

The Rascally Manager

Luke 16: 1-13

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October 6, 2019

This story of Jesus drives accountants crazy, makes scholars squirm, makes preachers want to skip this text and move to the next. But maybe it has some surprising messages for us. It surely has some surprising twists.

I

Let's first examine it in its larger context in Luke's gospel. Following Jesus Luke was concerned with the corruptions of wealth and the plight of the poor. So he gathered more stories and teachings about these things than any other gospel. For example, the Rich Fool, The Rich Young Ruler, Zacchaeus the Rich Tax-Collector, and in chapter 16, The Rich Man and Lazarus and today's text, The Rich Man and his Rascally Manager.

One way to think of this story is as a kind of Brer Rabbit story. Do you remember any? Brer Rabbit getting the best of Brer Fox and Brer Bear? I read them growing up and later discovered that they began as slave stories, as slaves

loved seeing Brer Rabbit—standing in for the slaves—outwit Brer Bear and Brer Fox, standing in for the white slave master and his operatives.

Today's parable has that kind of humor, and the joke was relished by the common folk who followed Jesus.

II

The story begins: "There was a man who was rich." To Luke and to his audience in these first words was the message: "Be wary of this guy".

The rich man had a manager who took care of the books of the rich man's collection of farms. He was like the Chief Financial Officer of that first century agra-business.

People came to the rich man and passed on some malicious rumors about the manager. Literally the word meant "devilish charges." The manager, they said, was wasting, or squandering or mismanaging the rich man's goods. We have no details about the charges and their truthfulness. Embezzlement? Building in extra money for himself in what he charged the farmers? But the intent of the charges was malicious. They wanted to do him in.

So the rich man called him in and said, "What is this that I hear about you?! Turn in you accounts, for you can no longer by my manager!" or to use the words of the reality T.V. show: "You're Fired!"

The manager left the room and had a little talk with himself. “Self”, he said, “I’m too scrawny to dig, and I’m not about to go around begging. What am I to do?” Then the light bulb came on: “I know what I’ll do. Before I turn in the books, I’m going to make friends for myself with the master’s debtor’s so that when I’m out of work they will receive me into their homes.”

He went to the master’s debtors. The rich man was rich in part because he charged such exorbitant fees and interest on the loans he made to the farmers. In this he was a disobedient man who broke the Law or Torah of God. He was an unrighteous man, the word is *adikia*, in the Greek. We will see the word again and again in today’s passage. Both the rich man and the manager were in on the corrupt practices of the corrupt system, both scoundrels. If I were to cast these two characters in a movie, the rich man would be Danny DeVito and the wily manager would be Billy Bob Thornton.

The manager called in the master’s tenant farmers *privately*, one by one. “How much do you owe the master?”, he asked the first. “One hundred measures of oil”, the farmer said. A huge debt: 900 gallons of olive oil. It would take a laborer three years to produce that much. He’d never get out of debt. “I owe my soul to the company store.”

“Sit down quickly”, the manager said—for he did not have a lot of time—“take your bill and write down fifty.”

Another came in . “How much do you own the master?” “One hundred measures of wheat”, the man said. Another huge debt, about a thousand bushels of wheat. “Take you new bill”, the manger said, “and write down eighty”. And so it went.

The farmers had suddenly, unexpectedly been set free from crippling debt! Imagine the word beginning to spread around the village: “This is a miracle! The master has found the Lord! He has become a righteous man.” The rich man and the manager have just become local heroes!

Now, what was the rich man to do? If he put out the public notice: “All debts are back to full measure”, he’d look like a fool and lose his new-found acclaim.

The rich man realized he had been outwitted by his manger. So what did he do? Here’s how the parable ends: “The master praised the unrighteous, *adikia*, manager because of his *shrewdness*.” “What!?”

The Greek word is *phronimos*, shrewd, smart, wise. So I’ve made up a new word: *phronomosity*, shrewdness. It means being smart about your well-being, your welfare, and acting upon it! Get smart!

Remember Jesus’ teaching about the foolish man who built his house on sand and the wise man who built his house on rock? The word for wise was

“*phronimos*”, the same. And remember how Jesus taught, “Be gentle as doves and wise as serpents?” The word for wise was the same, *phronimos*.

It’s about being smart about your spiritual life, your whole life.

So here is the gospel as comedy. God making the crooked places straight and changing our crooked little hearts, changing us from *adikia*, unrighteous, to righteous. The gospel as comedy is, as Frederick Buechner put it, about “the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people.” Even us! (You may remember George Burns playing God in *Oh, God!* He said that God was like a comedian, playing to an audience who is afraid to laugh. It’s ok to smile at this story!)

III

Jesus adds now a moral teaching to make sure we got the point: “The children of this age are wiser, shrewder in their dealings with their own kind than are the children of light.” In other words I wish you, children of light, were as smart about your spiritual life as the children of this age, the bankers, lawyers and merchants are about their own welfare.

Last week Pastor Brunson preached about our needing a spiritual check-up just like we need an annual physical check-up. If your foot’s infected you go to the doctor so it won’t spread and develop gangrene. Are we that smart about the

infections in our spiritual life and moral life? In our spiritual life we need a dose of *enlightened self-interest*, or long term self-interest. Taking good care of ourselves. *Phronomosity*.

Then Jesus adds, “Make friends for yourself with *unrighteous mammon* (there’s that word, *adikia*), so that when it gives out you will be welcomed into dwellings that are eternal”, eternal habitations.

In other words, “Use the Almighty Dollar for Almighty God”, or, here’s a loose translation from the Greek: “*The devil’s had that money long enough; let God use it for awhile!*”

Think about that dollar bill in your pocket. Where has it been in its long life from hand to hand, person to person? What has it been used for? For good and for ill? For good purposes or bad? Let it be used, Jesus said, for the purposes of God in the world. Turn it into currency for the kingdom!

IV

Finally, Luke adds two saying of Jesus that fit the topic of the chapter. The first is this: “Who ever is faithful in the little things is faithful in the big things. And whoever is unrighteous (there’s that word, *adikia*) in the little things is unrighteous in much.”

Sometimes we may think, “When the big challenges, big opportunities come, I’ll be ready.” The way to be ready is to take care of the little challenges and opportunities.

Be faithful in the hours, and the days will take care of themselves. We cannot alone solve climate change, public corruption and the inequality that affects almost everything in the land, from the courts to the schools, but we can do our smaller part. It keeps us human.

So we wake up and we feed the homeless, write a note, vote, visit a nursing home, teach a Sunday school class, sing in the choir, read a child a story, take care of the neighbor’s dog. A little kindness goes a long way. “Whoever is faithful in little things is faithful in much.”

I used to have a hand-stitched saying of Mother Teresa on my walls: “Do Small Things with Great Love.”

Then the final saying of Jesus on the topic. Matthew’s gospel places it in the Sermon on the Mount. Luke places it here between the stories of the Rich Man and His Manager, and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

“No one can serve two masters”, Jesus said, meaning the heart can only have one master. Which is true. When it gets down to basics, to crunch time, your

heart reveals its true master. Then the clincher: “You can’t serve both God and mammon”, money, wealth, stuff.

Try as we might! We can’t serve them both.

One the back of the dollar bill is the phrase: “In God We Trust.” It’s an interesting place to put those words. In God We Trust. Is this true? Or do we place our trust in the dollar bill itself?

These are the kinds of questions Jesus is asking in Luke 16.