

Luke 16:1-13
Saint Paul's
21 September 2025

In nomine...

When I was little, we spent a lot of time at my Grandma and Grandpa Hofmeyer's farm. They were my step grandparents, but they were always kind and welcoming and generous. My stepmother had two brothers who each had families, so the cousins would get together on weekends and spend the days wandering and exploring and imagining—with exactly zero adult supervision as long as we were back to the house in time for dinner. A farm is a magical place for little kids. Barns that we could pretend were castles, with ropes in the loft for moving hay that we could swing back and forth on over lava pits and rivers. A John Deere combine that we would sit in and pretend was the Millennium Falcon. Grandpa had an old ice cream maker that he would let the cousins take turns cranking for a while—though to be honest I am not sure that we ever helped too much.

One of my favorite times of the year on the farm was the Fourth of July. Because we could climb up on top of the grain bins and see the fireworks from dozens of small towns and municipalities all around us. It was incredible and I can still see the flashes of reds, blues, yellows, purples – bursting above the cornfields and my cousins pointing and yelling as another display would begin that we hadn't seen. And all of this was ours. This beautiful corner of the world belonged just to us.

Except it didn't. I do not remember when I learned that grandma and grandpa didn't own the farm, but I do remember being terribly confused. They did all the work, grandpa spent hours in the combine at harvest, sometimes not coming home and just sleeping out there. And yet, someone else owned the land and received the first cut of the money that was gained when the corn and soybeans were sold. I did not understand it as a kid, and I am not sure that I fully grasp it as an adult either.

Things were not so different in Jesus' day. Rich men bought farms and poor men worked on them. Farms then, like today, relied on the labor of folks who the wealthy would not invite to dinner. Folks whose status in society may be questionable. Folks who at the end of the day have very little to show for the blood, sweat, and tears that flow forth from their bodies and feed the soil. The manager, or steward if you are reading the King James version of the text, was more than just a middleman. The steward was a "retainer and contractor"¹, they would negotiate prices, oversee the smaller farms, and they would make their earning from the share of the rents – or value of the crops – that was paid to the landowner. They were, as Andrew McGowan describes them, stewards of injustice.²

¹ Andrew's Version, "A Steward of Injustice", 16 September 2025, https://open.substack.com/pub/abmcg/p/a-steward-of-injustice?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email .

² Ibid.

The question for us today, is why is Jesus praising the actions of this unjust man? It is worth saying clearly, that neither the dishonest steward, nor the wealthy landowner's praise of him – are examples of God's conception of morality nor are they visions of God's self. But Jesus as he often does has chosen an example that his hearers would be familiar with, it is not hard for them to imagine a rich man who has gobbled up their farms or a dishonest steward who is likely taking too much from them and giving too little to the business owner. Most of us here are not intimately familiar with farming practices, but I imagine that most of us can recall an unfair boss or a supervisor who is skimming a little a little bit off the top for their self.

So again, we ask what does this have to say to us today? Especially when the praise of the dishonest steward seems so very contrary to how Jesus would normally commend us to act. First, we must put this in the context of the breadth of Jesus' teaching and not try and make it stand up on its own. To understand the teachings of Jesus we have to take them as a whole. We might ask ourselves what does Jesus say about wealth? Our Lord's teachings are quite consistent, earthly wealth does not lead to the Kingdom of Heaven, and our use of our wealth will be a significant factor when we stand before him on the judgement day.

Having in our minds the reality that building up wealth is not a good as defined by Jesus, perhaps helps us to understand what Andrew McGowan meant when he described the manager as a steward of injustice. I would offer that Jesus is saying here that the system is corrupt. A system where poor folks lose their land and rich men gain said land is not a foretaste of the Kingdom. The steward no matter how *justly* he manages the business – is still managing a corrupt enterprise in a corrupt system.

And that hasn't changed. The system we live in where some folks can afford to eat, and some cannot – is corrupt. The system where some sleep on the street and some sleep-in feather beds – is corrupt. The system where some have free speech and some do not – is corrupt. We do not need to look very far or hard to see the corruption of this world. Perhaps what Jesus wants us to consider when we hear this passage is “how will we live in this corrupt system?” Will we let it corrupt us? Or will we do a little good each day and use our resources rightly? Will we be faithful in a little and thus be faithful in much – as Jesus says?

Our Lord says unequivocally, "You cannot serve God and wealth." That remains true. With the wealth that we have, will we serve God or mammon? We cannot overturn the whole system, but we can refuse to let it define who are and how we live. Will we use our wealth to lift up the poor and the outcast? Will we use our wealth to fight antisemitism, while also striving to end the continued genocide in Gaza? Will we use our wealth to build the Kingdom of God, or will we build bigger barns to store away the excess grain for tomorrow?

Beloved, we are, each of us, stewards of injustice – in ways big and small we benefit from the labor of the overlooked and underpaid. That is a sad reality. What we must do is work in little ways to serve God and not be overwhelmed by the allure of injustice. We must not be content to comfortable, while others bleed and starve and die beneath the rubble. We must make no peace with the ways of this world, each day, each breath, each step must draw us closer to the Kingdom of God. So that at the last, when we stand before our maker and redeemer, he will say to us "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things... enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

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