

## The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-8)

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### Keywords

Christianity, values and issues, honesty vs dishonesty, morality, debt, generosity

### Notes for teachers

In this story about a dishonest manager is far from easy to categorise exactly who is the hero and who is the villain. Often, readers of Jesus' parables are tempted to identify characters with God, or the disciples, or Jesus himself. Here, is God to be associated with the rich boss, calling his follower, the manager, to account? Is the manager, all in a panic, really to be identified with faithful disciples? Debts are sometimes used in the parables to represent sin, but that does not seem to work here, as the manager fiddles the accounts in the debtors' favour, hoping to curry their support in the future. Most strangely of all, the master applauds him for defrauding him and it seems that the threat of dismissal has been forgotten. The manager's quick-thinking seems to have saved the day in a most surprising way.

This is certainly a story in which the unexpected happens, but generosity of a sort is a key theme here. Those with power act in a way that seems unjust- perhaps to modern readers as much as to those who heard the story in its original context. But the powerful are the only losers here in the end.

Some background information might help us to read the story with greater understanding.

There is a theory that at the time of Jesus it was common for a manager to exploit those he managed by demanding a proportion of their profits, either in money or in goods, as his commission. The manager in the story, under pressure, does not charge those beneath him that proportion, in order to gain their trust. And when the master finds out, he is forced to commend him for acting justly. Knowing something of the way business was conducted at the time of Jesus perhaps helps us to understand what the story might have meant to its first hearers.

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The immediate context of the story might also be significant. If we compare the shape of the parable of the Prodigal Son, which comes just before this one in Luke's Gospel (Luke 15), we will see some similarities: both start with "A certain man"; both start and finish with speeches from the opening character; both involve characters who squander what they have and get themselves into life-threatening situations; both end with the authority figure accepting the son/manager back. Perhaps in both stories the emphasis is on the father/master and his willingness to welcome the disgraced one back.

The writer of Luke's Gospel struggles to make sense of this parable as much as we do- in verses 9-12, he keeps adding to the parable, trying to explain it. Perhaps in Luke's attempt to see in the parable something about the importance of relationships over money there is something we can all relate to, although it remains a puzzling and strange story!

### **Questions for Discussion**

#### Comprehension of the story

Why is the manager in danger of losing his job?

What does he do to prepare for this and why?

How does the master react and why?

What words would you use to describe the manager's character?

What is surprising about this story as it is told by Jesus?

#### Application to other contexts

Is it always right to be generous?

Are there other ways the story might have ended?

What difference has it made when someone has been generous to you in some way?

Are there examples of times when being generous has had a cost, to you or to others?

#### Reflecting on wider Christian issues

What does parable suggest about how people should treat one another?

What does this parable teach about the relationship Christians have with God?

What does this parable teach about the way you should approach challenging situations, including those involving money?

## The Dishonest Manager

Luke 16.1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a servant who managed his property. The rich man was told that the manager was wasting his master's money, so he called him in and said, ‘What is this I hear about you? Turn in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ The servant said to himself, ‘My master is going to dismiss me from my job. What shall I do? I am not strong enough to dig ditches, and I am ashamed to beg. Now I know what I will do! Then when my job is gone, I shall have friends who will welcome me in their homes.’

So he called in all the people who were in debt to his master. He asked the first one, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ‘One hundred barrels of olive oil,’ he answered. ‘Here is your account,’ the manager told him; ‘sit down and write fifty.’ Then he asked another one, ‘And you—how much do you owe?’ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he answered. ‘Here is your account,’ the manager told him; ‘write eight hundred.’

As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light.”