

## **TFTD 2025.22      Saturday March 19<sup>th</sup>**

### **Balancing the books: Luke 16.1-9**

**\*\*PS don't forget the clocks go forward on Sunday morning!\*\***



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. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>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.<sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” <sup>5</sup>So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” <sup>6</sup>He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” <sup>7</sup>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.” <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.’

I love this parable! It’s not a “good example” of how to behave (like the Good Samaritan) — and not in any obvious way a picture of God’s love

(like the parables of the lost sheep and lost son in ch.15). It's much more paradoxical than that. We don't even know what to call it! People sometimes call it the parable of the wicked steward — or the unjust steward — or the dishonest manager. Is Jesus commending a blatant piece of dishonesty (v.8)? — or at the very least, sharp practice? Or is it just a bit of creative accountancy? What's going on here?

Jesus taught a lot in parables, and it's worth stopping to ask what we expect of a parable. A parable is basically a story that starts with something in the ordinary everyday world (like a shepherd — or a sower sowing seeds — or a fig tree) and then uses that comparison to show us something about what God is like — or what God's kingdom is like. Sometimes Jesus uses shock tactics to help us think about what God is like — as in the story of the unjust judge in Luke 18.1-8, where the point is, “Even an unjust judge will listen if you shout loud enough. How much more will God listen to those who cry out to him!” The more puzzling a parable is, the more it draws you in to argue with it, to work it out for yourself — maybe even to change the way you see the world.

So what's going on here? The first we have to do is to look carefully at what it says — and what it doesn't say.

The first question to ask is, who are the characters in this story? What roles do they play? There's a rich man, and a steward — or manager — who works for him. He's been put in to manage his master's business — which means that he's paid to maximise his master's profits, to make the rich man richer. That's the deal: everyone knows that. What the business is, is not so clear. Maybe his master is in the loans business? He certainly seems to have a lot of debts to call in (vv. 5-7). Or maybe he's simply a rich landowner, with a lot of tenant-farmers who have contracted to pay their rent in kind, out of the proceeds of the harvest. They work the land, pay the master the agreed rent, and the rest they get to keep for themselves, to feed their families and maybe lay aside a bit for a rainy day. It's a very common system around the world — but it's a risky one. With a good harvest, the tenants could make a good living — in a bad year, not so good. Either way, the master's profits always have to come first: which means that some years there won't be enough left to feed the family, and

they might have to sell themselves (or their children) into slavery to pay their debts. But the master always comes out on top — provided he's got a good manager.

But this manager doesn't seem to be doing so well. He's about to lose his job (v.2). Why? It's all rumour, of course, but the rich man takes it seriously: allegedly, he's been "squandering his master's property" (v.1). The word means "scattering around" instead of raking it in — which sounds rather generous. Nothing about embezzlement or dishonesty: he simply hasn't been minding his master's interests sufficiently, hasn't been maximising those profits as well as expected. Maybe he was just inefficient?

Or is there something else going on here? What happens next is unexpected — and opens up another possibility. He's smart, this manager: he spots an opportunity for a spot of creative accounting before he has to turn in his accounts. Not to boost the profit margins and get his job back — in fact, he does the opposite. He starts re-balancing the books in favour of the tenants, the people who work the land — so the landowner gets less, and they get to keep more of the harvest. Maybe that was what he was doing all along? Maybe that reputation for "squandering" was because he was managing in the interests of the people who actually live and work the land, instead of the rich landowner who already owns more than his share? Maybe this manager has a new vision for the land, a vision of generosity and partnership?

So the master's verdict is that the manager has acted "dishonestly" (v.8). But actually I think that's a bad translation. The word is *adikia*, which literally means 'injustice' or 'unfairness'. The manager certainly hasn't been doing the right thing by his master, at least the way 'justice' or 'rightness' is usually defined — i.e. by balancing the books in such a way as to maximise the profits for the rich. But maybe there's another kind of 'rightness' peeping through here — a kind of justice that manages the land in partnership with those who work it — perhaps even a kind of justice that considers the long-term interests of the land itself? Is this the kind of rightness that goes with 'seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness', and putting that first?

And what happens? Given how rich landowners usually behave in gospel parables, we might expect the manager to end up losing his liberty, if not his life. But this rich man is different. He roars with laughter! He slaps his thigh (metaphorically speaking), claps his manager on the shoulder, and congratulates him on his shrewd management — in other words, for having exactly the kind of skills you would want a good manager to have. He's convinced the tenants that their master is a generous man who actually has their interests at heart — and now the master can't back down without losing face. Maybe he didn't mean to act generously — but his crafty manager has backed him into a corner where he can't do anything else. The manager gambles on the fact that the master actually is generous at heart — or at least that's how he wants to be perceived. So the paradox of the parable is that, in God's kingdom, getting rid of your wealth (or scattering it around), balancing the books in the interest of the poor, actually is good management! Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

God bless,  
Loveday