

"The Unjust Steward"
Luke 16:1-8
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September 1, 2024

I have to begin by confessing that I've spent a majority of my ministry trying to avoid this morning's lesson. And WHY? Because there is almost universal agreement among biblical scholars that the Parable of the Unjust Steward is not just THE MOST COMPLEX parable Jesus ever spoke, it is arguably THE MOST DIFFICULT of all his teachings. It's been called "a puzzle for interpreters through the centuries." Even St. Augustine said, "I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord." Here, Jesus tells a story about a shrewd scoundrel who benefits himself by defrauding his employer and then he tells his disciples that they are to emulate THEMSELVES after this man. Most commentators have characterized the steward as dishonest, shameful, unjust, unrighteous, and wicked while OTHERS have tried to portray him in a much more FAVORABLE light by viewing him as clever, honorable, prudent, and shrewd.

But how you interpret this parable ULTIMATELY depends on how you view the STEWARD, the main character in the story. Those who regard him as a rascal and a rogue see Jesus as saying that there is much the church can learn from the world. If only his disciples and subsequently the Church were as fully committed to the kingdom of God as the world is to the kingdom of money, they would accomplish so much more. As the steward used his master's funds to win the favor of those who owe his master money, so are we to learn how to use money--what the Bible calls "filthy lucre" or "unrighteous mammon"--to make friends and extend our influence while ALSO using it to help the poor and needy around us. After all, did not Jesus say that we are to be wise as serpents but innocent as doves?

But is that REALLY what Jesus is implying through his parable? Let me give you a couple of examples of persons who did just that and you tell ME whether you think they honored Christ and his kingdom by doing so. I received my doctorate from Drew University in Madison, N.J, an outstanding Methodist institution that provides undergraduate education, trains persons for the ministry, and offers advanced degrees in a variety of programs. Over the years, it has sent thousands of ministers and missionaries all around the world as well as staffed hundreds of colleges and universities with fine teachers and administrators. Well Drew was not founded by an enterprising Methodist minister by rather by one of the seediest, most despicable human beings of his era. Daniel Drew was a 19th century robber baron who became one of the richest men of his time through guile and deceit. Though virtually illiterate throughout much of his life, he was named a director of one the largest investment companies in the country, yet consistently bet against it in the stock market. This resulted in huge profits for himself but ruining thousands of other investors in the process. He regarded himself to be a devout Methodist and yet had no qualms in cheating his fellow church parishioners out of their money. In 1866, he gave \$250,000 to found Drew Theological Seminary and increased this sum with successive donations that amounted to nearly a million dollars. However, he eventually went bankrupt and wound up a lonely, bitter old man, dependent upon the charity of his son. Here was a man who was clever in the ways of the world but who ALSO used the fruit of his shrewdness to help benefit the church and her mission. Now is THAT the type of behavior our Lord is asking us to emulate in his parable, that we are to be generous and benevolent towards the church while shrewd and deceptive towards EVERYONE ELSE?

Here's another illustration: I served a church for five years that was situated one block

from Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J. Now Seton Hall is a noted Catholic university named after the first U.S.-born saint, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton. Three buildings on its campus have been named for alumni donors who were convicted of massive corporate crimes or misdeeds. There's Kozlowski Hall, named after Tyco's ex-CEO Dennis Kozlowski who ran a "criminal enterprise" that looted more than \$600 million from shareholders. Across the green is the library named after Frank Walsh, Jr. a former Tyco board member who was convicted of receiving a \$20 million bonus from Kozlowski without the board's approval. And then NEXT to the library is the recreation center named for First Jersey Securities founder Robert Brennan, who was convicted of bankruptcy fraud and money laundering. (The school has since removed his name from the building.) He had given or promised the university \$11 million while Kozlowski's pledge was estimated at \$5 million. Again, we have three individuals who used their worldly street smarts to amass huge fortunes for themselves who also used a portion of the proceeds to benefit the church and her mission. Again I ask- is Jesus lauding the use of ill-gotten gains for righteous purposes in the parable now under discussion?

Yes, we are exhorted to be shrewd, but NOT shrewd like the STEWARD was. I REFUSE to believe Jesus praises this man for being a cold, calculating, clever liar. The book of Genesis calls SATAN shrewd when it describes him as the "subtlest creature of the field." I had a nephew who spent a considerable amount of time in and out of various jails. He used to tell me how smart he was, that he knew more about the law and how to get around it than even the police or the lawyers. He was shrewd all right, but it was his unshakable belief in his own wits, in his own ability to get out of trouble that kept getting him INTO it in the FIRST place. No, THAT kind of shrewdness should never be a quality desired by ANY Christian. Rather, the

scriptures teach us that we are demonstrate just the OPPOSITE- compassion, humility, faithfulness, and simplicity. Romans 12:9 says that we are to practice love without hypocrisy, abhor what is evil, and cleave to that which is good while in 1 Corinthians 4:2, Paul tells us, “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” We are constantly cautioned to beware of using people for our own selfish interests.

Well, if Jesus is praising the steward but not for his shrewdness, then what IS he commending him for? I agree with Dr. Kenneth Bailey, the Presbyterian author and Middle East scholar, who contended that Jesus is REALLY talking about FAITHFULNESS and NOT clever thinking. Rather than a story about an unscrupulous manager for a wealthy landowner who when his fraud is uncovered realizes he must earn some friends quickly, which he does by decreasing the amount of loans due the landowner, it is REALLY about one who receives mercy at the hands of his master and then seeks to repay him by showing everyone just what a generous man his employer is. To begin with, the steward is never called wicked or dishonest. The Greek word used here is the same word that occurs in the Parable of the Prodigal Son- he is accused of being careless, of merely wasting his master's funds. When word is received of this, the master confronts him about it. His manager, the steward, does not deny it but tacitly admits to the charges against him by simply saying nothing in his own defense.

Notice that the landowner doesn't summon the authorities and have him arrested. He doesn't threaten him with a public whipping or demand that the money lost be paid back as the law permitted. He doesn't even SCOLD him. Instead, he sees his desperate situation and just fires him. By doing so, he does the most merciful thing he can- he allows him to quit with dignity and without punishment, refusing to impose any consequences upon him. However,

knowing that when word gets out, it will be practically impossible for him to get a job, the steward begins to panic. He can't do manual labor for he's too weak for that kind of work, nor will his pride allow him to beg- being a steward is all he knows how to do. Therefore, he concocts a brilliant scheme. Since no one yet knows that he has been fired, he calls in all his master's debtors. Assuming that he is still the legitimate representative of the landowner, they are surprised by this sudden and unexpected windfall- having their loans reduced, some by as much as half. They are convinced that this is the generosity of the master at work, not simply the personal initiative of his intermediary, and they praise their lord for such undeserved kindness.

When the steward returns to the master with his ledger showing the reduction in the tenants' loans, his actions are then brought to light. Informed that the town is now celebrating his kindness and generosity, the master knows he has but two alternatives before him. He can go to the debtors and expose his manager's ruse, telling them that it has all been a terrible mistake and that they REALLY owe the original amount of the loan. But then the cheering and celebration would soon turn to anger towards him and he would be cursed as a stingy tyrant. Or, he can just remain silent and accept the praise of the village. This would accomplish two things: he would be regarded as a hero among the townspeople and his steward would save face so he could easily find employment elsewhere. Hence the reason for the master commending his manager for his cleverness.

Thus, according to Kenneth Bailey, this parable is REALLY about MERCY when it is MOST UNDESERVED AND UNEXPECTED. The steward had received mercy at the hands of the master by merely being fired instead of flogged or thrown into prison or made to restore the funds. He now creates a situation in which he not only saves face but turns his master into a

popular and much beloved hero in the community. He thereby risks EVERYTHING on the fact that his master is a kind and merciful man. He takes the chance that when his ruse is eventually uncovered, the landowner will exercise such mercy and kindness AGAIN. He places his complete trust in him knowing that he has no other options left. Therefore, he is praised, not for being shrewd in a dishonest way, but for being wise enough to place total trust in the quality of mercy he experienced at the beginning of the story. Jesus is not commending his disciples to exercise that same kind of duplicity but rather to demonstrate that same kind of UNCONDITIONAL TRUST IN THE LOVE AND MERCY OF GOD IN ALL THAT THEY DO, for God's mercy and love is all that anyone ever REALLY has. Even when we are dishonest and disobedient, God's love for us remains both CONSTANT AND TRUE.

This parable is therefore remarkably similar to the parable immediately PRECEDING it, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I believe Jesus relates THIS story in order to emphasize and bolster the SAME argument he had made in his tale about the prodigal- that to God, love and mercy is always preferable to harsh, retributive condemnation and judgment. You see, both stories involve wastrels, but where the former concerns a PRODIGAL SON, this one involves a PRODIGAL EMPLOYEE. Where the son throws himself upon the mercy of his FATHER, here the steward throws himself upon the mercy of his MASTER. Both receive extraordinary grace and mercy when it is so undeserved. And finally, in both stories, we never hear the conclusion- it's left up to the listener to provide the missing scene.

I find TWO VERY IMPORTANT LESSONS in this story for us this morning. The FIRST regards the role of money in our lives. The use of money is the second most frequently addressed topic in the Bible right after that of the Kingdom of God. In fact, there are more

passages in the Gospel of Luke about money and its dangers than there are about marriage, sex, or family values. For example, it is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer that asks "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," unlike Matthew's version which prays, "forgive us our trespasses (or sins) as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is also Luke who quotes Jesus' condemnation of usury--the practice of lending money at unreasonably high rates of interest--when he tells his followers to lend but expect nothing in return (6:34). It is Luke who records such parables as that of the Rich Young Ruler, the Good Samaritan, the Widow's Mite, the Lost Coin, the farmer who built bigger barns to hoard his wealth, the banquet feast for the poor, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and this morning's parable of the Unjust Steward- all stories that express the dangers of greed and hoarding wealth. Jesus is never objective when he mentions money for he understands the SEDUCTIVE POWER that too much of it can have over a person's mind and heart. For him, it always represents mammon, otherwise known as "dirty money." As a result, our Lord was uncompromising in his teaching about the role of money in people's lives and he demanded that they choose that day whom they would serve- whether it was to be God or whether was it to be mammon as no one could serve two masters at the same time. He was ALSO clear that if we continued to make the WRONG choices, the consequences could be ETERNAL.

You see, in Jesus' day, there was a significant and growing gap between the peasants and the powerful, not unlike our OWN age where the income gap between the wealthy and the poor is currently THE GREATEST IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY. According to the statistics released by our own Federal Reserve, by the end of 2021, the top 1% of households in the United States held a third of all our country's wealth, while THE BOTTOM 50% held only a little more than 2%. In fact, just this past week, it was announced that Warren Buffet's investment firm Berkshire

Hathaway became the very first company (that was not a tech corporation) to be valued at ONE TRILLION DOLLARS! According to Forbes Magazine, the “Oracle of Omaha” as he is often called is currently the sixth-richest person in the world with a net worth of over \$133 billion,

Well, such economic disparity wasn’t much different in JESUS’ day where between 60% and 70% of the wealth of Israel was owned and managed by 2% of the population with peasants, who constantly lived on the edge of economic disaster, making up over 90% of it. Farmers didn’t own the land they farmed but rented it from the landowners. Typically, 50% of their harvest would be paid as rent to the landowner, 25% would go in taxes to Rome and the Herodian nobility, 10% went to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, and 3% would go to the village. Thus, each farmer realized only about 12% of his harvest which had to be spent both on the family’s annual income and next year’s seed. If one couldn’t meet his debt obligations, the landowner could repossess his land, and if the farmer didn’t have any land left, the landowner might then take his daughter. You can now understand why Jesus was always concerned about the poor, because life in that agrarian culture WAS so hard and precarious.

With that in mind, on one level, we can see how this parable addresses the debt burden of the poor. Jesus is saying that the way one pleases God is by using this mammon, this “dirty money” to give generously and excessively to the poor, to the hungry, to the starving and homeless of the world. If you want to draw close to God and please him, then one way of doing so is by exercising better use of our wealth and not being afraid to share what we have. In times of growing scarcity and increasing unemployment, it’s easy to allow our worries and insecurities to dominate. Instead of not telling our right hand what our left is giving as Jesus warned, we allow our fears and insecurities to govern us. Over time, our hearts slowly constrict which in turn

results in the bowels of our compassion and sympathy and pity drying up. Therefore, instead of GOOD stewards, we become SMALL, STINGY, SELFISH, AND GREEDY, the VERY OPPOSITE of what God would have us to be. As Christians, we should take to heart the observation that “a person’s TRUE wealth lies not in what he keeps but in what he gives away,” a remark similar to one credited to Helen Walton, the selfless philanthropist and wife of Sam Walton--the founder of Walmart and Sam’s Club--who at one time was one of the world’s richest men. She never tired of reminding people that “It’s not what you GATHER but what you SCATTER that tells you what kind of life you have lived,” a quotation you will find posted on the wall of every Sam’s Club across this country.

And the SECOND point is no LESS important. At the core of this story is the lesson of forgiveness. The steward forgives- he forgives debts. He forgives things he had no right to forgive and he forgives for all the wrong reasons. Still, by forgiving, he not only secures a better position for himself but he turns his master into a local hero. The moral of the story is thus that we are to FORGIVE, to forgive it ALL, to forgive it NOW, to forgive whether your reason is VALID or not. The main thing is to FORGIVE- forgive those who have hurt you, forgive those offenses committed only yesterday and those which were committed long ago, forgive that which is considered unforgiveable, and be willing to forgive those who don’t ask for it or may not even want it. Even as WE have been forgiven, so we must forgive OTHERS. It’s our JOB to forgive, and if we can’t, then the love of God is not in us and we are Christian but in name only.

Friends, the church is a home where we practice and dispense forgiveness and love- at any time and any place, for any and all reasons, whether it is deserved or not, whether it is received or not. By being forgiven, we discover the freedom to forgive and love and be made whole and then

to love in return. Love in concert with forgiveness sets up a chain reaction where the more we forgive, the more we love; and the more we love, the more we forgive. And so, in the final analysis, this parable is simply about mercy--mercy undeserved and unexpected--for God's mercy and love is ALL we are ever promised and it is ALL we shall ever receive. Let us pray...

All-forgiving God, we ask not that we might be shrewd but merciful even as your servant, the steward of Christ's parable, was, abounding in grace and love and forgiveness, even as you have been toward us again and again. May we now be bold enough to extend that same grace and forgiveness towards others regardless of what they have done that they might know and experience the reality of your presence and the mystery of your love as well. Amen and amen.