

**“Profits & Losses”**  
**Luke 16:1-13**  
**United Methodist Church of Yucaipa**  
**Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching**

**Scripture. Prayer.**

**Opening.**

There’s an old story about a young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise.

“I’m afraid the horse has died,” he explained.

The young man said, “Well, then give me my money back.”

The farmer said, “Can’t do that. I spent it already.”

The young man thought for a moment and said, “Ok, then, just bring me the dead horse.”

The farmer asked, “What you going to do with a dead horse?”

The young man said, “I’m going to raffle it off.”

The farmer said, “You can’t raffle off a dead horse!”

The young man said, “Sure I can. Watch me. I just won’t tell anybody he’s dead.”

A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, “What happened with that dead horse?”

The young man said, “I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece and made a profit of \$998 . . .”

The farmer said, “Didn’t anyone complain?”

The young man said, “Just the guy who won. So I gave him his two dollars back.”

There have been movies and TV shows with con man anti-heroes like this young man.

Our parable for this morning tells the story of a con man from Jesus' time.

The parable of the Dishonest Steward is one of the most difficult in the New Testament. First the master threatens to fire his steward. This makes sense, given the steward's questionable ethical behavior.

But here's the problem: The master ends by praising him. This seems crazy.

Maybe by analyzing the profits and losses in the story, we can get an idea of what Jesus is getting at. Let's begin with the losses.

### **I. Losses**

If we look at the situation of the debtors, we see that they are at the mercy of the dishonest steward. They must pay him whatever he asks, having no direct dealings with the master. The master has entrusted all his financial affairs to his steward. It is likely that the debtors are unaware that the steward is about to be fired. And so they fully expect to pay their usual debts. They expect the steward, who has always charged them unfairly, to continue to do so. Their anticipated losses are the same as they have always been – they owe the master a certain amount, but the steward wants more, much more, in order to process their payments.

Makes me think of credit card companies, for some reason...

Next we have the steward. His potential losses are his entire livelihood. He's been found out. His shady dealings are known to the master. He has been fired and is now charged with cleaning up the books before he goes. The next stop for him is the streets, begging on a corner. While the master's debtors stand to lose money in the deal, the dishonest steward stands to lose everything.

Finally, we have the master. The list of his losses is long. Before the steward is caught, he cheats the master out of an unknown amount of money. Stealing from both sides, his

mismanagement is complete. We know from the story that the master is rich. He is apparently able to absorb some losses. However, it seems reasonable to assume that he would prefer profits over losses, like most businessmen. And yet, after learning that his steward has cheated him, he trusts him again with the books. The steward is not thrown out on his ear immediately. He is charged with cleaning up the books, with collecting payments from the very debtors he has been cheating all along. And he is to deliver those payments to a master whose trust he has already betrayed once. Why would the master trust him a second time?

This question gets at the heart of the parable. It is here that we discover the hidden meaning behind this confusing tale. For Jesus' story is not really about money at all. It is not concerned with financial profits and losses. It is not even about whether or not the steward was dishonest.

The point Jesus makes has to do with relationships. And it has to do with kingdom relationships. The parables of Jesus describe the kingdom, not the world. This is why we are so often surprised by the endings. The morals to Jesus' stories are not what we would expect, living as we do within the world, lulled as we are by the voices of the world, inundated as we are with the values of the world.

The reason the master trusts the steward with the books a second time is that the master sees how he can profit by such trust. The profit will not be financial. The profit will be in his standing in the community.

## **II. Profits**

Tom Rietveld, in his book, Shrewd Managers, writes, "Where we used to live in Missouri, in rural St. Charles County, we had the smallest, stand-alone, full service post office in the country, with its very own full-time postmaster. It was something the citizens of our area

were very proud of, because it had grown out of years of previous postmasters trying to juggle both their small business and their job as postmaster.

“A lot of stories were told about the difficulty of trying to run a business and trying to serve the people of that area and their postal needs. One of them that I especially liked was about a gas station owner, who was also the community's postmaster.

“This man had no helper at his service station, so when he had to leave his store to meet the mail truck, he was consumed by thoughts of people stopping for gas, or soft drinks, or candy, but finding him gone and his store closed. So, one day he hit upon a very shrewd solution. He printed a sign in bold letters that solved his problem during those required absences. The sign read: Back in 15 minutes--Already been gone 10.”

Or how ‘bout this World War II story from Billy D. Strayhorn’s book, Let's Make a Deal?

“It seems there was wine steward who was responsible for caring for the finest collection of wine in all of Europe, the wine cellar at the Chateau of Monaco. At that time in history, the chateau was well known for its vintage, rare wines. But the Nazis had overrun the city and now lived and dined in the chateau, expecting and wanting to drink the world's finest vintage wines.

“The wine steward resented those ‘slimy Nazis’ and cleverly and carefully hid all the rarest wines deep in the cellar, serving his enemy only the cheapest and youngest wines, pretending that those wines were the best.

“Stewards are people who care for precious property that is not their own, often times preserving it from disaster.”

The master in Jesus’ parable is not worried about his financial losses. He is devastated by the loss of his reputation. His business manager has gone wild. The master’s debtors are

being so mistreated that someone finally comes to him and tells him about the situation. He is humiliated in the community. No longer viewed as a fair businessman, he is despised as someone who gouges his customers and associates, his neighbors and his friends. Worse than the loss of money is the loss of his place in the community. He is not to be trusted.

At first glance, the master's choice to trust the steward a second time seems foolish. Financially speaking, it is. On his way out the door, the steward could steal substantial amounts of money. After all, he has his future survival to think about. And he may have some grudges against his master.

It's kind of like when a company does lay-offs nowadays. When a decision is made to lay off a group of employees, they often aren't informed until their last day with the company. When they show up for work they find computers locked or access to their work area denied. Their pink slips are on their desks or in their mail slots. Another employee collects their badges and escorts them off the premises, locking the door behind them.

This method of dismissal sounds cruel. The usual minimum for laying someone off is a two-week notice. But the problem is that a disgruntled ex-employee could really do some damage. They could program a virus that would destroy stored information months down the road. They could simply start dumping files, maybe spend two weeks merrily trashing their work and the work of their colleagues. They could even "go postal" – gunning down bosses and colleagues. So, while it seems unfeeling to let people go without notice, the practice makes a certain amount of sense in terms of protecting the company's interests.

The same would seem to apply in the case of the master and the steward. The steward could do some real damage to the master financially. And yet the master seems to hand over the keys and say, "Here, go ahead, destroy my business. Rob me blind. Take the money and run."

Perhaps surprisingly, the steward does not take the money and run. But he does lose more money for the master in order to save his own skin. In order to make friends for himself, he reduces the debtor's payments. Not only does he forego his own dishonest profits; he also reduces his master's take. The debtors owe the master a certain amount of money. The dishonest steward reduces their debts, with the hope that they will feed and shelter him after he loses his job.

At this point we expect the story to end in a moral. The moral ought to be: "Never trust a dishonest man twice."

But instead Jesus says, "The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness."

This is wrong! This is just plain messed up! This is not at all what we expect! This guy ought to be tossed out on his backside!

And yet if we look closely we see that the master has profited greatly from the steward's actions.

We have established that money is not the issue in the story. Relationships are.

When the steward reduces the debts to be paid, the debtors believe he does so at the master's request. The master regains his standing in the community. His neighbors and friends and customers and associates again view him as a man to be trusted. He praises the steward for having restored to him something of great value -- his reputation.

In the end, then, everyone profits. The debtors pay less money; the steward gets his job back. And most importantly, the master is restored to right relationship within the community. End of story.

### **III. Kingdom Profits and Losses**

Kingdom profits and losses are different from worldly profits and losses. When Jesus tells a story, his goal is to enlighten us about the Kingdom of God. Profits and losses are very different in the Kingdom than in the world.

John Wesley, that founder of Methodism, instructs us to: “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” We are not to make money for our own gain, but for the expansion of God’s Kingdom of love and justice.

The parable of the Dishonest Steward is actually very similar to the story of the Prodigal Son we looked at last week. It’s funny how we tend to love the prodigal son story and yet be so confused by the dishonest steward story.

Within the family we like to see forgiveness and love. The prodigal son does not return to his father out of any particularly commendable sentiments. He is starving. He has wasted his inheritance. He knows he can get some food at his father’s house. And so he returns home. And the father, in his surprising way, forgives the son and throws a banquet.

Similarly, the dishonest steward in today’s lesson never much changes his mode of behavior. His reasons for reducing the other’s debts are to gain something for himself. He will soon be starving. He has made some enemies along the way. And so he helps others in order to have food -- for himself! -- for tomorrow. The master, in his surprising way, praises the steward and entrusts his finances to him.

I will say it again. Profits and losses in the kingdom of God are different from profits and losses in the world.

Prodigal sons are forgiven in the kingdom.

Dishonest managers are trusted in the kingdom.

**Even those who believe they are totally unlovable and completely unforgivable are joyously welcomed in the kingdom of God.**

Theologian Ron Lavin explains it this way, “The sharp point of this parable is that the master commends the use of money for people, instead of for pride, power, position, and possessions. In other words, the value of money and possession comes to a dead end when we die. The sharp point of this parable is that money and possessions will do us no good when we arrive at eternity and face the judgment of God.” [emphasis added]

Almost in spite of himself, the Dishonest Steward uses the Master’s money to help others. Jesus’ point is that whatever helps people is to be commended in the Kingdom. God’s central concern is with people and their eternal welfare.

King Duncan tells this story: “A church member came to his pastor’s study one day. The pastor could see that the man looked deeply troubled. The man said, “Pastor, I need to talk. I feel so empty, so dried up inside, I’m scared.” His voice began to quiver just a bit. He said “Pastor, I have just come from the doctor’s office, and he told me that I have only six months at best to live. After I left the office, I realized that I have no spiritual resources, no inner strength to cope with this. There is nothing to fall back on, to lean against. Many people would be surprised to hear me say that, for I have made lots of money, and people think I am a success not only at making money, but at being a strong, powerful person.”

He then fell quiet, and the pastor waited in silence for him to go on. Finally the man said, “You know I’m poor in the things that count the most. I see it now. I’ve put my faith in the wrong things, and the truth is I am destitute, spiritually destitute. I could pick up the phone and call any bank in Houston and borrow any amount of money to do whatever I wanted to. Just on

my name, Reverend, just on my name! Do you understand? I could borrow it on my name only.”

The man then leaned forward and put his head in his hands, and said softly through tears, “I guess there are some things you can’t buy or borrow.”

This man’s material bank was full to overflowing, but his spiritual bank was empty. Is that your situation? Then you are serving mammon and not God.”

Mark Trotter tells a similar story of a minister in Columbus, Ohio. Says Trotter, “[The minister] has a friend who works downtown. The friend is something of an enigma to the minister, because he grows hot and cold about the Church and religion. But they are good friends. They have a good relationship. They get together often, have lunch together. On this occasion he went to his office to meet him for lunch. He sat down to talk before they went out. The man looked out his office window, and said, "Barry, I think I've got it figured out now. The big guy is going to ask two questions when we get up to the gate. I'm serious now. I'm not kidding. I really mean this. The first question will be, 'What did you do with what I gave you?' Then he is going to ask, 'Who did you do it for?'"

### **Closing.**

The job of the Church is to be a kindly manager of the kingdom on earth until Christ comes again. We are entrusted by God with the treasures of that kingdom, even though we have not always proven ourselves trustworthy. God continues to trust us again and again because the goal of God’s kingdom is to restore right relationship with every person on earth.

I close with a Zen story, as told by W. Robert McClelland. “[The story] characterizes life as a Buddhist monk fleeing from a hungry tiger. The monk comes to the edge of a cliff cutting off any hope of escape from the pursuing tiger. Fortunately for the monk, a vine happens to be

growing over the edge. He grabs hold of it and begins to climb down the cliff, out of the tiger's reach, who is by now glaring at him from above. But alas, as the monk is climbing down, he spies another tiger waiting for him below; circling impatiently at the bottom of the cliff. To make matters worse, out of the corner of his eye he notices a mouse on a ledge above him already beginning to gnaw through the vine. Then out of the corner of his other eye the monk sees a strawberry growing from the rock. So he picks the strawberry and eats it.”

Continues McClelland, “Faith in God is not believing that the Holy One will intervene to "save" us. It is knowing what time it is. We live with the reality of sin and death encoded within us, yet we are to live with joy here and now, sinners and scoundrels, because the kingdom is at hand. We are not to demand evidence of its presence. Rather we are to believe it and act accordingly. The claim that we are invited to entertain is that our Savior has overcome the guilt of living and the embarrassment of dying. No longer do we need to apologize for the bumps and warts which inevitably result from living the risk that we call ‘life.’ We are not as those who live under sentence of death, but as those who possess the promise of life.”

Let us share the good news of this “promise of life” with others. Jesus tells of the Steward who reduced the debts owed to his Master. Let us witness to others of God’s love and forgiveness. And let us be diligent in our work, for the stakes are high. We are entrusted with God’s reputation and the reputation of His Kingdom.  
Amen.