

119

MINISTRIES

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The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)

One of the most difficult to understand parables of Jesus, his Hebrew name being Yeshua, is the parable of the dishonest manager. Some misinterpret this parable to imply that Yeshua commends the manager’s dishonesty, which is downright confusing. How do we make sense of the seeming endorsement of dishonesty?

Before we attempt to interpret this particular parable, we need to understand the nature and intent of Yeshua’s parables.

Yeshua makes it clear that his parables are meant to be difficult to understand. When you read Yeshua’s parables, you can immediately see that they cannot be taken at face value. They require some work and explanation to reach a proper interpretation.

Matthew 13:13

[This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.](#)

John 16:25

[I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.](#)

Let’s quickly examine some parables, just for illustration purposes. We need to show how parables work.

In Matthew 13:24-30, there is a parable about a farmer who finds weeds growing in his field. The interesting thing about this parable is that it is one of very few where Yeshua conveniently explained the meaning to the disciples (Matthew 13:36-39):

- The sower = Messiah Yeshua
- The field = the world
- Good seeds = good people

- Bad seeds = bad people
- The enemy = the Devil, Satan, or the Adversary
- The reapers = the angels
- The harvest = at the end of the age

There is not often much confusion here because Yeshua himself gave the identification of the characters in the parable. More importantly, and fantastic for us, this parable provides us with a template for properly interpreting Yeshua's other parables.

In Luke 14:12-24, Yeshua tells a parable about a man sending out invitations to a feast. But the invited guests are too busy with business to accept the invitation. So, the host becomes angry and invites the poor and outsiders instead.

Luke 14:12-24

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

It is easy to see that the characters in the parable are all real people or groups of people:

- Host of the banquet = God
- Servant sent to call guests = Messiah Yeshua
- Guests who make excuses = The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees
- The poor and sick of the town = the everyday Jews
- Those from outside the town = the Gentiles

Also, this parable was based on real-life circumstances. When he told this parable, Yeshua was actually present at a banquet (Luke 14:1), and his audience included precisely the kind of people who were excluded in the parable (Luke 14:7). See how these parables are following a similar interpretive paradigm? So let's continue...

In Luke 15:11-16, we have another parable.

Luke 15:11-16

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

The mention of the far country and pigs in verse 15 suggests the same subject:

- The father = God
- Older son = Jews, the House of Judah
- Younger son = The House of Israel

Again, real people, real local circumstances. For more on the circumstances of this parable, we would recommend our teachings “[The Lost Sheep](#)” and “[What is the Gospel?](#)”

In Luke 16:1-13, we have a much more complex subject. Yet, the parable is still has a metaphorical relating to specifics that require interpretation. Let’s read the parable.

Luke 16:1-13

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management 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 removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 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.”

Just like the other parables, each character here also represents a particular group or individual. In this parable we find:

- The master = God
- The dishonest manager = the Pharisees

- The debtors = the people

We know that the rich man or the master is YHWH. How do we know? There are a few reasons.

First, YHWH is clearly our master. That one is easy.

Second, the master was concerned with his “goods being wasted” and did not find dishonesty to be an acceptable practice. The dishonest manager was getting booted out. This demonstrates the righteousness of the master.

Lastly, the dishonest manager prioritized serving himself by charging hefty monetary fees on top of the debts instead of serving his master. In Yeshua’s interpretation in verse 13, we find that Yeshua interpreted this as either serving God or serving money; one cannot have two masters. Thus, the master represents God in this parable, and the absurdly high monetary fees charged by the dishonest manager is the other master.

We find that many of the parables of Yeshua were about revealing problems with the Pharisees. This parable is no different. Yeshua stated that the dishonest manager represents the Pharisees.

Yeshua clarifies that he is talking about "the Pharisees who were lovers of money" (v.14). When they laughed at the parable, he turned to them and said, "**You are those...!**" (v.15).

How do we interpret the identity of the debtors?

The only option is that the debtors represent the people of faith.

Now, as we enter the details of the story, this is where it gets a little confusing.

The dishonest manager (Pharisees) finds that he is going to lose his job in working for the master. As a solution to this problem, the dishonest manager starts discounting all of the debts to gain favor with the people. Then the master says:

Luke 16:8-9

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

On the surface, it seems like the dishonest manager is discounting what is owed to the master, and oddly enough, the master commends him for it. What is going on? Is YHWH commending this concerning behavior?

No, YHWH is not commending such deceptive behavior. There is actually a simple explanation and requires an understanding of typical practices found in the first century.

In our culture, an employee, such as a manager, documents and details moneys owed to his employer by his customers, and in return, the employer pays the manager a wage. If that manager reduced the bills of his employer's customers owed to his employer and was caught, he would most likely be fired and may even find himself in jail.

And this is quite often the same interpretive lens we use to try to understand this parable. When we read the parable through modern day practices, it creates an interpretation that Yeshua is commending concerning behavior.

The problem is that when we read the Bible, we inject our own cultural perspectives into the text, which will often cause serious problems with the interpretation of that same text.

When we understand the first-century cultural context, the interpretive solution becomes much more simple.

In the first century, the master (the employer) did not pay the steward (the employee) a wage. Instead, a steward made his money by adding his fees onto the bills of his master's debtors (the customers). When the debtor received the bill from the steward, he did not know what amount on the bill belonged to the master and what amount belonged to the steward; only the steward knew. When the debtors paid their bill to the steward, the steward pocketed his portion of the bill and then forwarded the remaining money to his master.

This is also why Jewish tax collectors were so despised in the first century. A Jewish tax collector employed the same process. The tax collector not only collected Roman taxes but also would add a fee on top of the taxes that the tax collector would then pocket for himself. That was how the tax collector made money. If he charged outrageous fees, he made a lot of money.

As this steward is called "unrighteous," we can assume that he was placing an extraordinarily high amount on the bills for his fee in order to make large amounts of money at the expense of his master and his master's debtors. However, when he found out he was going to be fired, he took the debtors' bills and reduced, or eliminated, the amount owed to him, thereby currying favor with these debtors in the hopes that one of them may hire him due to his perceived "generosity." In this, the manager was commended.

After this dishonest manager was called out for his behavior, he removed his excessively inflated fees from the debt collections. So, the manager was then only collecting what was really owed. The debtors were happy because they felt like they got a discount, and the master was happy because he received full payment of the debts.

When the Pharisees heard this parable, they knew the parable was about them, as Yeshua's parables often were.

Luke 16:14-15

[The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.](#)

The Pharisees were more focused on earthly rewards and self-exaltation instead of their heavenly rewards and exalting God. After Yeshua called them out on it, all they did was ridicule Yeshua.

The Pharisees were more consumed with themselves rather than helping the poor, the widows, or advancing the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees loved money for what it did for them rather than what it could do for the Kingdom of God or for those in need. The end of the matter is this. The Torah is all about loving God and loving others. It takes resources to advance the Kingdom of God. We can use our

resources to help out those in need or ministry work and that is all part of loving others. But the Pharisees were less inclined to do either, and quite often, they only helped themselves. In doing that, they disregarded the top two principles of the Torah, loving God and loving others.

As Yeshua concluded just a couple of verses later:

Luke 16:17

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

In the parable, the dishonest manager realized that he was doing a disservice to both his master and the people. He was voiding the Torah by not loving God or loving others. He realized that he did not have many options when he was fired and that he himself would have to depend on the love and kindness of others for his own survival. In that way, the dishonest manager then understood the value of loving others instead of focusing on loving himself. Part of loving others is knowing others depend on you or vice versa when needs arise.

The application of the lesson learned in this parable extends to even us. Like the steward or manager in the parable, we too someday will lose all of our stewardship. God owns everything that we have. We are simply stewards or managers over these things. We will someday die and that stewardship will end.

And that is the conclusion offered to us in Luke 16:8-13.

Luke 16:8-13

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 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.”

The dishonest manager used the little time he had left in his stewardship to prepare for what was next. This is not unlike what Yeshua said in Mathew 6:20.

Matthew 6:20

but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

The “true riches” of the dishonest manager parable are the “treasures in heaven.” The “unrighteous wealth” is the wealth of this world. The wealth of the world is not ours, we simply manage it for a time, until our stewardship ends at death.

When we die, we should want to be received into the “eternal dwellings.” The idea here is that we should want to use the resources we manage with an eternal mindset. The wealth and resources we have now will someday fail, as the parable reveals. In Matthew 6, Yeshua virtually says the same thing:

where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

The connective phrase “when it fails” is even more evident in Luke 12:33.

Luke 12:33

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that **does not fail**, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

In the end, the management of resources reveals a heart issue, and through this particular parable, the hearts of the Pharisees were revealed.

Luke 16:14-15

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, **but God knows your hearts**. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

The parable of the dishonest manager is difficult to understand when understood through our modern day employer/employee practices. However, once we insert the cultural context and customs of the first century, we can better appreciate the lesson Yeshua is teaching. Yeshua was clearly revealing the hearts of the Pharisees in the first century. However, it can sometimes be easy to forget that all we have is God’s, and we are simply managing it for him for a time.

The end of the matter is this. It is more important to use God’s resources for his glory and the eternal good and love of others, which is to the love and glory of God (1 John 5), than to focus on worldly matters for ourselves.

1 John 3:11-24

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, **that we should love one another**. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. **But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?** Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua] and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

We hope that his parable now makes a bit more sense and how it can be applied in our lives today.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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