

The Big Picture
[Luke 16:1-13](#)
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You know as a preacher that you're in trouble when you open your commentary to the passage you're supposed to preach on that Sunday, and it says "This passage is among the most difficult in the Bible," or, "this passage has baffled interpreters since the beginning of time." And it's not hard to see why. People always say that the stories of Jesus, his life and ministry and parables, they turn the world upside down, there's a sting to them that forces us to re-examine everything we think we know, but even though we say that, we don't really believe it. Oh, sure, Jesus turns other people's worlds upside down, the disciples and the Pharisees and the early Christians, but our world is nice and far away from Jesus', so the sting is gone, we stay right side up. We can hear the story of the Good Samaritan, and we love it, because we don't know any Samaritans – the only one we've ever met is a Good one, *THE* Good One, we don't have 750 years of ethnic and religious hatred fuelling our ideas about Samaritans, so the sting is gone, our world stays right side up. We hear the story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant, and we love it, because we don't know any Centurions – the closest thing we have is a Sergeant in the local armed forces, and we love the troops, we support the troops, and because we've never been occupied by a foreign military power, we've never had

oppression and tyranny personified for us in one soldier, a daily reminder of our slavery, so the sting is gone, our world stays right side up. We hear the story of Jesus forgiving the tax collectors, and we love it, because the only tax collectors we know are neighbours down the street working for Canada Revenue, and they endure our friendly jokes and teasing about being the taxman, because we know that they can't get a mandate from imperial dictators allowing them to squeeze every cent we have and leave us to starve, so the sting is gone, our world stays right side up. We don't know any Samaritans, any Centurions, any Tax Collectors ... but Dishonest Stewards? People who we trust to care for the things important to us, who then squander them for their own benefit? Those we know. We entrust our economy to stewards, bankers and investors who destroy everything chasing after a quick buck. We entrust our political power to stewards who promise to make things great again but only seem to make themselves more powerful. We entrust our environment to stewards, the care for our planet to oil company executives and industrial magnates who allow the sea levels to continue rising as long as profits keep on rising too. Our world is full of Very Bad Stewards, they play golf at private clubs, take private jets to private islands, their company goes bankrupt and they take a huge bonus, Dishonest, Unjust, Incompetent Stewards, they are everywhere. And so when we hear Jesus tell the story of an unjust, dishonest, incompetent steward getting hauled in front of his boss, getting chewed out and humiliated and sent packing, doesn't it feel good?

Finally, they're being held responsible, they're getting what's coming to them, getting what they deserve. And then it gets better. The fired manager is sent back to his office to clean out his desk, and he's petrified, "what will I do, what will become of me, I'm too weak to do real work, I'm too proud to beg, Oh whatever shall I do, all is lost." Wouldn't you just love to see some of the people responsible for the destruction of the world's economy and environment in such a state? Suddenly all the wealth and power and lies that have let them ruin our lives for so long is stripped away leaving only sweet beautiful justice. Isn't it great? And then the steward hatches a scheme, and he starts calling in his master's creditors and slashing their IOUs, forgiving their debts, cheating his master out of even more money, compounding whatever his old crimes were tenfold with massive deliberate fraud, and you just know that if the master was angry before, he's going to be furious when he finds out what his steward has done, it's really going to get good, like, towering fury, casting into the outer darkness with the wailing and the crying and the gnashing of teeth. You can't wait! And then finally the steward is called before his master, and he goes to his master, and his master ... commends him. For his shrewdness. And Jesus says, go now, and do likewise. And that sick feeling in your gut like you've just been punched and the burning confused fury in your head, *that* is what it feels like to have your world turned upside down. And it stings, doesn't it?

And so we do anything that we can to try and get rid of that sting, to somehow make it more palatable, to make it make our kind of sense. Maybe the steward was just forgiving the part of the debts that would have made up his own commission, and so he's commended for his generosity, and that's what Jesus wants us to emulate. Well, maybe, except that the master very clearly commends him not for his generosity, not for his selflessness, but for his shrewdness. The Greek word is *phronimos*, and everywhere else it appears in the New Testament it is translated as a positive, healthy, happy thing – wise, prudent, sensible. When the wise man builds his house on the rock, he was *phronimos*. When we are told to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, we're supposed to be *phronimos*. The parable of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom says that five were foolish, but five were *phronimos*. And earlier in the gospel of Luke in chapter 12, Jesus compares two stewards, one who does not anticipate the master's return and so is punished, and one who is faithful and *phronimos*, who is hard at work when the master returns. These are the fine upstanding, wise examples of *phronimos* in the Gospels, and lumped in alongside them is the dishonest, corrupt, incompetent but shrewd steward.

So what could such a group have in common? If this assortment of characters is Jesus' idea of *phronimos*, wisdom, prudence, how are we supposed to follow their example? Well, the only thread that runs through all these examples of *phronimos* in the gospels is that all

these characters think not of their immediate needs, but they look into the future and anticipate what is truly important, what will become truly important. The wise builder chooses to build his house on the rock because he knows that one day soon, the rains and floods will come. The wise virgins know they may be waiting for the bridegroom all night, so they store up extra oil so that their lamps will not go out. The faithful and prudent steward in Luke 12 knows that his master will return, and so he works diligently to ensure that when the master comes, he is not disappointed. And the unfaithful, dishonest, incompetent but prudent, wise, shrewd steward in Luke 16, he knows that the money he has stolen from his master will not last, he knows that he can no longer depend on fraud for his survival, so he shrewdly commits one last act of larceny against his master in order to gain friends and allies who will help him land on his feet. To be phronimos in the gospels is to see the big picture, to look into the future and discern what will truly be valuable, and then act accordingly, and that is what the steward is commended for, for realizing what is truly worth something and singlehandedly pursuing it at the cost of all else.

And it's just as important to see what exactly the steward considers to be valuable. When he goes back to his office that one last time and decides to throw all caution to the wind and commit one last massive act of theft against his employer, he could have done things differently. He could have called in the debtors and demanded that they

pay their debts immediately, and then kept some of it for himself. From the master's perspective, that would mean about the same thing, the same loss of property, whether it went to the steward himself or to the debtors. But the steward doesn't steal for himself; he doesn't fill his own pockets, despite this being the last opportunity for him to do so. The steward realizes that taking the money won't help him as much as making friends who can take care of him, who can support him, who can find him a new job, a new master to defraud. The steward realizes that long term, it is better to invest in people, in gaining friends and influence, than it is to hoard more and more money to himself while only making enemies. The steward realizes in that moment of despair that people are worth more to him than money, and so he shrewdly gives up his wealth to secure the people's love.

And despite the fact that he does it for all the wrong reasons, despite the fact that his motives are utterly selfish, despite the fact that as soon as he is again established in a prosperous position he will likely turn on his new friends for any profit he can get from them, by recognizing that the debtors are worth more to him than the debts, the unjust steward is in very good company with Jesus himself. Jesus has just told three parables to a group of Pharisees who had mocked and scorned him for spending time with tax collectors and sinners, the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son, three parables where Jesus made absolutely clear to the judgmental Pharisees that from God's perspective,

one lost sheep is worth leaving 99 in the wilderness for, one lost coin is worth searching all day and night for, one lost son is worth waiting and watching and running out into the streets for, that something lost has to be found and when it's been found, it deserves a party. The Pharisees couldn't see how tax collectors and sinners could be worth anything, not even worth the time Jesus was spending with them, but Jesus insists that those sinners are worth something regardless of their sins, that the debtors are worth more to him than collecting on their debts. And when the righteous, upstanding Pharisees can't understand this principle, when they refuse to see how people could possibly be worth that much, Jesus tells a story about an utterly unrighteous, not-upstanding scoundrel who does understand, who in the midst of his conniving and corruption has the shrewdness, the wisdom, the phronimos to see the big picture, to understand that people are worth more than possessions, that relationships are a better investment than righteousness. The Pharisees reject the tax collectors and sinners around them out of their own sense of virtue, but the dishonest steward out of his own greed and fear would have accepted them and befriended them and sought them out, while Jesus accepts them and befriends them and seeks them out because of his deep, unconditional, unending love.

So when Jesus sets up the dishonest steward as a model for us to follow, as an example to emulate, he's not advocating fraud, greed, or conniving self-interest. He's pointing out that if even the most selfish,

corrupt character you can imagine can see the big picture, can see past the short term desire for comfort to the long term need for relationship, then why can't we? Why can't the Pharisees? Why can't the church? When we take a look at our most pressing needs as a church, what are we most focused on: our short-term comfort, our building, our budget, or can we see with wisdom, can we see with true vision what Christ's mission on earth is and how we are called to join in? We have been incredibly blessed with earthly abundance, with so many good gifts, but how do we use those gifts? To secure our own survival, to keep things the same way they've always been, or do we use them to seek out the lost, to reach out to people who are in need, to build relationships with everyone we meet and bring them to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ? Everything in this world belongs to our God, he has entrusted us with gifts and abilities and talents and life itself so that we can use it, all of it, to bring people closer to him, to preach the good news of the salvation that is available to all humanity, even tax collectors, even dishonest stewards, even Presbyterians. We read the story of the dishonest steward and we turn away from such a corrupt man, and yet he too is a child of God, he too is someone that Jesus Christ considered so precious that he was willing to die to redeem him from his sins, and as Christ considers the unjust steward worth dying for, he calls all of us to use the gifts and the wealth we have been given to reach out and love and witness to all those as lost and fallen and sinful as that steward, as lost and fallen as those Pharisees, as lost and fallen as we once

were, until Christ reached out to us. God is calling us to look at everything we have, everything we do, and see the big picture – to use the things that will not last, that are already passing away, use them to build what will last forever, to invest in the things that will endure until the Kingdom comes. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.