

## Interpreting Luke 16

By Felician Stancioiu

One of the examples given by Jesus to His disciples about handling material wealth is provided by the short story from Luke 16, in which a dishonest but shrewd manager is giving his master an account of his administration.

*The Parable of the Clever Steward (from Bible.org)*

*16:1 Jesus also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who was informed of accusations that his manager was wasting his assets. 16:2 So he called the manager in and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Turn in the account of your administration, because you can no longer be my manager.' 16:3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What should I do, since my master is taking my position away from me? I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm too ashamed to beg. 16:4 I know what to do so that when I am put out of management, people will welcome me into their homes.' 16:5 So he contacted his master's debtors one by one. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 16:6 The man replied, 'A hundred measures of olive oil.' The manager said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and write fifty.' 16:7 Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' The second man replied, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' The manager said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 16:8 The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their contemporaries than the people of light. 16:9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by how you use worldly wealth, so that when it runs out you will be welcomed into the eternal homes. 16:10 "The one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and the one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 16:11 If then you haven't been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches? 16:12 And if you haven't been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you your own? 16:13 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 first impression after reading the story is one of confusion, since the master appears to take two totally opposite actions for similar acts committed by his manager: he fires his manager after hearing about him squandering his property (strong rebuke); then after the same manager apparently continues to squander his masters' property by partially erasing the debt of two people who owed his master, his action is commended by the same master (high praise). Such a contradiction seems difficult to explain spiritually or materially; from the material standpoint the goods squandered by the servant-manager are significant even for a wealthy master: the olive oil and the grains that were wiped out with the stroke of the manager's pen are equivalent to the pay of about 5 years for a daily worker.

In trying to explain the material aspect of this parable it was suggested that the manager has decreased the amount owed to his master by the interest bourn by the principal debt or by eliminating manager's commission from the principal debt. These explanations seem unlikely, both because Jewish Law forbids loaning with interest (or applying interest to loans), and also the corresponding percentage of interest to the two debts principals would have been too high (20% interest to a debt was asked only as punishment for theft according to the Jewish Law). Similarly, such a high commission from the goods owed to his master would have been unlikely for the manager.

We have to notice that this story doesn't provide much information about its circumstances, namely the functional status of the masters' property. It may have been that the master had big debtors who couldn't repay and such the property could have been mired in a "liquidity trap" which made it impossible for the manager to honor its own debts, debts which could have included managers' own wages. In such a circumstance the re-distribution of debt to compensate for other obligations (including his wages) could have been a commendable solution. Even so, one may still wonder: "isn't the manager still dishonest for taking for himself his masters' property without his knowledge and prior approval?" The short answer is yes. Still, there are two factors that mitigate this aspect. Firstly the main concern of the master – that of squandering or wasting or incompetence – was addressed. Secondly, the damage is completely reversible since the dishonest manager has confessed his transgression at an early stage – before a material damage actually occurred – and appropriate action could have been taken by the master to recover his possible loss if he so wanted (by simply re-writing the debt papers).

However, in order to put to rest any remaining confusion about what is valued and what is not, we'll employ a neat trick of logic known as "reductio ad absurdum". Let's assume for a moment that shrewd dishonesty is truly valuable, namely the master commending his dishonest manager for taking for himself part of his masters' property. Then the master would have come across as encouraging stealing from himself under different pretenses (shrewd or even clever as it may seem); and with others following this example that was commended, ruin would be inevitable for this master. So then there is something wrong on the material aspect of this story, which may be clarified by the following reasoning:

The most likely explanation is that sometime during the re-telling, translation and writing of the story (story not told in Mark, Mathew or John), an error was introduced regarding the timing of the events in the story. The apparent sequence of events as transmitted to us is: 1. the master hears about his manager squandering his property and decides to stop this by firing his manager; 2. he then asks his manager for an account of his administration; 3. the manager partially erases the debt of two of his master's debtors, seemingly providing a cushion for his old age; and 4. this action is commended by his master.

The error has likely occurred in 16:3; having "since" replaced by "when" will better reflect the timing of the thoughts of the manager on his life after retiring and the ensuing action taken by the manager. It is more likely that the partial erasing of the debt by the manager occurred *prior* to him giving the account of his administration to his master (3 before 2), and this very act (debt-erasing) was the reason for which his master heard reports that his property was being squandered. So instead of appearing to further squander his masters' property while he was being investigated for squandering (for which he could have landed in jail), the servant-manager was simply giving an explanation (account) of the incriminated actions (squandering) to his master: he felt he was getting old and wanted to have some cushion in his old age, so he erased some debt which was reported as squandering. Thus he could be commended for his planning ahead (funding his pension), instead of simply giving away his masters' property by erasing debt with no apparent reason, action that could only be seen as wasting and squandering.

If there is any lingering doubt on Jesus position on commending or rebuking dishonesty, we have the conclusion of the story where Jesus clearly states that the person dishonest in small things will not be trusted with important ones. Supporting this stance (importance of small and big), is the account of the feast of the 5000 people with five breads and fishes; when afterward feasting the broken pieces

of bread that were not consumed were collected (Matthew 14:20; Mark 8:8; Luke 9:17; John 6:13), so that nothing that was given to him from His Father could not be wasted (and yes, there is a metaphor here regarding all the men he needs to save).

Besides condemning dishonesty, the conclusion of this story seems to be also about the dichotomy of material versus spiritual (advises disciples to make friends in the material world by being trustworthy and especially by sharing things, before the New Age arrives), and the futility of chasing at the same time material wealth (world of mammon) and aiming for spiritual redemption – the world of God. Material world – represented here by the master of the property – may value shrewdness over honesty (think about the cunningness of the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden), but this set of values is temporally and materially limited and is completely different from the values of spiritual world.

Acquiring wealth by mammon's rules, regardless of the means and ethics, leads to bad results as it is further presented in Luke 16:19-31 with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus; this conclusion is similar to that from Mark 10 about the wealthy man who prized his material possessions more than Jesus' company: it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than such an individual to enter heaven. This message is consistent with both Mosaic and Christian rules, and mostly all religion.

*The Rich Man and Lazarus (from Bible.org)*

*16:19 "There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 16:20 But at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus whose body was covered with sores, 16:21 who longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table. In addition, the dogs came and licked his sores.*

*16:22 "Now the poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 16:23 And in hell, as he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far off with Lazarus at his side. 16:24 So he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this fire.' 16:25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus likewise bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish. 16:26 Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 16:27 So the rich man said, 'Then I beg you, father – send Lazarus to my father's house 16:28 (for I have five brothers) to warn them so that they don't come into this place of torment.' 16:29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they must respond to them.' 16:30 Then the rich man said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 16:31 He replied to him, 'If they do not respond to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"*