

One thing we know to be true—there were no chapter and verse divisions in the original scripture text
Those were added many years later—chapters in the 13th century and verses in the 16th century
In addition, they didn't use sentence punctuation as we know it in the original text
For those of us who grew up on the KJV, we know that there were no paragraph breaks
Therefore, it's good to consider whether or not the breaks in Scripture are appropriate

The division between chapters 15 and 16 of Luke is one of those cases

After much study, I am convinced by scholars that say one must read chapter 16 in light of 15
Or... One must read the parable of the Dishonest manager in light of the Prodigal Son
I suggest that the parable of the dishonest manger belongs with chapter 15

At a minimum, it should not be cut off from the parable of the lost son

There are parallels with the story of the Lost Son that tie them together

- The son throws himself on the mercy of his father and the manager throws himself on the mercy of the master
- Both the son and the steward betray a trust
- Neither offers excuses to explain their behavior
- Both "squandered their property"
- The son received extraordinary mercy from his father, and I will show that the same is true of the dishonest manager
- Both stories are missing a final scene, which is left up to the actor in the parable to enact according to their choices. Will the older brother come into the party? What will the dishonest manager do with the grace and mercy offered?

Luke 16:1-8 The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

This is a surprising parable because it seems that Jesus is praising dishonesty
Scholars struggled with the parable for years—often saying it is the most difficult to interpret

We have a rich man and a manager of the rich man's holdings or property

There is no indication that the rich man is an absentee landlord or one who is cruel to renters

From all indications he is well respected in the community

The manager is likely a paid overseer or steward of the property—the estate's business manager

He's probably an agent that works for a salary, yet also receives a fee from the renters

Like a tip—an appropriate amount is considered honorable

The rich man finds out from other people in the community that the manager is dishonest

We don't know the specifics of his dishonesty or how he was squandering the master's property

It appears that the rich man is told out of respect by those who have dealings with the manager

We do know that the rich man summons the manager and confronts him in strong language

Accusing him without giving detail of what or how he knows the man is dishonest

Silence on the part of the manager, implies his guilt—he doesn't try to defend himself

The rich man does not put him in jail—the expected outcome of such dishonesty with money

Rather he extends unusual mercy in simply firing him from his job—immediate action

He also tells the manager to turn in the books that he uses to keep the accounts

I think we misinterpret the words, *Give me an accounting of your management*

Which implies that there will be an audit of the books

Rather he tells him to get his books and bring them to the master
He knows what an audit will tell him, and he knows he could falsify the books

The manager now has a problem! *I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.*

Clearly, he has no options and is unwilling or unable to do the ones available to him

There is no way to get his job back and if he doesn't do as he is told, he'll go to jail

He must turn in the books—but he has a small window of time in which to act—and act quickly

Before he turns in the books and before the word gets out that he is fired...

He knows he can get away with continuing to act with the authority of the master

He also knows that he needs to act quickly in order to get in the good graces of someone

Otherwise, he will be forced to dig or beg, because no one will ever hire him again

Therefore, like the Prodigal Son, he devises a plan to fix his situation and put him in good graces

He gambles that he can get away with it and succeed—if not, he will go to jail

He also risks everything on the belief that the master is a merciful man as he's been before

So, he calls in the debtors—people who rent large acreage from the rich man and raise crops

These aren't sharecroppers or poor people working the land

The renters themselves are wealthy and also upstanding citizens in the community

While he likely called in many debtors—we are only given 2 examples

The first debtor comes in and he asks how much he owes—which the manager and master know

We know this isn't the extra to the manager as this is the public bill

He tells him he owes a 100 jugs of olive oil

It isn't due, nor is it overdue—it's what he will owe after the harvest is complete

100 jugs of olive oil are the rent he pays for using the land for his olive orchard

It is not dependent on yield—although it can be discounted in bad years

The manager has the bill in his books, and they have just confirmed what the amount is

The manager tells the debtor to take the bill and quickly write 50 jugs in his own handwriting

An estate manager has this authority—if he isn't fired, which the debtors don't know

The books are kept with the estate, but the bill written in the debtor's handwriting

Which kept the contract legal and mutually agreed upon

The second debtor tells the manager he owes the master 100 containers of wheat

The manager tells him to take the bill and change it to 80 containers of wheat

Again, writing the bill in the debtor's handwriting and giving it to the manager

In both cases, the reduction, which appears unequal, was valued at about 500 denarii

A denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer

—so, 500 denarii indicate both wealth and rental of extremely large plots of land

With the bills rewritten—the manager turns in the books to the rich landowner

The master looks at the books and right away, he sees what the manager has done

Now the master has a problem...

Does he confront the manager or even have him jailed for cheating him yet again?

However, the master knows that the manager has acted on his behalf

Believing that he acted on the master's authority, the debtors are grateful

The whole town is singing the praises of the rich man's generosity

Explaining the problem to the debtors will be disappointing and difficult—even cause anger
Better is to keep silent—accept their praise—and write off the loss
His generosity does more good than exacting justice

The dishonest manager has gambled everything on the mercy of the master—and won
Not only does he not go to jail, but he has also earned the good graces of the community
Yet, again, the mercy of the master is extended to the manager—while he loses the job, he's free
Although the manager is still called dishonest
He likely will get another job, although he will be watched closely as they don't trust him

Luke 16:8 - And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...

This is where we begin to struggle...
To let him off the hook is generous, but to commend him for his actions doesn't seem right

The word translated as shrewdly in the NRSV or NIV can also mean wisely as the KJV reads
It is not the traditional *sophia*, but a word only used once in the New Testament
There is an Old Testament meaning of wisdom that includes skill in self-preservation
It is wisely as in mindfully, prudently, or providently
The master recognizes what the manager has done and also knows that he will benefit from it
The generosity people perceive will serve him well and he can well afford the expense
Therefore, he commends the steward for how he has responded to a bad situation
He does not rehire him, nor does he recognize him as honest, simply as prudent

...children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.
The manager gambled on the fact that the master is a merciful man and expected mercy to prevail
Jesus wants his followers to see God as a merciful and gracious God, trusting God's love and welcome
Too often, we as "children of light" expect judgment not mercy
We've been conditioned to think that God will punish sin...
Rather than to trust that there is love, mercy, forgiveness as the answer to sin

The unwritten conclusion to the story, can only be written by the dishonest manager, himself
Twice now he has been the beneficiary of the grace and mercy of the master
Will he continue his dishonest ways?
Or will he allow the grace and mercy to transform him?
Like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son—he has another chance...
Grace isn't a once in a lifetime opportunity—oops you missed it!
Grace and mercy come to us again and again and again...
It isn't based on what we deserve—it isn't based on our obedience
The amazing thing is that there is grace and a new opportunity even when we do wrong
Even for those of us who have already chosen to do life with Christ
It is astounding, yet I've felt it in my own life—grace extended even when I acted out
Instead of condemnation or a scolding, I found God's grace and love came to me
With that grace and love—I had everything I needed to find way forward
Have we not all been found out and tried to shift things so that we are in a better light?
Tried to manipulate the impression others have so they will not judge us?
Done so without confession or admission of guilt?
We stand silent and then try to step aside and create our own future
Yet God's love, grace and mercy comes all the way to us and finds us every time! It's enough!