy and love. Serve God and master money; don't serve money and think you can master God. The steward figured out a way to make the system work to his advantage. He brought others on board by figuring out a mutually beneficial scheme. It appears that everybody got something and went home happy.

The steward exhibited follow-through, creativity, and perseverance in addressing his situation. He was not afraid to encounter money and work with it. He did not hesitate to expand his circle of influence and enlist the help and support of others. He refused to roll over and give up, and he was serious about securing his future. He was a steward of abundance rather than a hoarder of scarcity. What might it look like if we were to embrace this attitude? I think about the 6 months I backed into my garage trying painstakingly not to hit the hutch that sat, useless.

Money and possession have the power to lead us into corrupt and exploitative practices, but also have the power to free us and others. Rather than creating opportunities to accumulate wealth only for ourselves, the passage encourages us to use money to uplift others, bringing honor and dignity both to them and ourselves.

Jesus says in the passage, "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?" Jesus sees that how we use money and possessions can be an important indication of how we can be trusted with more important things. Money and possessions are not wrong in themselves; it is how we use them. You cannot serve both God and money, Jesus says, but you can serve God by using money to help and reach out to others.

Being entrusted to true riches is to be trusted to give value to that which is truly valuable: Loving God and loving our neighbor; taking what really has no value and using it to take care of what is really valuable, our relationships. Those that are truly rich, are those who are rich in faith and rich toward God.

Friends, let us imagine, if we let go of our hold on and hoarding of our resources, and share them with joy for the betterment of all, with what true riches we will be entrusted. The Good News is that God promises to keep us, to share with us true wealth. May we let go of our need to keep our worldly wealth for ourselves, so that we may experience God's true riches.