

Sermon – September 18, 2022

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Luke 16:1-13

During my time here at First Parish, there have been *several* instances where different church members—reading through the book of Luke on their own—have reached out to me to ask questions about the passage we just heard today. Nobody’s ever asked me about “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” but apparently a lot of people hit a wall when they read “the parable of the dishonest manager.” And if it’s any consolation, *I* and many other clergy and theologians have that same experience every time *we* read it too.

I think there are two big reasons why this passage is hard to unpack. The first is literary, and the second is historical. What I mean is that the literary *structure* of the reading gets in the *way* of itself, and two-thousand years *later* we readers don’t automatically *know* the historical *context* the people *hearing* Jesus in *person* would have already understood. So we’re missing something.

We have here what starts out as a straightforward Gospel scene: Jesus tells his disciples a parable, a story to tell a lesson. And as with all of Jesus’ parables, we get swept up in the current of the narrative, riding the wave towards an inevitable “moral of the story.”

A rich man—specifically a lord, *kyrios*, in Greek—had a manager, or a steward, or a slave; the exact nature of his position is unclear, but his job was to handle the lord’s accounts with the folks that owed him for outstanding loans or rent. It then came to pass that this account manager was accused of squandering his boss’s property, and that would not do. So the lord told the manager to go gather up his account ledgers and turn them over, “because you cannot be my manager any longer.”

The manager realized he was never gonna work in this business again, so before getting tossed out on the street, he came up with a scheme. True to the name of the parable, it was a *dishonest* scheme—as if there were any other kind. He needed a way to land on his feet once the paperwork went through and he was kicked to the curb. So he decided to make *friends*... by *cheating* his rich boss.

As quick as he could, this *scoundrel* summoned the people who *owed* the lord, and *erased* sizeable chunks of their debts.

He went through them one-by-one, cheating the lord out of all sorts of repayment, a move which helped out a *lot* of folks who owed a *lot* of things. Needless to say, the manager made a lot of friends that day. The inspiration for this plan was based on

gratitude—if I erase these folk’s debts, the people of the community will look favorably upon me when my livelihood is taken away.

So, the plot of this parable is fairly easy to follow along with, but the *literary* sticking point comes when the author of this book of the Bible—who we know as Luke—attempts to tie the whole thing together with a capstone or an epilogue that... in the end doesn’t just include *one* “moral of the story,” but in fact holds *four*. The reason our brain derails about two-thirds of the way through this Scripture reading is that it in the space of *six* sentences it tries to teach *four* separate lessons that—while based in the parable and related thematically—they each go off in completely different directions. As a pastor that means I could preach on this passage four times in a row with four totally different sermons and get away with it, but that doesn’t make “reading the Bible” any easier on *you*, does it?

In a nutshell, the four lessons Luke attaches to this *one* parable are these:

*First*, the children of this world are wiser in their generation than “the sons of light;” that is, if only people of faith were as eager and ingenious at attaining *goodness* as people of the *world* are in attaining money and comfort, the world would be a better place. If we all would give as much attention to righteousness and the soul as we do to our business dealings, imagine what people and what world we would be. That’s *one* lesson, and Luke gives it *half* a verse, but there’s no stopping at *this* station.

On to lesson number two: we should use our *material* possessions to make *eternal* friends. Don’t hoard your wealth; *share* it and strengthen the bonds between yourself and your fellow children of God. *That’s* a big conversation to have, but Luke doesn’t have time for that right now, so it’s off to number three!

The way one performs a *small* task is proof of how *fit* they are—or *unfit* they are—for *larger* tasks. Scholar William Barclay paraphrases it like this: “Upon earth you are in charge of things which are not really yours. You cannot take them with you when you die. They are only lent to you. You are only a steward over them... On the other hand, in heaven you will get what is really and eternally yours... What you will be given as your very own will depend on how you use the things of which you are only steward.”

But Luke’s not done yet. Here we come to the fourth and final “moral of the story,” and it’s a doozy: you cannot serve God and Mammon. Maybe you’ve heard that saying before. In our pew Bibles it’s translated as “wealth,” but what’s highlighted by calling it by *name*, Mammon, recognizes the *idolized* dimension of wealth. It’s *wealth* that becomes the center of your life. No less true today than it was two thousand years ago, people center their lives around wealth the way some people center their lives around God.

Instead of devoting oneself to goodness, righteousness, and justice, serving *Mammon* means offering that *devotion* to price-gouging, exploitation, imperialism, and

profit-margins. The same reverent attention that was once focused on reading the oracles of bones cast on the floor of a hut... is now focused on the tickers of the New York Stock Exchange.

*That* lesson alone could do with a *whole* sermon series and two spinoff Bible studies, but Luke decided to just *toss* it in there with three others like a handful of fortune cookies. Which is why, when we read all the way through the “parable of the unjust steward” from verse 1 to verse 13, it feels like the traincars of your mind are piling into each other.

So how do we put it all together? *Can* we put it all together? I’d argue no. I’d argue that what Luke was trying to do with those four diverse sayings was to give us four different *avenues* to follow *after* reading this parable, based on the one that speaks to you most at the time... and it’s only the unique problem of reading an *English* translation of a two-thousand-year-old *Greek* text about an *Aramaic*-speaking Christ that makes it so much harder for us to unpack when we read it all at once.

But I imagine a lot of you, like me, care maybe a little bit less about what the author “Luke” thought about the parable, than what Jesus *himself* thought about the parable *he* was *telling*. And the best I can do to *start* to unravel that *today*, is to bring in for you some historical context that we as modern readers are *missing*, that may help you shed some light on what Jesus was talking about.

The “lords” of Roman-occupied Galilee two-thousand years ago—including the rich man in this story—functioned as landowning loan-sharks. They would loan land, goods, and money with exorbitant, *predatory* interest rates, locking *generations* into abject poverty and servitude, allowing *themselves* to accumulate *more* wealth and *more* land and exploit *more* of the incredibly poor populace.

It may surprise some of you to know that in the Old Testament, right after giving Moses the Ten Commandments, God *outlawed* charging *interest* on loans made to individuals. It’s in Exodus, it’s in Leviticus, and it’s in Deuteronomy *twice*. It’s the reason why when we say The Lord’s Prayer every Sunday we say the words “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

But these lords ignored that. They might hide the interest in creative ways and through creative use of money managers, but when we see the “dishonest manager,” that *scoundrel*, reducing large percentages of those people’s debts, we see him in effect

*reducing* some of that unlawful and immoral interest that the lord was *extracting* from the people who were *doing* the backbreaking labor and making him a rich man.

So when I read this passage, I see a lord who was doing evil, exploiting and cheating workers of the fruits of their labor for his own exorbitant profit, against the express admonition of *God*... and then I see someone else who *cheated* that lord of what *he* had cheated the *people* of, providing some restitution and restoration for the people enslaved by the debts looming over their heads. Did the manager do it for *entirely* altruistic reasons? No; out of *fear* he bought himself some good-will from the community... but he did it by doing what, ultimately, I think Christ was arguing was a *good* thing.

It's why the manager gets away with it in the end; because, in the eyes of God, regardless of motive the manager was exercising *justice* for the wronged, and if the rich man openly *punishes* him for that, he's opening up a *big* can of worms for *himself* in the eyes of *society*.

Wouldn't it be nice if *today* the pressure of society was enough to keep those who serve Mammon from oppressing and exploiting the people?

Maybe Luke was on to something. Because wow, there's a lot to unpack here. Certainly more than a *single* fortune cookie could cover.

Which, of the options it could be, is the *true* reason Jesus thought the manager was... shrewd or wise or prudent? Why did he tell this parable if there were at least *four* different ways you could take it?

Maybe *that* was the reason. Maybe the lesson of this parable is dependent on who's hearing it told. If you're a shrewd business person, maybe you need to hear Christ's lesson about those who get out of the habit of pursuing the spiritual, and who let pursuit of the light fall by the wayside in pursuit of capital. And if you've been blessed with *much*, perhaps Christ is speaking to you to remind you of the call to *share* those blessings with those who have had their blessings taken *from* them. And if you've looked at the world around you and felt disappointed and angry at the exploitation and oppression taking place in every strata of society, maybe through telling this story Christ is giving you the push that *you* need... to be a little bit of a *scoundrel*... for the good of others.

May God bless the reading and the hearing and the lifelong quest for understanding these holy words. Amen.