### “Faithful in a Little” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 18, 2022

**Luke 16:1–13**

1Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ 3Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ 8And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

10 “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13No slave 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.”

Again we have a pair of gospel passages that share some of the same vocabulary, but convey very different messages. In fact, if we take the subject of faithfulness and honesty, then the messages in the two halves are the somewhat opposite of each other. Actually the first part of the story is not really a lesson about faithfulness, but about cleverness and focus.

The first part is a very down to earth parable; such a thing could have happened many times in that society. A business owner finds out that his manager has been wasteful and possibly dishonest, and decides to dismiss him, but first requires an up-to-date reckoning of all accounts. This manager is a wily fellow who knows how to take care of himself, so he goes to the owner’s various debtors and reduces their debts, knowing that they will be grateful.

When the master finds out, he is amused and impressed with the manager’s cleverness. He says “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (16:8). The lesson here is that believers—the children of light—need to be more wise. They seem to be outsmarted by the clever cynics, the “children of this age.” Does this mean we should take the cynical path and pursue selfish cleverness in all our dealings with each other? No, but it commends cleverness itself, and recommends that the children of light have more of it.

Exactly how and what believers should do to *be* more clever, is not explained, but they are clearly being told that they ought to be more clever. Perhaps this means believers ought to be more far-sighted about their spiritual progress, or have a better idea about what progress they are making. It almost certainly has to do with preparing for the future. Spiritual-minded people ought to think about their spiritual future at least as diligently as material-minded people think of their material future. The materialists are “more shrewd,” Jesus says (16:8).

To me, this implies that believers ought to have more of a concept of where they are headed, spiritually. If someone has good social skills, but not much individual creativity, then maybe that person should start working on their creativity, anticipating that they will someday need it. If another person is philosophically wise and theologically educated, but has minimal experience in intimate relationships, that person needs a family life to teach him or her the art of relating to others.

Many of us are aware of what our weak points are, but do we have a shrewd concept of how these deficiencies will be addressed, of how we can achieve well-rounded growth? I think this parable is saying that believers ought to plan ahead in the areas that really matter: areas of spiritual, intellectual, and social growth, and the issues of everlasting life.

The next instruction is linked with this one only by the common words faithfulness, wealth, and dishonesty, but it is making a completely different point. It is all about honesty and trustworthiness. Jesus is saying that if you are honest in little assignments, you will be honest in greater tasks. If you can be trusted with a small responsibility, you can be trusted with a big one. But if you’ve shown yourself to be untrustworthy, why should anyone trust you? And if you have been dishonest with someone else’s property, who’s going to give you property of your own? You can either serve God and be honest, or you can serve mammon—that is, money—and be sleazy.

I don’t think these two stories should have been connected at all, their message is so different. But sometimes an evangelist connects together sayings that have the same catchwords. What we should do is notice how different passages have different messages, and most parables have only one simple message. The parable here is about cleverness being a desired quality, and that spiritual people need to develop spiritual cleverness, just like materialistic people are often very clever about the things that matter to them. Pursue your spiritual treasures with as much devotion as those who go after material treasure and comfort here on earth.

Honesty and integrity are very important to spiritual-minded people, and that is the focus of the second part of today’s Scripture. It makes sense that we will be advanced by a series of ever-increasing trusts. First we show that we can be trusted with something relatively minor or down-to-earth, then we may be trusted with bigger things and higher responsibilities. We humans are often not very good judges of who is trustworthy, even of ourselves, but God knows how to measure just how trustworthy and honest we are. We are in the School of Love and Truth. God’s love will protect, guide, and encourage our growth.

Let’s learn more diligently and honestly to execute our responsibilities and trusts. It is one of the things about which we could pray. Trustworthiness is an important soul-measure. We can ask for God’s help. We could say “Make me a better friend, a better husband, a better worker, a better volunteer. Make me an instrument of your justice, O God. Help me to bring joy to others, to respect my responsibilities, and to grow in your light. Let my actions be a guide to others on their spiritual path. Let me both receive and share your love, always.”