

## The Hardest Parable

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Luke 16:1-9

This is probably Jesus' least popular parable. I know it's hard to measure things like that. I suppose ultimately these things are impossible to measure, but if I had to guess, I would say, this is Jesus' least popular parable.

Which is ironic because in Luke, it comes right after Jesus' most popular parable, the parable of the prodigal son. People love the prodigal son. Parents tell it to their children, preachers love to reference it in their sermons, artists paint pictures depicting it. The parable of the dishonest manager could not be more different. This isn't a parable we include in our church school curriculum, artists are not generally inspired to paint it, and preachers aren't eager to preach on it. In fact, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the last pagan emperor of Rome, Julian the Apostate, pointed to this parable as evidence that Christianity was an inferior religion. "The leader of this faith praises scoundrels!" he said. This is definitely one of the most puzzling texts in the New Testament.

What makes it so difficult? Well, as Julian said, it's difficult because when you first read it, Jesus seems to be praising deception. When you first read it, Jesus seems to be praising dishonesty. A man who already has a history of crooked behavior is caught red-handed cooking the books. His master tells him to clear out his office, but makes the critical mistake of giving him till the end of the week before he leaves the firm. He lets his manager work out the week. The crooked manager uses that week really well. He concocts a plan to ensure that that, once next Monday rolls around and his job is gone, there will be some open doors for him. Without the boss' permission, he writes down the debt of a couple of the major suppliers. That's his way of winning friends and influencing people.

When the end of the week rolls around, his boss sees what he's done and realizes that he's been outmaneuvered. He can't go to these debtors and ask for the balance, he'll look ungenerous. He'll look like an unreliable business partner with out of control employees. Even today, your reputation in business is everything and you damage it at your peril, just ask Boeing. But in those days, in a shame based culture, having your reputation ruined was the kiss of death. And so the boss is cornered by his reputation. He smiles a wry smile. "You weasel. You clever weasel!" He says, and he commends the unjust manager for his savvy, for his cleverness, for his shrewdness.

That's the story and then in verse 9 Jesus seems to give his amen to the boss' commendation. "See that manager," says Jesus, "you could learn something from him." Inspiring isn't it?

What are we to make of this parable? What exactly does Jesus want us to learn from this shrewd manager? Well, people have tried to rehabilitate this parable in a whole variety of ways. I've come across numerous attempts to make sense of it. And let me share with you some of them.

Some interpreters suggest that what the boss and Jesus commend in the manager is not actually illegal behavior. Sure at the beginning of the story it's obvious that the manager has done something dishonest, but when he reduces the bill of the suppliers, he was acting within the law. The reduction was simply the manager removing his commission from the final bill and so he wasn't stealing the master's money; he was waiving his own commission so as to win friends. So it's honest generosity commended here, not deception.

That's a nice thought, but doesn't fit so well with the facts of the parable. The amount of produce that the manager writes down is way beyond the range of a normal commission. Especially the first one: The shrewd manager cuts the bill in half. That would mean a commission of 100%. Not really believable. And the amount forgiven, the 450 gallons of oil, some people have estimated that the value of that oil would be around 1000 denarii. That's three year's wages. So in today's dollars that's roughly 150 thousand dollars, again

not really conceivable as a commission. In the context of the story, it seems clear that when he lowers the debt, it's his master's money he's playing with.

Others choose what I call the Robin Hood interpretation of this parable. They say that the manager is commendable, because, even though he's stealing from his employer, that's OK because his boss is a bad guy. He's a bad guy because he's rich, and these interpreters suggest that, in Luke, the rich are always suspect. So that should be a warning flag right there. According to these interpreters, he must be charging HUGE amounts of interest to his debtors. That's what the manager is doing when he cuts down the bill: he's eliminating the interest charges. He's like a prophet calling out the loan sharks. He's a hero! He's like Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Again, it's a nice try, but hard to really fit with the parable itself. While it's true that Luke has lots to say about money and has lots of important warnings for the rich, simply being rich doesn't make a person a bad guy. A counter example would be Jesus' good words about the rich centurion in chapter 7. And if his wealth doesn't make him a bad guy, there is nothing to suggest that the master has done anything wrong. There is no mention of interest or cheating or bad behavior.

In fact, in the way Jesus tells the parable, there is a clear indication that the unjust one in this story is the manager, not his boss. In verse 8, AFTER he's pulled his little stunt, Jesus calls him the 'dishonest' manager. Adikias is the word in Greek. If Jesus meant to tell a story where the manager was the good guy and the rich man was the bad guy, why would he begin the story with an account of the manager's malfeasance and end the story by calling him dishonest? Why would he give us no clue that the boss was a bad guy? If that's how Jesus meant us to understand the parable, he sure could have told it better.

Another attempt to rehabilitate this parable comes from Eugene Peterson. I love Eugene Peterson, and I am loathe to disagree with him, but I fear I must. Years ago, in the Christian Century, Peterson wrote an article on this parable in which he said that what was commendable about the manager was his reliance on grace. You see the manager realized that his boss was a man overflowing with generosity. That's why he got that extra week when he first got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Most bosses would have thrown him in jail! But this boss not only saves him from jail; he also gives him a few more days in the office! The manager sees the generosity and grace in his boss and decides to "risk everything on the mercy he has already received from his master." He concocts his last minute giveaway scheme trusting that his boss will once again be merciful. Yes, what he did was dishonest, but it was commendable because he trusted completely in the master's grace.

Now I love grace, and it would be nice if this interpretation were believable, but it just doesn't make sense. Both Jesus and the master commend the manager for his shrewdness, not for his trust or his faith. If it really were the trusting in grace that was the commendable thing, would the master, would Jesus, really choose to commend his shrewdness? It's possible, but really unlikely.

And on top of that, if you want to celebrate reliance on grace, this is just the wrong kind of story. Sometimes people ring the doorbell at LaGrave, and they show reliance on our generosity and grace by trying to con us out of money. Most of the people who come in asking for benevolent help tell you true stories of real need, but a few will just make something up hoping to squeeze a few bucks out of you. They do it counting on soft hearted church people will pull out their wallets. And most of the time, that's exactly what we do. Now: it is certainly true that these people are counting on our grace, but if I were writing a sermon about relying on grace, and I was looking for an example for you to follow, would I choose these people? Would I say: look at how these con artists trust our grace! No way. Never. It strains belief to say that this is what Jesus is doing here.

So... if none of these interpretations hold water, what is this parable about? What is Jesus commending here? Well let's start with what's analogous, what's comparable between our situation and the situation of the manager? If we are to imitate him, there must be some sense in which our situation is like his situation. I think the answer to that question has to do with the temporal state of the manger. The manager is stuck between times. The manager is in an already, not yet position. He already knows that he will be fired.

His boss has made that clear. But he's not yet off the job. He still has the authority to go to his boss' suppliers and write down their debt. Do you see how he's in a between time kind of state?

That's like us. We live in an already, not yet sort of time too. We already know that Jesus has won the victory over the powers of sin and death. We know that in the future, the world will be made new and we will live in an eternal state of shalom and righteousness. We already know that's coming. But we do not yet see that reality. We're still living in a world that doesn't have shalom, a world where evil still has a lot of power, a world where you have to watch your back, a world where nice people get stepped on. We too live in a between time state.

In his between time state, what does the manager do? When he makes his decisions, what guides his decision making? How does he use his resources? The manager uses his resources with his eyes completely on the age that is to come for him. He focuses himself completely on the day, which will come soon and very soon, when the master shall return and his job will be over and he will be jobless. Every decision he makes during his in between time is directed toward that future. He uses all of his resources, his money, his smarts, his power, to make a place for himself in that future age. He lays up treasure in the age to come.

That's what makes him a "shrewd" manager. The word used by Jesus to describe the servant, the word translated in our Bible as shrewd is the word Phronimos. Phronimos is prudence. It's planned thinking. It's not just intelligence. It's intelligence that minds the future. It's intelligence that watches for the signs. And in the Bible it's often a word for those who are preparing for the crisis of the end times. It's the word Jesus uses elsewhere to describe the 5 young women who knew the bridegroom was coming. They bought oil when the others didn't. They were prepared. They were the 5 phronimos virgins. They were shrewd. It's also the word Jesus uses to describe the man who built his house on the rock instead of the sand. He was the phronimos builder. He built his home in the sunshine, but he looked ahead to the day when the storm would come. He was shrewd.

This is what's commendable about this manager. He lives today for the age to come. Using the categories that Jesus uses elsewhere, all through the gospels, he knows the season, he discerns the times, he keeps watch, he counts the cost. And so, when the day of reckoning comes, he's prepared.

That's the point of this parable for us. How the manager lives with respect to his coming unemployment is exactly how Jesus wants us to live with respect to the coming new creation. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven – Matthew 6. Set your minds on things that are above, not on earthly things – Colossians 3. Use your earthly wealth so that you will be welcomed into eternal homes – verse 9 of our passage. Live tomorrow's life today.

Jesus preaches about this stuff, and tells parables about this stuff, because it's hard to live this way. People's default mode is to live in light of today's issues and this age's problems. People live trying to keep themselves afloat and secure for this age. Making your decisions based on God's eternal future takes a strong exercise of faith and will. You give 10% of your income to charity!!! 10%! Do you realize how much money that will add up to by the time you get to retirement? If you made 8% interest a year on that money, compound the interest...you'll get a number that will fill up the screen of your calculator. How shrewd of you, you're living in the light of God's future.

You spend \$20,000 per year to educate your children in a Christian school because it teaches children, not only about this age, but also about the age to come!? Do you realize what you could do with that money?! That's money that could be spent on vacations, cars, 401ks. How shrewd of you. You're living in the light of God's future.

Or maybe an even harder one: you chose not to have that expensive procedure to prolong your life? In my previous church, there was a man in his 80's who was really sick, but he was told he could have a procedure that would prolong his life. The procedure cost something like a half a million dollars, but it would be covered by insurance. He refused. "That's a lot of money," he said, "and I'm going to die soon anyway and I know that death isn't the end for me. I know where I'm going. I have an eternal life with Jesus." I don't know if I would have the courage to do what he did, but I do know that he was living in the light of God's future.

In the end, I think that's what Jesus is telling us in this parable. Am I positive about that? It would be foolish of me to be sure that I've figured out a parable that has given the church fits for 2000 years, but this interpretation seems to fit. Despite all its weirdness, it feels to me as though in this parable Jesus is standing over his people saying to us, "Don't worry too much. Don't worry too much saying, "What shall I eat, what shall I wear?" My Kingdom is coming. I am coming. The world will be new. You will be new. Even your death can't stop it from happening. Live by that future. Make your plans based on that future. In the meantime, seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well." And if that's right, if that's what Jesus is saying, those aren't hard words; they're wonderful.

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