

Wait, what's the point of this parable? (Luke 16:1-13)

At first the dishonest manager seems to offer an example of what not to do. But then it seems like he's the hero. What's going on?

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September 19, 2025

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When I was a college student, I attended quite a few evangelical conferences. None was more memorable than the one where a confident quarterback-pastor was bested by a parable.

The keynote speaker was a preacher who had played college football. Lest we fail to note this fact, he carried a football as he strode onto the stage for his first talk. He smiled, teeth sparkling, and asked for a volunteer anywhere in the huge auditorium to catch a pass from him. An eager student near me raised his hands, and sure enough, the pastor uncorked a perfect spiral pass right to him. Unfortunately the student was not an experienced wide receiver, and the ball ricocheted and hit the face of another student, who was escorted out to receive medical attention.

This fumble was perhaps an omen of the sermon to come. Unfazed by the face injury he had just inflicted, the pastor puffed out his chest and shared with us that he would be teaching on the most difficult-to-interpret parable—if not passage—in the New Testament: the parable of the shrewd (or unjust) manager. Why had he chosen such a confounder? It wasn't clear, except that he seemed to revel in the difficulty level.

I don't remember the details of what he preached that day. I only remember that even though at the time I was a loyal evangelical prone to hero-worship, still I was thinking, *Wow, he botched this*. After his sermon I still had no idea what this parable means.

Decades later, as much as I like to poke fun at an overconfident jock, I can't really blame the guy. What in the world is Jesus teaching in this story? Someone is about to be fired, but before his boss can axe him he makes a series of underhanded deals so that his boss's business partners will smile upon him when he's unemployed. If all we had was the plotline in verses 1–7, I would likely say this is an example of what not to do. Don't be like this unscrupulous money manager, who gives away someone else's money without permission, and not to help others—solely to advantage himself.

But then the manager is commended, and to make matters worse, Jesus offers his own shocking takeaway: “I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” What? So the shady manager is the hero after all?

To be fair, I didn't include the second half of Jesus' statement. I'll also admit that I excluded it because I do not understand it: "so that when [the wealth] is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes." It sort of sounds like we're supposed to rip off some people in a way that will benefit ourselves and others, and that second group will sneak us into heaven.

Whenever I read this passage, which I have done from time to time over the years just to see if I can be a better Bible teacher than that barrel-chested quarterback, I can only make sense of it if I squint my eyes. When I do, and this story merges with Jesus' other teachings about money and what matters, I come away with this truth: people matter so much more than money.

Money does matter. It matters because it can support our survival and because it can help others. It matters because it can take our hearts captive. And it matters, as the unjust manager reminds us, because it can make us friends. Friendships matter more than wealth. Friendships can last forever. Our wealth, whether gained honestly or dishonestly, is well spent if it helps other people and makes us friends.

But you might want to duck, because I know there's a real chance I fumbled the ball.