

“Dishonest Brokers in the Business of Normal!”

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FCMF #2

Scripture:

Luke 16:1-15

Jesus would say to the disciples:

“There was this rich man whose manager had been accused of squandering his master’s property. He called him in and said, “What's this I hear about you? Lets have an audit of your management, because your job is being terminated.’ Then the manager said to himself, “What am I going to do? My master is firing me. I’m not strong enough to dig ditches, and I’m ashamed to beg. I’ve got it! I know what I’ll do so doors will open for me when I’m removed as manager.’ So, he called in each of his master's debtors. He said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?’ He said, “Five hundred gallons of olive oil.’ And he said to him, “Here is your invoice; sit down right now, and make it two hundred and fifty.’ Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?’ He replied, “A thousand bushels of wheat.’ He said to him, “Here is your invoice; make it eight hundred.’ The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...”

Sermon:

Ah, it’s passages like these that make me love the Bible.

So how many of you find this passage just a little troubling?

At face value we have a story where the main character is a real scoundrel and who, not only, is not admonished for his bad behavior but actually receives commendations for being unscrupulous.

Is Jesus really encouraging folks to be underhanded in business?
Or does Jesus not really care if we are less than “above board?”

Well, if you are troubled by this parable, know that you are not alone!
It was also real problem for the early church.

So troubling was it, that several attempts were actually made
and later added to the parable so as to head off misinterpretations.

Whenever we study the Gospels we first must acknowledge that any encounter come to us with at lots of baggage. Or as one biblical scholar explains it, with multiple layers of varnishes after two centuries of Christian interpretation.

Most of the time it can still make sense but many times in can be nearly impossible to strip away all those layers in order to get what might have been the original understanding and intent of the passage.

But just as some treasures are buried deep, with a little effort we too can cut through some of those layers of cultural, religious, and political assumptions that are obscuring some of the golden saying of Jesus.

Many scholars feel that the original parable of the “Shrewd or Dishonest Manager” would have likely ended midway through verse 8.

Totally unsatisfied, or mystified or perhaps even a bit frightened by how some might interpret the parable, Luke and or other early Christian editors felt the need to elaborate or “interpret” the parable by adding additional verses (8b though 15). And so from almost the beginning of Christianity itself this passage has confused and deeply troubled folks.

If we too are confused and or troubled, well... don't feel too bad, we are in good company!

In those seven verses that follow we can see at least four attempts to interpret just what the heck Jesus was saying?

But before I get into those we need to clarify a few other things.

Now most versions of this passage call him a “shrewd manager.” The New Jerusalem Bible however calls him a “crafty steward,” while the KJV says he was an “unjust steward,” Several versions flat out call him a “dishonest manager.” It is seems pretty clear that what ever he was doing it was shady. It is also unambiguous, that in the end, his actions were not condemned but depending upon the version; even “praised, commended, admired, or applauded,” by his master.

So we cannot varnish over the fact that the manager was clearly unscrupulous and that not only was he not fired for his shady dealings he was actually praised for his dishonesty.

One commentary inserts an even more intriguing idea. Given the tense of the Greek verb used here, the manager's internal dialogue could go something like this,

"I've known all along what I shall do in a case like this."
In other words this guy knew exactly what he was doing and so he had also figured out a 'plan B' for the day when he would likely get caught."

Now I think we all know what the word "dishonest" means? But "shrewd" is after all not a term we use all that frequently. So I went to good ole Webster and found such terms as: "crafty, mischievous and dangerous."

Another definition is: "marked by clever discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen."

But my personal favorite is: "given to wily and artful ways of dealing!"

One other key question before we return to the passage is this: To whom was Jesus telling this parable?

As a traveling mystic and sage Jesus' earliest audiences would most likely have been the rural poor; small farmers, laborers and fisher folk.

Much of the source of the poverty during that time was due to indebtedness that was rampant among rural peasantry. Folks in the crowd would have known dishonest money lenders as well as absentee landlords who would have allowed their managers (and at times hired goons) to not only hound them to pay their debts but who would add to the amounts owed through kick-backs, bribes as well as exorbitant and unregulated interest rates.

As long as the boss got his, lower level managers were free to cut themselves in on part of the scam.

Even the religious authorities at the Temple skimmed of a large slice of the "offerings" levied upon the faithful before sending the taxes they owed off to Rome.

Both these characters and their business models would have been far too real for most in Jesus' audience.

But even in a system of corruption such as this any "manager" also knew that their own fortunes could change overnight.

A manager possessing a "clever discerning awareness" would have no doubt come up with a Plan B just in case things to a drastic turn.

The first interpretation attached includes the last half of verse 8:
"The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this world (or age) exhibit better sense in dealing with their own kind than do the children of light."

"It's a dog-eat-dog world out there!"
Lying, cheating and stealing is how business gets done.
That is how "children of this age" treat "their own kind."
Success is not for the tender hearted.
But the "children of the Light" (or of God) behave differently.

The next interpretation is verses 9:
"I tell you, make use of your ill-gotten gain to make friends for yourselves so that when the bottom falls out, they are there to welcome you into the eternal dwelling places."

Okay, on a human level -- good advice.
If left to only one's own devices maybe it's not a bad idea to take your "ill-gotten gains" and buy some friends.

And if we've learned anything from all those mobster movies its that money comes in handy when the coppers are on your tail and especially handy when your locked up in jail.

Or we can state this a bit more positively, share what you have, and be a kind neighbor or friend, invest in relationships, true relationship are the true riches that will last.

Verses 10-12 is another attempt:
"The one who can be trusted in trivial matters can also be trusted with large amounts; and the one who cheats in trivial matters will also cheat where large amounts are concerned. So if you couldn't be trusted with ill-gotten gain, who will trust to you with true riches? And if you cannot be trusted with something that belongs to another, who will let you have property of your own?"

Here a later editor adds a rather familiar aphorism that we also encounter in other places in the gospels, though it is usually as part of different and familiar parable. Typically it is part of what we often call “the parable of the talents.” You may recall the story, where a wealthy landlord gives out varying amounts of cash to three different managers to invest on his behalf. Two of the managers (were they dishonest in their dealings?) make a killing by doubling the original investment!

The third individual however decided to hide the amount and was actually punished severely, when he returned the principle. It is certainly, in my mind, a tortured interpretation, which seems to be summed up as “dishonesty in small things leads to dishonesty in bigger arenas.”

Or as we often say to our children, little lies will only lead to bigger lies. Inversely then being faith full to God in small things will also lead to faithfulness in larger measures. Certainly this is true and a good message to take away but it really doesn’t seem to really fit the story.

The last interpretation was probably the latest to be added. In verses 13-15 the religious establishment, particularly the Pharisees, came in for harsh criticism:
"No servant can be a slave to two masters.
No doubt that slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and disdain the other."

In other words, you cannot be enslaved to both God and a bank account.

“The Pharisees, who were money grubbers, heard all this, and they sneered at him. But he said to them, ‘You're the type who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is detestable in God’s estimation.’ “

Verse 13 dregs up the well-worn warning that it is better to simply avoid wealth due to its all corrupting influence.

Again not bad advice especially to those who might welcome Jesus’ words as ether a license to cheat and defraud or that Jesus might not really be all that concerned with the accumulation of wealth.

Now the accusation that some religious leaders were corrupt and “lovers of money” was no doubt true, but in this case it would not have been the true in regards to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were usually from the middle class and they would have been concerned with maintaining the highest ethical standards of the law.

They were also the most popular Jewish group during the early days of the Jesus movement, and as such they would have formed the main competition for converts in the early Christian movement.

Of course there were good reasons to critique the Pharisees for being far too legalistic about following the law. The parable was certainly consistent with other criticisms of the religious establishment by Jesus throughout the gospels. In chapters 14 and 15 of Luke, Jesus specifically condemns the religious establishment for squandering the gifts and privileges (their ill-gotten gains) that they had been given by God.

Now I am not saying that any of these interpretations are incorrect - after all they would have been some of the earliest ones on record.

But they could also be one of those layers of old lacquer that is obscuring a more honest reading?

I am also not going to propose to you a definitive interpretation. But what I do want you to take away this morning is the importance of actually struggling with the Biblical text.

To get at the original meaning we must approach scripture critically, open and with a bit more skepticism.

This is of course not the only parable or saying of Jesus in the Gospels that is very confusing or potentially unsettling.

Most, if not all, of Jesus' parables, I believe, are meant to be provocative and to make us think! First he seeks to capture his audience's attention using common elements but then to make us think he may jar us with exaggerations, reversals of fortunes stark contrast and even contradictions. It was how he not only challenged the status quo but also how he fired the imaginations of those disenfranchised.

It was also how he introduced the radically reoriented way of God, which begins by first disrupting "business as usual."

If the standard operating procedure in all levels of society is to be dishonest and to disenfranchise the poor, then God demands we act dishonestly within those norms.

God also expects us to resort to "wily and artful ways of dealing" when we confront those in power of an unjust world.

So what could be some real world applications for this passage? Well, one personal and perhaps radical application is to be honest in your business dealings.

Let's say for the sake of argument that the dishonest Manager was simply removing his cut from what others owed his boss. Maybe the system is still corrupt but at least he has stopped benefiting from it personally and becoming less corrupt.

But if we are part of systems of power that benefits us for being white, or male or straight or whatever, we too may need to start divesting ourselves of wealth and privilege.

Such divestment that leads us to serving and living among the poor actually may uncover a new kind of wealth, treasures of new understandings, real joy, life-changing experiences and deeper and longer-lasting friendships. Maybe we can use our ill-gotten gains of wealth and privilege to create a more just world for everyone.

But to do this we may have to betray, artfully and deceptively, the class or race or even religion we were born into.

In every progressive movement from women rights to civil rights we saw how necessary it was for some to be considered dishonest by their own people for lasting change to happen.

During Hitler's brutal reign in Europe, fortunately there were many who lied, disobeyed and were otherwise disloyal to the Reich and who were able to save many who were destined for the gas chambers.

Each time I enter Israel with CPT I am not completely honest. I try not to lie but I certainly do not tell them the whole truth.

And when one considers the current situation in our nation
where so many in the White House lie with impunity
and alternative facts are seemingly the norm,
should we not praise, commend, admire, or applaud
those who are being dishonest with those who seek to uphold dishonest behavior as the norm
by speaking and spreading the truth?
Should we also be willing to be at least accused, if not of dishonesty but being wily, or crafty, or
mischievous, dangerous and even “fake?!”
by those who think unjust structures are just fine and dandy!

But let me share one more possible interpretation as I end my reflection,
and that is what should I be doing about all that unmerited,
unearned and lavishly bestowed love and forgiveness of God?

Am I squandering these riches by sitting on them
or am I using them for their intended purposes?

Am I making friends? Am I trying to influence enemies
(to become friends of course!)?
Am I spending my ill-gotten gains cultivating what is of ultimate value?
Am I cutting folks some slack in what I expect or think they owe me?
Am I helping to create spaces in my heart and in my home
and in my city, or nation and world
that truly become “eternal dwelling places?”

And so yes, be shrewd, be utterly “crafty, mischievous and dangerous”
“marked by clever discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen.”

Be also “given to wily and artful ways of dealing!”
Until such “eternal dwelling places” become reality
here on earth as they are in heaven!

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