



## St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

September 21, 2025

Proper 20C: [Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#); [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#); [Luke 16:1-13](#)

Usually, scriptures like this morning's gospel make sense when put in context and read as a whole. Today, however, this doesn't seem to work. Being faithful in little and faithful in much is clearly a call to integrity. The parable of the dishonest manager appears to suggest the opposite. Why does the master commend his manager for stealing from him? What does it mean to make friends with dishonest wealth? What is Jesus trying to say?

Let's start with the dishonest manager: the one who went around to all his customers and reduced their bills, was caught, then was praised for his actions. You could see him as a sort of Robin Hood who steals from the rich to help the poor. You could also think of him as an employee who saves a company by unwittingly doing the right thing. Imagine a scenario where the master had been charging exorbitant rates which the manager reduced to logical levels to keep clients aboard. Think of an owner of a local wireless company franchise who gets rid of junk fees and extra charges, a tire salesman who includes balancing and mounting the tires and even filling them with air as part of the cost, or a gas station owner who decides not to add a \$1 to the price of every gallon of gas just because his station is on this side of the Shinnecock Canal. I could go on but I think you get the point. The master commended the Dishonest Manager for keeping customers who would have otherwise fallen away. Jesus commended the Dishonest Manager for doing what was fair and just. Jesus commended the Dishonest Manager for accidentally doing what was right. Did you notice Jesus' line about the children of this age being more shrewd than children of light? There are a lot of shrewd people out there these days. This parable challenges us to up our game, to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, and use the gifts and skills God has given us to fight the good fight and do the right thing.

But what about the command to make friends by dishonest wealth? I invite you to look at these words through the lens of the Jesus of history or what biblical scholars call the Historical Jesus. The historical Jesus wasn't the rather thin blond hippy with a lamb on his shoulder who shows up in Children's bibles and stained-glass windows. The historical Jesus was a swarthy Mediterranean-looking guy. Probably a builder or stone mason rather than a carpenter, the historical Jesus probably had many more muscles than the emaciated Jesus that often hangs from crosses in church.

The historical Jesus was known as a glutton and a wine bibber. He had a propensity to hang out with fishermen, tax collectors (think the Junk Bond dealers of his day), and ladies of the evening. To succeed with that crowd, he would have needed a finely honed sense of sarcasm and not a small amount of snark. Can you see how that Jesus - the historical Jesus - might have been using a little reverse psychology in today's reading? Could it be in commanding his followers to make friends by dishonest wealth, Jesus was speaking sarcastically, saying "Go ahead and see where that gets you. When it's gone, see what eternal habitations the unrighteous mammon has for you." Of course, we could take what Jesus said literally. But what if he actually means the reverse?

This interpretation makes the second paragraph – be faithful in little and be faithful in much – make sense. If we can't manage what we have been given in this life, how will we manage things in the next? If we can't put our priorities in order here, how can we do that anywhere else? As clearly shown in our Old Testament reading, God has what scholars call a "preferential option" for the poor. Our reading from Jeremiah describes a time when the harvest has passed, the king and the landowners have received their profits, and the poor have been left with nothing. Jeremiah suggests that there are physicians – and that there is a balm in Gilead – and yet the health and health care of the poor has been ignored. For Jeremiah a budget balanced on the backs of the poor isn't balanced at all. Does this feel a little too close to home? For God, the bottom line isn't the bottom line. For God, the bottom line is about those on the bottom are treated. Jesus puts it this way. "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." This passage is not a condemnation of wealth. It's a warning of what happens when wealth takes over and becomes an idol, an end in and of itself rather than a means to achieve other goals. Jesus is asking who we serve, what motivates us, what drives and directs our actions, why we do what we do, and about what we will do with all - or even a small portion – of what we have received. We are about to begin our stewardship campaign, a time when we can answer his question in a real and concrete way. In this world where things like character and integrity are harder and harder to find, Jesus is challenging us to have both, to put our priorities in order and to be both faithful in little and faithful in much. Seeing the writing on the wall, the manager actually did the right thing. The question is, will we?