

Shrewd steward: Luke 16:1-13

by [Mary Schertz](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

One of the strengths of my Anabaptist tradition is that it takes the Bible and biblical authority seriously but also expects believers, particularly younger people, to argue and raise questions about the text. The parable of the shifty steward in Luke 16 was a delight to my friends and me in our coming-of-age years. Any adult defending a “one right answer” approach to biblical interpretation had to be prepared to take on a barrage of questions about this parable from avid teenagers.

The setting of the parable is a wealthy estate. The rich owner, or master, receives a report that the steward has not been doing his job adequately and calls him to immediate account. This demand throws the steward into a tizzy. He does not fall apart, however, but faces up to his limitations honestly. He knows himself pretty well—he’s too out of shape to do manual labor and too proud to beg.

He not only knows himself well but also is able to take action. He calls in those he knows to have outstanding debts with the master and reduces the total amount of the debts—some by as much as 50 percent, others by 20 percent. His goal is to create enough gratitude, enough goodwill, enough indebtedness of another kind so that he has a place to land when the master throws him out on his ear.

Thus far in the parable nothing is surprising. The thoughts and the actions of the steward are self-serving, but most of us can empathize with his frantic scrambling to salvage what he can out of the situation. What is surprising is the master’s reaction to all this scrambling. We have been led to understand that this master is hard—fair, maybe, but no softie. So we are surprised by his unexpected commendation of the steward and all his sly acts. He is actually pleased.

We can try to understand this inexplicable change of attitude in several ways. Some have speculated that if the debtors were to actually pay the reduced amount of the debt, the master might be pleased that he has gotten some of the money back even if he never receives the full interest on the loans. Others have suggested that if the steward was reducing the debts by the percentage of his own take, then everybody but the steward would have come out even—and supposedly quite happy. Yet the

story ends without satisfying our curiosity. We do not know if the master ever received payments on the loans or if the steward, in reducing the loans, was giving up his own percentage. We do not know whether the master kept the steward in his employ or let him go, whether the steward actually had to rely on his plan or whether it worked. The parable has a classic open ending.

The best reading of the parable is one that takes into account its setting in Luke's Gospel. The theme of the preceding chapter had to do with table fellowship and celebrations over those who are "found." This chapter and some of the material following have to do with possessions and wealth—which create a twofold crisis for the steward. Not only has he wasted possessions that belonged to his master; he has been found out. His behavior is not only a breach of financial responsibility but also an act that affects his relationship with the master.

As he quells his panic and begins to deal with the situation, he acts in two ways that are commendable. He accepts some financial responsibility in reducing the debts, and at the same time he translates economic realities into relational realities. Whatever the outcome, whether he repays the amount by which he reduced the debts or is fired, he has created good relations with a variety of people. It is his resourcefulness and his realization that friends are more important than money that finally commends the steward to the consideration of the disciples.

The parable makes little sense if we assign roles, symbolically or otherwise. The master is not God; the steward is not Jesus or a disciple. Instead, here is a classic "how much more" parable. If even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of light realize that "true riches" have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions. It is in fact, as Jesus concludes, impossible to truly serve God if one is also trying to serve wealth and possessions.

The parable and the sayings that follow it put us squarely into the middle of one of the oldest dilemmas known to humankind. We may think that materialism and consumerism are North American, 21st-century phenomena—and perhaps nowhere and at no other time have they held such sway over human lives. Luke's Gospel, however, bears ample witness to a larger reality—these are ancient as well as contemporary problems.

This Gospel also leaves us little room to rationalize our overabundance and our pursuit of even more. The dishonest steward, the farmer who built more barns, the rich man who ignored his neighbor Lazarus, the ruler who valued possessions more than abundant life—all point us toward the better path, the path of radical trust in God alone that Jesus walked before us.

Luke's Gospel is countercultural, a vision that perhaps finds its true home only in monasteries and other places where radically communal and nonpossessive values survive and thrive. Almost a year ago, an Amish community astounded the nation with an unfathomable act of forgiveness. It is likely no accident that this gift of reconciliation came from a community of people disciplined in serving God rather than mammon.