

KEEPING A LITTLE ON THE SIDE: THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Luke 16: 1-14

Jesus' parables are populated by memorable characters. There is a prodigal son who strays into the world of casino life and finds he misses his family. A Good Samaritan who binds the wounds of a mugging victim and proves a friend to an enemy. A rich man who goes to hell because of his indifference to the poor, and a poor man named Lazarus who goes to heaven where he inherits a mansion.

Then there is the parable of the unjust steward, today's parable, perhaps the most puzzling and controversial story Jesus ever told because of the way it mixes apparent good with apparent bad. It's hard to tell the good cowboys from the bad ones in this parable, because what we normally think of as a vice, is praised by Jesus as a virtue.

It goes this way. Once upon a time there was a rich man who had a steward, a kind of business manager, and charges were brought to the man that this steward was wasting his goods. It seems cut and dried. Malfeasance in the workplace. The steward will need to be reprimanded and let go.

But not so fast! The decision to fire the manager wasn't made until after business hours on Friday, so the manager had the whole weekend to cook the books and submit a bogus financial statement. Between Friday and Monday when the books were due, the steward went around to all the rich man's debtors and fixed the accounts payable. He marked down a percentage of what was owed by all the debtors and thereby ingratiated himself to all the people to whom he would be looking for help in his looming unemployment.

"How much do you owe my master?" he asked one. "A hundred measures of oil," the debtor answered. "Take your bill quickly," the steward said, "and write down fifty."

"And how much do you owe?" he asked another. "A hundred measures of wheat," came the answer. "Hurry, take your bill and write eighty."

Some scholars in an attempt to rid this parable of its offense have suggested that what the steward was doing was cutting out his markup. But I think it's reasonable to assume that in some way the steward is taking something that is not his own and using it for his own selfish purposes.

I see him sitting at a table, a bare light bulb swinging from a single wire overhead, sleeves rolled up, sweat rolling down his neck, a green visor shading his forehead, and two sets of books splayed in front of him like a waitress doing her taxes trying to hide the tips. Yet with each unsuspecting debtor who comes in for an accounting, he pulls another fast move and reduces the account, ingratiating himself to each. By the end of the day he has done pretty well for himself and the debtors have done nicely as well. The only one who hasn't made out is the rich man whose assets have been depleted by the steward's feathering of his own nest.

Reason dictates that this scoundrel should not only be fired but brought up on charges by the D.A. Only problem is that, according to the parable, Monday morning when the rich man calls the steward to account and demands his key to the executive washroom, he is so favorably impressed by the way the steward has used his cunning to get ahead that he commends the dishonest steward for his cleverness (the RSV calls it his “prudence”). And Jesus sums up the meaning of the parable by saying that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light. Which sounds like we good law abiding people should take a lesson from the crooks. Is Jesus giving us a new beatitude, “Blessed are those who get by on their wits, however dishonest?”

In the verses that follow the story there are three attempts by Luke to explain the meaning of the parable. The first says, do like the shady steward and make friends with tainted money so that when it fails you’ll have friends in high places. The second says that you must do well with a little or you won’t be entrusted with more. And the third says you can’t serve God and money, so make a choice. Evidently Luke had as much trouble making sense of the parable as we do. But none of these really looks squarely at the dishonesty of the fellow who gets rewarded for his embezzling.

In a sense the story line fits the occasional characterization that sometimes emerges in scripture, the character of the rogue, the impish trickster who is held forth as a hero. Jacob in the book of Genesis is the best example; Jacob the trickster who pulls the wool over his father’s eyes and makes off with his brother’s inheritance.

But in another sense this parable is also like the parable that precedes it, the parable of the prodigal son in which a crisis causes the morally compromised protagonist to do an about face and receive an unmerited reward. And it is also a bit like that parable in which a vineyard owner hires laborers at varying times of the day but pays them all the same at the end of the day because the boss has the infuriating right to do whatever he pleases with whomever he wants, like the landowner in this parable who rewards a scoundrel.

But while there are echoes of all of these in this parable it’s not exactly the same because we’re left hanging with what appears as a vice held as a virtue, “Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth,” Jesus says, “so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

There are two important elements that we need to consider in this parable in order to unlock its mystery. One is the issue of time, what time it is, emphasized by the fact that the accounts have come due and the steward has only a brief time to get things moving in his favor, a fact that’s underscored when he tells the debtors to change their account balances *quickly*.¹

And the second is the comedy in the parable, the laughable nature of what is happening, so extreme that it is absurd. If you think about it, the forgiveness of the rich landowner is preposterous. Imagine the scene in which the steward stands before his boss, and the rich man opens the ledger to see just how bad things are and it’s so bad that all the landowner can do is roar with laughter and commend the steward on his cleverness. This is the most unlikely thing that can happen, and so it is laughable. Either there is laughter or there is murder, and since murder is not reported, there must have been laughter.

We do know there was laughter in the room where Jesus told the parable, because the scene immediately shifts to the Pharisees, whom we are told loved money, and they laughed at Jesus' story, in fact they ridiculed Jesus for the story. To them it sounded like a joke. One should not take such a serious matter as money and poke fun at it. After all, the moral order of a just and lawful society is ridiculed by the outcome of this parable. And the Pharisees heard that and thought it must be a joke.

They loved money, these Pharisees. They were in the business of collecting fees for sacrifices, raking off a bit of the take on the pigeon sales and cereal commodities. Money was serious business to them. So they laughed at Jesus. His parable was absurd. And it's *that reaction of the Pharisees* perhaps more than anything else that helps us understand what to make of this parable.

Think of it as a shell game where a pea is placed under a shell, and we try to keep our eyes on that shell. As they are moved around the table we think we've got it, and so we choose the shell that we have followed with our eye, but when the shell is lifted, the pea is not there. The pea has never been there.

You see the point of the parable is that it's not a story about money. That's just a distraction. Our eyes like the eyes of the Pharisees go with the money, with the cleverness of the steward who is able to get something for nothing by going around and making deals for himself. We're entranced by the cleverness of the steward because we're more interested in the money than we are anything else.

But money and cleverness is not the ultimate issue here, any more than wasting money is the issue in the parable that precedes it, the parable of the prodigal son. This is, instead, a parable about *time* and *the stewardship of our gifts*, the realization that we have been wasting the master's goods and worse yet, *soon* we will be called to account for it.

How do I know this? Well, for all that is despicable in the dishonest steward, he has one redeeming quality, he has a sense of how much time he has, and he does what he can to redeem his situation in what time is available. And therein lies a truth. If we took a random sample of folks this morning and asked people to write down their most valuable assets, most of us would likely list our possessions, some real estate, the car, our 401K, our tangible assets, liquid and real. A few of us would likely list our children, our spouse, our partner, or our work, maybe even our health.

But what the steward in the parable makes plain in his frenzied struggle to better his future is that none of these is the most valuable commodity on earth. That most valuable commodity is time. Time is all the steward has to work out his salvation, low sighted as that salvation may be. And he does a remarkable job of it. He summons what assets he has and makes friends in the world so that when cast into it penniless he may have a place to go and friends to take pity on him.

What the steward realizes is that he does not have forever and the walls are closing in; accounts are being settled and he must show what he's done. While he's not a paragon of virtue in the way he goes about it, he cannot be faulted for his awareness of the immediacy of his situation. He knows what time it is because his illusion that he has forever has been shattered by the owner's calling in the books.

This is not an easy truth for us to hear because most of us are banking on tomorrow... we bank on it because we are trying to instill some certainty on a commodity that has none. We take out the thirty year mortgage on the apartment and barely blink. We sign for the five year payment plan on the new car and are more stunned by the sticker price than by the brass we are exhibiting in imagining that it is certain we will be around or even employed to make all the payments. We live with an illusion of immortality. But as we have seen, even Leona Helmsley and her beloved dog Trouble, for all of their riches, owe God one death. You really can't take it with you.

The late Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and theologian of Yale Divinity School, wrote about the illusion of immortality that we all have. He says, "Although we have learned... that we are worth more than what the world makes us, we keep giving an eternal value to the things we own, the people we all know, the plans we have, and the successes we 'collect.'"²

We are like the steward before the fall, thinking we have forever to accumulate our wealth and save for our future, but his future came home to roost suddenly and then he had develop a new plan.

Each fall I preach about stewardship and of course your eyes go glassy because stewardship, for many of you, means the church is trying to get in your pocket again. But stewardship, is not simply the annual autumn exercise of fundraising that we do, it is far more radical than that, far more fundamental than the pledge we make to the church or the gifts we drop in the plate on Sunday morning. Stewardship is what we do with what we have with our most important possessions, and no possession we have is more valuable than time.

Stewardship is understanding that all that we have is on loan, and eventually the accounts will be called in, and so it's important to know what time it is. We, all of us, have been given life and health and the leisure to use our lives for whatever purposes we choose, for good or for ill. Our illusion of immortality tells us to get comfortable and bank on tomorrow, but wisdom suggests that we make friends in heavenly places so that when the accounts are called in we have somewhere to take refuge.

How do we do that? Well its not just a matter of grabbing all the gusto you can get while you have the chance; skiing Vail in the winter, and summering in the Hamptons, climbing Everest at least once, or renting a villa in Tuscany for awhile. It's more than that.

It's making the most of where you are at any given moment, living today as fully as possible, treasuring the people with whom you are, and seeing that this moment itself is filled with God, perfect in every way, a gift so valuable that it is like the cup filled with grain, shaken, pressed down, and flowing over. It is accounting for and to God all the time.

This summer towards the end of August, Angus Duncan, a member here, a remarkable and gifted young man, only 48 years old, and father of two young boys, Colin and Brice, was on a weekend away with Vicky his wife and the boys visiting friends upstate. Before breakfast, he told Vicky he was going to take a quick bike ride, and he would be right back. "Don't go," she said, "the boys are getting up soon." "It'll be a

quick ride,” Angus said, “I’ll be right back.” And a few minutes later Angus lay dead at the side of the road at an intersection where he and a car that he just didn’t see collided.

Angus was a man who loved life and lived it well. An exceptionally gifted investor and analyst of the market, respected greatly on The Street. The market fell 250 points the afternoon of Angus’ service, and maybe one of the reasons was because every notable investor in town was at his memorial service, he was that respected.

If there is anything that Angus’ death reminds us, it is that time is shorter than any of us think. No amount of wealth, no earthly possession, no degree of honor, no wisdom or talent or good looks or family connections, nothing that we can put in our pocket or evaluate using an appraiser, can add one second to our life, when our life is over.

The point then is to live a life that bears the marks of knowing to whom you will give account of your life, to the one who will be looking at the books, to God. So pray, and read the scriptures, and come to church school and bring the kids and attend yourself. Support the church, give thanks to God every morning, say your prayers every night, look at those you love and hold them close, love passionately, look perceptively, see everything, breathe deeply, because every breath is a gift, don’t you know.

There is a prayer that I often use at memorial services taken from our *Book of Common Worship* that says, “Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord...” That’s how we are to live as Christians, deeply today, expectant of tomorrow, trusting God in all things.

Lest anyone have any doubts, time’s a wasting. Whatever you are going to do for good, do it, there is no better day than today. Whatever you can do to get the columns adding up for you on the positive side, don’t waste any time, for heaven’s sake, don’t waste any time in doing it. For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

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¹ Lk. 16:6.

²Henri Nouwen, **Reaching Out**. ((New York: Doubleday, 1975). p. 82.