

Have you ever read a Scripture passage and ended up with more questions than answers? Our parable for today has always left me a little confused. It seems that Jesus is applauding the dishonesty of the steward and we know that can't be right. I have resolved for myself that Jesus is complimenting the man's ingenuity to resolve a difficult situation. Sometimes we need to wander back into the time of Jesus to pick up a few details that help us to see Scripture in a new light.

In antiquity, a steward functioned as the agent of the master or lord of the estate with the powers to hire, fire, enter into contracts, etc. The steward kept the books and received some payment for himself by charging interest. The loan note indicated the amount to be paid back, not the amount borrowed. In essence, the amount to be paid back included the interest, and that extra money was for the steward. So in the parable, when the steward writes down the note, he is effectively giving up his share of the money owed, 25% in one case and 50% in the other. The rich man will still receive what is his due in full so the parable is not encouraging dishonesty, but rather, the right use of money and resources, which itself is a favorite theme of the gospel of Luke. It is certainly true that the servant is dishonest, as we learn at the opening verse. And it is for that reason that he is being released. But his writing down of the debt is a crafty way for him to use his own resources (the money owed to him) to curry favor with others.

Luke is the only evangelist to tell this parable of the Dishonest Steward. It is rooted firmly in the ancient world; discerning the likely meaning is much like deciphering a puzzle. Rather than a quick, easy read it's important to understand something of the context of the ancient world so as to more appropriately apply its lesson.

Jesus has more to say about money and how we use it nearly any other ethical or moral matter in the gospels. And Luke the evangelist gives us more of these sayings, parables and teachings than any other evangelist. Though the steward is being released from his position due to some dishonesty, he now acts in a shrewd way to leverage his remaining resources. He understands quickly that the money in the ledger due to him is better utilized currying favor than being handed over to the master. The master, upon realizing this, does not condemn him for stealing, for after all he was not stealing. Instead, the master admires him.

We are advised to be as cunning and creative as this steward. It would be a misreading and a sure misunderstanding to imagine Jesus is encouraging dishonesty. Instead, with our own resources we are to be creative, using wealth for a greater good.

In the book, *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo we encounter a bishop, Monseigneur Bievenu, who is a bishop in a small mountain diocese, Digne, France in the early 1800's. Monseigneur Bievenu was a very simple man who lived close to the earth and very closely with the poor. When he first arrived in Digne, he came to the bishop's palace which was a large handsome stone mansion, everything on a grand scale. The bishop's personal apartments, the drawing-rooms and bedrooms, the broad courtyard flanked by arcades in the old Florentine manner and the gardens planted with splendid trees. The dining room was a long and magnificent gallery on the ground floor, giving on to the garden. There was also a small hospital on the property which was a narrow, two-storied house with a small garden. A few days after arriving the bishop met with the hospital director in the bishop's palace to learn more about the hospital. What he learned is that the hospital was way too small for the many patients that they cared for. The bishop sitting in the very large grand house which was way too big for his needs began to think about how many patient beds would fit into this room and that room. Monseigneur Bievenu finally exclaimed to the hospital director, "I will tell you what has happened. There has been a mistake. You have twenty-six persons in five or six small rooms, while in this house there are three of us and room for sixty (the bishop's sister and her maid lived with the bishop). We must change places. Let me have your house and you shall have mine." The next day the patients were moved in the bishop's palace and the bishop, his sister and her maid moved into the hospital building.

Monseigneur Bievenu shows us the creativity that Jesus calls us to when we look at our finances. The bishop understood that all that he had and was given was not just for his care but the care of his brothers and sisters. He rejected all luxuries and shared what he had with those in need.

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