

CONVERSATION GUIDE

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss last week's sermon on "The Lost Sons."
2. What convicted you, surprised you, or made you stop and think? What topic or comment brought up by the preacher made you say, "I hadn't thought of that?"

This week's sermon will be the first of three on the subject of "How to Be Rich." This week's text contains what the *NIV Study Bible* describes as "the parable of the shrewd manager." The *New American Standard Bible (1995 Update)* calls it "the unrighteous steward." Whatever we call the central figure in the story, he is one of the most interesting characters in all of Jesus' parables, in part because he is clearly unscrupulous and yet Jesus doesn't explicitly condemn his behavior!

READ Luke 16:1-14

DISCUSS and REFLECT

Don't be concerned if you find this parable to be somewhat puzzling. You are not alone. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* says, "The interpretation of this parable is notoriously difficult."¹ The commentator William Barclay agrees, saying, "This is a difficult parable to interpret."² What is hard about it is that the story involves a raft of unsavory characters – a group whom Barclay calls "as choice a set of rogues as one could meet anywhere," and yet Jesus does not condemn any of them and offers important lessons from their behavior.

The *NIV Study Bible* offers this note in describing what is happening in the actual narrative: "The dishonest manager (vv. 3-8) had no scruples against using his position for his own benefit, even if it meant cheating his master. Knowing he would lose his job, the manager planned for his future by discounting the debts owed to his master in order to obligate the debtors to himself...He was shrewd enough to use the means at his disposal to plan for his future well-being."³

¹ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 10: Luke – Acts (Revised Ed.)

² Barclay, William, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1953), 246.

³ Kenneth Barker (ed.), *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), note on Luke 16:3.

Various adjectives used to describe the manager in different Bible translations and commentaries include "shrewd", "unrighteous", "dishonest", "unjust" and "crooked." Jesus would never explicitly condone unrighteousness, dishonesty, or crooked behavior, and He doesn't explicitly condone what the manager did, but He does seem to be saying that believers should draw some lessons from his shrewdness.

- **How would you describe the behavior of the manager (i.e., what adjectives would you use?) Why? Can you think of any positive spin that could be put on what he did (other than that it was shrewd?)**
- **Why do you think his master, who seems to have been ripped off by his actions, actually commended him for being so clever?**

Notice the transition that takes place in the middle of v. 8. This is a very important verse because it contains both the conclusion of the parable and the beginning of Jesus' commentary on it.

- **Have someone in your group read aloud vv. 8-9 in Eugene Peterson's *The Message Bible* translation at the end of this study guide. Does this translation make any clearer to you what Jesus was saying to His disciples? Why or why not?**
- **Is Jesus' teaching here about the importance and value of shrewdness, or is it about what we should do with our worldly wealth? Discuss.**
- **Can you think of any other instances in the Bible where Jesus points out a positive lesson for believers from the behavior or actions of an unsavory character?**

Although this parable does not appear in any of the other Gospels, verse 13 (which is our memory verse below) appears almost verbatim in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:24.) In that instance, Jesus has just preached His familiar teaching about not storing up "treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy (Matt. 6:19), and tells His audience "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:21.)

- **Was the shrewd manager storing up for himself "treasures on earth?" If so, in what way?**

- **Why does Jesus say not to do that in the Matthew passage, whereas some feel that He seems to say the opposite in this Luke passage (v. 9)?**

KEY TAKEAWAY

What do you see as the key takeaway from this passage? Some might say that the memorization verse below is the key takeaway. But is there a different lesson that stands out for you? (Note: Commentators point out as many as four explicit teachings in vv. 8-11.)

MEMORIZE

“No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money (Luke 16:13 NIV.)”

A CLOSING REFLECTION

The following statement is attributed to Jim Elliot, an evangelical Christian missionary who was killed in 1956 at the age of 28 while participating in Operation Auca, an attempt to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador:

“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

- **Do you see any connection between this statement and Jesus’ teachings in this sermon text?**

PASSAGE FROM THE MESSAGE (vv. 8-9)

“Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.” (Luke 16:8-9 MSG)