

A Generous God Whose Love Knows No Limits

Luke 16:1-13

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This parable is known by a couple of titles: The Dishonest Steward, and The Shrewd Manager. The commentaries are consistent on one point about this parable: that it is the most difficult one that Jesus told! After that, they go off in a variety of directions and interpretations. And who can blame them, for Luke himself seems to have a few ideas of what this parable meant. Verses 9-13, which follow the parable, offer 3 possible interpretations:

- verse 9: make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, these friends will welcome you into the eternal homes.
- Verses 10-12: whoever is faithful in a little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a little is dishonest also in much. If you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust you with true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?
- And verse 13: you can't serve 2 masters--you'll either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You can't serve God and wealth.

Is this parable about where our allegiances lie? Or about how faithful we are with what we have? Or about making the right connections with the right people to ensure our future?

Yes, in some ways this parable is about all of these things, but it is also perhaps, about more than these things. In many ways, this is a stewardship parable; a parable about our relationship with wealth. It is about how we use our wealth--Do we use it to build our own security or to build relationships with others?

I think one of the hardest things about this parable is figuring out why Jesus told it. Why on earth does he tell a story in which the main character--the dishonest steward--is commended for his actions, which seem to be dishonest? How can Jesus affirm dishonest gain?

The question that preoccupies me is: Was the steward dishonest, or was he a shrewd manager? The parable opens with us learning that charges have been brought against him for squandering his master's property. He is fired, or maybe threatened with

being fired, and then comes up with a solution to his problems. Here's where it gets tricky. He reduces the debts owed by the debtors. There are several possibilities for what happened: he further stole from his master by changing the amount that each debtor owed; he deducted the interest owed from each debt, interest which, according to Dt. 23:19-20, was prohibited from being charged; he deducted his own cut from what others owed; or it was a bad crop year, so he acted the way any good master would act (but without the master's permission) and deducted a certain amount from each debtors bill.

Each of us will most likely be drawn to one of these possibilities over the others, for various reasons. I really want the steward to have given up his own cut, or to have deducted the interest, because those are the neatest, cleanest interpretations of this parable. I'm more comfortable with him being an example, if his actions are worthy of being exemplified. It makes it harder to explain why verse 8 calls him dishonest, though.

Even the last explanation, of taking the kind of crop year into account, is better than the first one. This last explanation is from a commentary that takes the Middle Eastern culture and context into account (Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*), and says that this action would have been consistent with the practice of a master taking into account the kind of year it was for crops, and adjusting the rent accordingly. The debtors are the tenants, and the yearly rent has been agreed on up front. The manager, who essentially has been fired, effective immediately, stops in to see the tenants on the way from the boss's office to clear out his own office. Before anyone knows that he has been fired, he reduces the rent they owe. The shrewdness of this act is in the fact that the tenants would have seen this as a generous act on the part of the master/landowner, and been so grateful to him. The manager, as well as ingratiating himself to them, has also made it very difficult for the master to go back to the tenants and put the rent back to the original amount. He commends the manager for this shrewdness. In desperate times, the manager has decided to gamble that the master will be generous and merciful in this situation, as he has proved to be in other situations. For, instead of jailing the manager for his mismanagement initially, he is just fired. This is a merciful master, and the manager counts on that mercy to ensure his future. He also counts on the gratitude of the tenants to do him favours in the future.

So, there's something appealing about this interpretation as well. It's kind of like the first Fair trade arrangement--reducing or eliminating the cut that the middle people get for the products of the workers. But there is really nothing appealing about the first interpretation, in which the manager just reduces the debts owed in order to make sure he has friends in the future. This is theft, pure and simple. And it makes me really uncomfortable with Jesus right now. For it is much easier to fit people and their actions

into neat little categories: this person is good, this person is bad; this action is honest, this action is dishonest; this person is a thief, this person is not a thief.

But that isn't the Jesus we know, is it? The Jesus we know is always overturning our neat categories and boxes for people and events, and re-framing them. Where my heart and vision are narrow, Jesus presents a broader, fuller picture of a person or event. And the picture Jesus gives is one in which a person is more than their one act or decision. Real life and real people are never 1 dimensional, but always multi-dimensional.

Perhaps this interpretation of the parable, while leaving us uncomfortable, offers us the most realistic interpretation of life. It's an interpretation that knows the politics of the office or workplace; politics which require wisdom, cleverness and shrewdness to navigate some days. Some days, the choice is between the lesser of 2 evils; the action that will do the least amount of damage in an economy that is less than ideal; that has taken the best of us and our businesses and thrown them out the window. Some days, there just are no easy answers.

But in the midst of the difficult choices stands a master who understands what it is like to live in the world and need to make these difficult choices. In the midst of the messiness stands One with eyes of compassion who sees beyond the single act or decision, and welcomes the whole person, in all of their--our--messiness and complications.

While we may have a tendency for labels and categories that are limiting, this One's tendency is to extend mercy and compassion that goes beyond labels and limits--"What shrewdness, to take money earned through questionable means and use it to build relationships. That's what wealth is intended for--to be used for the well-being of others, not your own security."

So while on many levels, this parable is about stewardship--our relationship to wealth--another meaning has made itself known to me this week in my own struggle to understand this parable. And that is, how this parable points out my need to categorize people and God's great mercy in loving us beyond our categories, decisions and actions. This parable offers a perspective that is compassionate and loving toward those who find themselves in impossible situations, sometimes partly by their own doing, but many times because of a system that is broken or flawed. In such situations shrewdness and clear thinking are what is needed to make a bad situation better. And that is what is affirmed by this compassionate God, who loves us beyond our failings.