

“Come Aside, Little Pilgrim”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Sermon for 9 March 2025
 Text: Luke 16:1-16

What a strange passage . . . how incomprehensible! **There was a certain rich man who had, in his employment a wastrel steward. This employee squandered his master’s goods, wealth according to the reports of someone one.** An Inspector General? The steward was a thief. He had been discovered. So now what? What was the steward to do? **I cannot dig**—that is, do hard manual labor which would be honest enough and **I am ashamed to beg.** Interestingly he is ashamed to beg, but not to steal. His crisis lies in the discovery of his malfeasance; **he had wasted his master’s goods.** He devised a plan for securing his future. I will help others with their debts to my master so that when I am put out, they will reciprocate my kindness and help me manage my financial crisis! On a very obvious level, this was thievery. He would add to the **wasting of goods** . . . a reduction of debt at his master’s expense! How wrong is that? **SO** the man cleverly reduces a debt of 100 measures of oil to 50 measures. A fifty percent debt reduction! To another who **owed a hundred measures of wheat,** he said, **Write down 80.** A twenty percent reduction of debt! While the second reduction of 20% was not the same as 50%. Both debts would be, partially at least, now in his debt. His master was defrauded but his reaction recorded in verse 8 **And the lord commended the unjust steward because he had done wisely. For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.** *If the children of light are His disciples, Jesus the Lord in this parable, the point seems to be that prudent, acting wisely in terms of worldly living, is commendable. Being wise outweighs the apparent dishonesty.*

So we are all dishonest stewards, we are all engaged in sundering the master’s goods. It is unavoidable that we should do so. True. All wealth is the Lord’s and we are all charged with managing his wealth and we should so manage it, worldly/earthly wealth so as to make friends with others. The proper use of wealth is to bless others so that, in return, they will bless us back. Trusting in wealth, hoarding, living in a miserly fashion are all sinful uses of wealth and a dereliction of our duty. Jesus never says that mammon is righteous in itself because it isn’t—but what mammon is in itself is not the point; the point, rather, is the use to which we put it in our lives on earth. There are truer treasures in heaven and there is genuine wealth in heaven. How we treat earthly treasure is for here and now and from our management in this life we are being prepared for a higher level of management in heaven later and in the spiritual realm here and now.

If this explanation makes sense to you, that’s all well and good. I know that the Lord can do what he wishes, desires or wills to do with what he has created. Winning friends through our financial decisions is, however, not how most of us view squandering wealth, or defrauding through debt reduction that way. I was of the mind that thievery was thievery; it was forbidden and always wrong. Therefore the commendation of the swindler made no sense to me at all! I needed help to see that what Jesus was commending (acting wisely, winning friends and influencing people) was more significant than what I was condemning (blatant thievery).

One of the first things to do when faced with such a conundrum is to examine your surroundings. Luke 16 follows Luke 15. And Luke 15 records a parabolic sequence that appears to climax with the parable of “The Prodigal Son.” Some find that parable so perplexing as to want to change the label to “The Prodigious Father” because the amazing love of the father for the young son who squandered his inheritance, and wasted his father’s wealth. (Here’s a significant link to Luke 16 we should note because the last parable in Luke 15 is actually more about restored relationships/reconciliation than it is about misspent monies and misappropriated wealth! **And he**

said to his disciples this is how Chapter 16 begins. Some might take this as a marker that Jesus is speaking privately to his disciples, except that v.14 reads **And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things**. Instead of being convicted of their sinful neediness (covetousness as well as the squandering of their fathers' inheritance!), and hearing Jesus' words as a gospel invitation, mocked, **or derided him** (with ridicule and sneering). They did not identify with either the repentant steward, or the repentant wayward son. Why? Why did the Pharisees (and the scribes with them) resist the gospel invitation? I would suggest at least three reasons: 1. They were religious hypocrites; 2. They were proud ("We're good people") and 3. they were more focused on condemnation of others, than self-examination (**They had yet to come to their moral senses**). Therefore they thought they were not in danger (like a sheep down a well) and not precious but lost (like the woman's silver coin) and they identified with the elder son (bitterly obedient, resentful and whiney as well as covetous) and were out of touch with their poor stewardship (Luke 16).

The master question over this entire body of teaching, we should recall, is **Why does this man receive sinners, and eat with them?** (Luke 15:2) Consequently, I would mention that the chapter divisions and headings might not be entirely helpful. I would put a chapter break at Luke 16:16.

I hope that this exposition of Luke 16 has been helpful. But what I want to share is that I struggled for years with this anomaly, the apparent commendation of thievery which is directly addressed/forbidden in the ten commandments. And it wasn't until I realized what a moral prig I had turned into that I was able to get past that apparent contradiction. Oh, yes, a moral prig. Here's the definition of a prig: a self-righteously moralistic person who behaves as if superior to others. Some of the Pharisees were of that fraternity—so I have never felt isolated, or singled out for my priggishness! There are a vast number of people who reduced Christianity to a moral system—of "do's and don't's" and of "right and wrong." And some skate around this pond believing that being a Christian is about becoming a better person. I must say, that becoming a better person is fool's gold! The real gold is connected with becoming Christlike. **Christ in me the hope of glory**. The power of the indwelling Christ is there to make me utterly new, utterly transformed, not to merely make me a better person!

Anyway the matter I wish to disclose to you is this: the role of meditation in spiritual growth. I was by meditating on this passage that I was altered by the Spirit through the word. Meditation is the spiritual discipline by which, or through which one opens his heart and mind to the word of God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That, in fact, is what one prays for: We ask God to minister to us, to send His Holy Spirit to us or to quicken his presence in us as we meditate on the word. Take your Bible; seek out a place, secluded, quiet and undistracted if that is at all possible. Declare your purpose: Lord, I am here to meet with you. I was given the assignment of doing all this and asking the Lord to teach me in person what I need to know about this "troubling" passage. I am here, Lord, to be instructed. Please teach me.

I was at the spiritual life retreat with Morton Kelsey at Sheomat Farm in New Hampshire. He was an Episcopal priest and a Jungian therapist and spiritual director. I proceeded to the pasture and found a location near a granite outcrop. I centered myself with prayer and asked the Lord to teach me about Luke 16. He apparently knew the reference. I had a vision in which the Lord and I were swimming together in the Jordan River. The place was fairly wide with banks on each side. On one of these banks there was a rare flower blooming, which the Lord plucked and handed to me. I chastised the Lord for picking that endangered flower. The Lord looked straight at me and said, Samuel, you are such a moral prig. That's your impediment to the parable; it's not about morality. And you are worried about a flower that I created that I picked as a gift to you? Do you

not think that I, who created that flower, cannot create another just like it to replace it? How is the plant endangered in any way?” And that was it. The vision faded and I was back in New Hampshire, in a sunny pasture. I learned to take off my moralistic spectacles and the parable unfolded very different truths to me. Some of which I have shared with you. It didn’t come from books, commentaries, or other men’s learning and I am no longer troubled by the thievery being just such a thief myself. And it didn’t come by talking, rather it came by listening!

The Desert Fathers renounced speech to learn compassion, or so we are told by Richard Foster. Meditation elevates silence as a means of liberation and self-transcendence. It does both. How? First, it frees us from the compulsive need to control others. It also signals that we are aware of our fundamental helplessness (God is our help, strength and salvation) we wait on Him who waits for no one; meaning he is dependent on no one. We must step out of the frantic stream of wordiness (our instructing others, our assisting others, judging and condemning others, persuading/convincing and correction of others *so as to stay in control/ managing the narrative for security reasons*. In silence we relent of the effort to compel others to agree, align others with our point of view, “seeing things our way may differ from seeing things as they are!” A flood of words disturbs the peace rather than promoting peace—the less we say, the less we have to retract, revise, or even apologize for. If God is right, that should satisfy us more than justifying ourselves. Judging, cataloguing, analyzing and diagnosing all have their place but we should exercise care lest we consume ourselves! Meditation is shutting that stream of verbiage off, it is closing the valve and redirecting the flow—sound dams build up power, store energy. As fasting is to eating, so silence is to speaking—both can improve our hearing and enhance our clarity. A domesticated geyser is a kitchen faucet—a roaring gusher belongs outdoors.

I learned from the Lord that we should make the most of what we can in this life, while we can. Mammon is *useful*, utilitarian and part of the training ground—readying us from life in heaven, life beyond time and beyond the confines of wealth, status and standing. We should seek to be wise in all things and we should learn from whomever we can. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. We should avoid being unjust, and shunt evil for those who are unjust in little which will transgress greatly and have much more to repent of in the presence of our King. Learn to handle true riches by your handling of stuff here and now. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and yourself. Do not put your trust in wealth. Trust God alone. Discipleship requires financial engagement, the taking of risks and investment—use what is useful with wisdom. So learn with stuff that doesn’t matter ultimately how to cope with the things that do ultimately matter. Practice while you are in training. What we will do forever is connected with what we choose to do in the here and now. (However that connection may not be either obvious, or apparent right now.)

Amen.