

That's what a casual reading of this parable seems to remind me of...that old TV game show that aired along with the Price is Right on morning TV where contestants vied for a prize. My grandmother loved both of those shows...and when we come to this parable that seems to be what is happening. When looking at the parables of Jesus we usually come to them with an assumption or two. The first assumption is that they are to teach us something that Jesus wants us to know and understand, primarily something about God and our relationship with God. A second usually assumed aspect is that there will be something which Jesus' audience would have found unexpected or out of place in the narrative. Something that did not fit in the story which although it is about familiar things it has an element which surprises...like the shepherd of last week who left 99 sheep in danger in the wilderness to go after one stray. That wasn't a practical action for any shepherd whose livelihood depended upon this flock. In those earlier parables assigning the role of God to that shepherd was one apparent way to understand the message. This parable seems to present us with a difficult picture, one which has images we aren't sure what we are supposed to do with; we're not sure what we should learn from it because we are not sure what role either the rich man or the steward would have in God's reign. And the thing which seems to be most out of place is Jesus' endorsement of the master's praise for his steward. Again this is a parable only found in Luke. Like many of those found in Luke's gospel the issue of money and how it functions among the characters is central to understanding this story. It begins with a rich man as many in Luke do. Here a rich man is calling on the carpet one of his employees. In most of Luke's narratives the rich man can be equated with the wicked; so we initially expect this to be a description of some unjust action by a wicked master toward someone under his control. Yet this confrontation is with an employee whose status is given as a manager, not just a powerless servant or slave. The Greek word can be translated as an overseer, an administrator or a steward. This is someone who has held a position of trust. But reports or rumors have come to the rich man's attention which accuse the manager of abuse of that trust. The manager was "squandering" the rich man's property. This leads us to two expectations—the accusations are false and the rich man is unjust or the manager is the one behaving wickedly. By various subtitles that have been added during translations—unjust steward, dishonest servant or in the NRSV the dishonest manager---our first interpretation is that evidently this man has betrayed that the rich man's trust; that what is happening in this situation is embezzlement, an intentional cheating of the employer. But although those subtitles added to this passage within different translations indicate this parable to be about dishonesty on the part of the employee; there is actually no charge of theft in the story itself. The manager has "squandered" or scattered the masters property, not stolen it. The rich man demands an accounting of what property the steward has been managing and also tells him he is fired all in the same verse. The next verse switches to the manager's response to what has happened to him. It expresses his concern over losing the security of his position. There is no indication that the manager feels guilt over wrongdoing, there is no instance of repentance. At this point it helps to again remember the parables Luke has just recorded which have been about the joy felt by God over the repentance of the lost who have been found. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, they are found but repentance

is not actually a factor in the story as told because sheep and coins don't by their nature repent. That aspect is just in the comments which follow the parables. In this parable the steward, like the son in the story which just precedes it—the one commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, could be about someone who could be guilty and could need to feel repentance. But unlike the son, the steward does not seem to feel guilt or express repentance. Instead, he devises a plan of action for this accounting that he is called to render to the rich man. “Then he says to himself, what will I do, now that my master is taking my position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” The fired manager assesses his changed situation—he no longer has the position of trust, so how is he going to find a place in the community—he says he is too weak for hard labor and is too proud to beg. His solution is somewhat creative. It is to start gathering the master's squandered property together—this is the “Let's make a deal aspect” of the parable. When he summons his master's debtors, one by one, he asks the debtor what the debtor owed to the master. Evidently he had not kept track of what was owed, thus the charge of “squandering” was valid. But what he does next is surprising, he pulls the let's make a deal option—he knew who owed a debt, not the amount but he set about collecting some of the rich man's assets. Although he reduced the debt, he did indeed collect—gather—property before he went back and made the accounting to the rich man. So when he goes back to give the accounting his report shows some gains to the master's property—the coffers may not be as full as they would have been had he not failed in his duty to keep a strict account—but neither are they as empty as before—some of the debt has been collected and so the master commends him “because he has acted shrewdly” according to the NRSV translation. But other translations vary in their assigning of meaning to the Greek word used here. In the King James Version, the commendation is because the steward has acted wisely—the Greek dictionary defines the word used as prudent or wise. Again, perhaps influenced by the subtitles used to describe the parable the use of the word shrewd seems to attribute to the steward something unsavory in the way he went about gathering in the debts owed to his master. Taking away the pejorative of shrewd and using wise or prudent instead, it becomes easier to see why the master would offer a commendation—he is now in possession of assets that have been previously uncollected or lost by the manager's squandering behavior. But how do we understand the commentary that Jesus then makes: “for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” If we again look to another translation, it may help with this issue. I use what is known as Young's literal translation often, but that is not easily accessible for most of you, so I am going to again quote the King James version which you can check when you get home. There it reads: “for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.” It seems Jesus is criticizing his followers for their lack of effort on his behalf. In order to retrieve some of what had been squandered, the steward put forth a lot more effort than if he had just kept track of the accounts for which he was responsible in the beginning. That verse followed by Jesus' exhortation which refers back to the motivation the steward had for making these deals is important—The dealing done by the manager was not just to recover some of the master's resources, but was also to make for himself friends. “And 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.” In many ways this still seems to make no sense. But although we don't often

appreciate it, there is irony to be found in Scripture, and what if this is an ironic comparison which Jesus is making? What if Jesus is pointing out all the elaborate ways the steward in this parable acted to ensure a somewhat positive accounting and the making of friends for the future when his original position would have been secure if he had just done his job and not “squandered” the master’s property at the beginning of the parable? Perhaps, this is an urging for those who follow Jesus to wisely or prudently use what resources are given to them to serve him and not worry so much about the wealth of this world. The sayings of Jesus which follow the parable are about the faithful use of resources. They also help provide us with a clue to the meaning of this parable. “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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” These statements are fairly accurate summations of our human nature—if we are trustworthy in small matters—then we are likely to be trustworthy in larger ones. If we relate this to the parable instead of viewing it as a truism observation, what is the message for us? We are given many resources—and in the way of the world, we try very hard to manage them for our benefit—we are very concerned about the wealth of the world, what the King James version calls mammon instead of dishonest wealth. Yet we are also given other resources by God through Jesus—we are given a steadfast love, abiding faithfulness and unending mercy. These are also resources whose use we are given to manage—to share with others so that our master receives what is due—gratitude and lives lived in faithful obedience and loving relationship with God and with others. The conclusion to this passage is very familiar to us, the injunction: “no slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” This is not an unusual warning from Scripture—the Hebrew prophets sounded it often as well. But Jesus is not only sounding a warning against worship of wealth, but is inviting us to its good use in generosity toward others as well as an indication that an accounting may be held about the use we have made of resources entrusted to us. When we look at this parable we often view it in terms of the wealth of the world, not the wealth given to us by faith. We need to consider how faithful we are in our use and sharing of those gifts as well as any monetary possessions...the keeping of the promise to love one another, to live so that others see in us God’s presence in the world...a spirit of generosity not only in monetary things but in a sharing of time and joy...the willingness to be a comforting presence and so many other resources which give beauty and abundance of life to us. We are called to be faithful in all we are given, whether it is little or much in our eyes. Whatever the resources we have to manage, they are sufficient for our needs and abundant enough to share. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.