

Exegetical uh-oh

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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I like homiletical challenges. I enjoy preaching on Trinity Sunday and when Jesus tells us that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. I like tackling the tough doctrines and demands of the gospel. But [Sunday's Gospel lesson](#), the parable of the dishonest manager? That takes difficult to another order of magnitude.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus tells a parable about a man whose boss found out that he had been neglecting his duties as manager. "Give me an account of your management," the owner said, sending the steward into a panic. "What will I do?" he asked. Unable to do physical work and too proud to beg, the man began to cut deals with his master's debtors, slashing their debts and currying favor with them. He was hoping that, when he was fired, he could call in those favors and live off of the payback.

All of that is clear to us. The neglectful manager becomes a dishonest manager. He's lazy and prideful and deceitful. And that's when things get strange. Just when we're sure that there's nothing good about this man, the owner finds out and says, "Well done, you shrewd son of a gun." The hearers of the parable are certain that the owner will punish the dishonest servant for his wickedness, but, instead, the master praises him. Say what?

There's no way to make this easy to understand. This is a really tough parable. And anyone who claims that they can explain it in a way that makes perfect sense is either lying to you or is lying to themselves about what the parable means.

Here are the four principles I want to keep in mind this week as I'm pondering this tough passage:

1. Jesus isn't teaching his disciples how to be good stewards of earthly resources. He's teaching them (and us) how to be good stewards of the kingdom. To put it

simply, this is a parable. It's designed to teach us about something other than the narrative itself. This isn't about being a manager or being an owner. It's about being a disciple.

2. Don't confuse the owner's commendation for shrewdness with a commendation for dishonesty. In parables, sometimes the vehicle for conveying a message isn't the same as the message. In this already-confusing passage, don't make things worse by mistaking the principle being celebrated with the attention-grabbing package it's wrapped in.
3. The comparison matters. After the parable is finished, Jesus gives us some insight into its meaning by comparing the "children of light" with the "children of this age." The former seem to lag behind their counterparts in shrewdness. The parable itself, therefore, is not an independent teaching on kingdom behavior. It's comparative. "Be more like the children of this age," Jesus is telling them. But don't forget no. 2 above. He's not urging them to be dishonest. He's calling on them to be more shrewd.
4. Locate this parable in the long, ongoing Lucan theme of the kingdom's priority. The strangeness of this story is partially mitigated when we remember that Luke has used several shocking teachings to demonstrate that the kingdom must come first (e.g. "anyone who puts hand to the plow" and the good Samaritan and "I came to bring fire"). Ever since the Transfiguration in Luke 9, after which Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," we've seen that nothing can get in the way of the kingdom.

In the end, this parable is another teaching about the urgency of the kingdom. Just as the manager is faced with the sudden reality of his unemployment and responds with unabashed shrewdness, so too must the disciples recognize the sudden reality of the kingdom's advent and respond with kingdom shrewdness. I'm still thinking about the "dishonest wealth" that Jesus seems to see as a means by which those kingdom priorities can be accomplished, but, for now, I'm trying to remember that this parable may surprise us, but its teaching shouldn't.

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