

You Owe Me  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

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I expect if you surveyed two million Presbyterians, not one would list the parable of the dishonest manager as their favorite Bible story. Biblical scholar Charles Cousar describes our Gospel reading this way: “None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like the story of the dishonest manager [in Luke 16:1-13.] It is one of the great exegetical mountains of Scripture, [because of both] the bewildering parable and the positive use Jesus makes of its shifty protagonist...” [Cousar, Charles, in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, ed. by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 93 and 97.]

Now dishonesty and shiftiness may whet your appetite to hear our lesson, though I will admit I was tempted to simply focus on Jeremiah’s balm in Gilead, and tie it to how this church has been part of the balm provided in the Philippines. Yet, I accepted the task of approaching this text in which Jesus seems to commend dishonesty.

Let me first set the scene. The parable is about a rich man who had a manager, sometimes called a steward, someone he has hired to manage his property and oversee his financial transactions. The rich man receives word his manager has been squandering his money. Luke also used the word squander in describing the actions of the prodigal son in the prior chapter, and it implies the activity is willful. The manager has not made a mistake. The manager is not incompetent. He is dishonest, and he is fired.

Upon learning of being fired, the parable tells of how the manager did some quick thinking to make deals with his boss’s debtors concerning both olive oil and grain, and the quantities are large. This is not about paying back a neighbor for a borrowed cup of olive oil or flour. The deal involves one hundred jugs of olive oil – 900 gallons – or picture sixteen 55 gallon drums. We are dealing with a whole lot of good cholesterol. The deal the manager makes with the grain is equally large.

Let us hear the parable of the dishonest manager, or is it the shrewd manager, or perhaps even the prudent treasurer? Luke 16:1-13:

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that the manager was squandering his property. <sup>2</sup>So the rich man summoned the manager and said,*

*‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’*

*<sup>3</sup>Then I said to myself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. [pause]*

*<sup>4</sup>I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’*

*<sup>5</sup>So, summoning my master’s debtors one by one, I asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’*

*<sup>6</sup> ... ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’*

*I said, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty jugs of olive oil.’*

*<sup>7</sup>Then I asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’*

*‘A hundred containers of wheat.’*

*I said, 'Take your bill and make it eighty containers of wheat.'*

*<sup>8</sup>And the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;*

[While we are mid-sentence in the lesson, Jesus now seems to pause, and shift from telling the parable to teaching the parable to his disciples. He continues,]

*for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. <sup>9</sup>And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal tents.*

*<sup>10</sup>Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. <sup>11</sup>If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*

*<sup>13</sup>No servant can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

"You owe me." I recall using that phrase in July when preaching on Luke's Lord's Prayer and how we can connive to put someone in our debt. I suggested, "as we forgive our debtors" was a call to cancel any ways we have made people feel indebted to us in a "you owe me one" way. I was again reminded of the phrase in today's lesson.

With cleverness and slickness the dishonest manager manipulates "you owe me" deals with his boss's debtors. He does so out of desperation. The manager was caught squandering the boss's finances, and has been fired. Yet, before his termination is made public, the manager devises a scheme, and calls in the rich man's debtors to settle accounts, in an attractive way for those who owed the rich man.

Some speculate the manager was forgiving the accumulated interest on the debt, which was in the gray area of legality. Others suggest the manager was voiding his own commission, which would be legal. Yet, the continued use of the adjective dishonest in the parable seems to affirm the manager was doing something shady; likely, allowing the debtee to pay just a portion of what was owed. But there was also a side deal, in that the debtee would also sign an "IOU" to the manager for his future use, to be welcomed into their homes. Those who owed the rich man caught a break, and while they might not feel completely good about it, they would likely feel they owed the dishonest manager a favor. As with most of Jesus' parables, it ends abruptly and we don't know if the manager ever called in the "you owe me" slips.

Still, even if his cleverness, his shrewdness is admired, it is the master's commendation of his dishonest manager that throws us, because Jesus seems to affirm it as well. We wonder how Jesus could seemingly uplift dishonesty, and what he could be teaching in this parable.

There seem to be several themes emerging, one about shrewdness, another about faithfulness, with an overlay of Luke's global concern with the corrupting power of money in believers' lives. We are careful to note the commendation of the dishonest manager by the rich man was not, in fact, for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness, a word sometimes translated as prudence.

The manager panicked in thinking digging ditches or begging might be his next career stop, then paused briefly and thought quickly, "Here is what I will do..." and proceeded to settle the debts. In a sense, I hear his boss, the rich man, saying, "You lost me money, but I do admire your chutzpah!" So, the shrewd decisions are commended, not the dishonesty.

Jesus tells this parable to his closest disciples not a large crowd, so one can hear an intimacy as he explains it, "Friends, children of light, it would be good if you could show a little bit of the shrewdness, the chutzpah, of this manager." He does not tell them to make friends of dishonest wealth, but since money is a part of life, with its ever controlling lure, he suggests dealing with it in a manner that will make friends.

As we will later read in the Book of Acts, also written by Luke, one way to use money well is to hold all things in common. The pastoral letters call upon followers to put their money behind their words in that you can't say you love hungry people if you don't feed hungry people. How can our money be focused on providing that longed for balm in Gilead, to heal souls and bodies?

Jesus' own life and teaching shows it is in encompassing the poor as friends, even with worldly money, that one is preparing for one's own welcome in eternal tents. The word "tents" offers a sense of "non-settlement," as the disciples will experience in following Jesus, and again following his death. For the disciples, it will be like the manager who will only be able to cash his "you owe me" slips for short stays before having to move on.

So dishonest wealth is not commended, but recognized as a teaching example. Underlying Jesus' parable are the riches of faith with which God entrusts us, so he tells his disciples, *If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*

Recognizing the richness of the greater gift of grace and faith will stifle our desires to create "you owe me" indebtedness to secure our own well-being, status, power, or control. The richness of faith recalls for us we are daily managers, stewards, caretakers of a gift which calls us into the kind of community where we can sacrifice and share without keeping accounts. Indeed it is within a faith community where we are given a spirit of compassion and hope, as we transact the great wealth of gospel love with which we have been entrusted.

I like how Fred Craddock reminds us this work does not need to be complicated or big:

"Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat." [Craddock, Fred, as quoted in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Luke-John*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 191-192]

Faithfulness in small things matters. Jesus ends his teaching by reminding his disciples they cannot serve two masters. They cannot serve God and money. But they must serve one.