

“The Way it Is, Isn’t Always the Way it Should Be!”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor
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Scripture

Scripture Luke 19:12-26

12 So he said, "A nobleman went off to a distant land intending to acquire a royal title for himself and then return. 13 Calling ten of his servants, he gave each one of them one hundred thousand dollars, and told them: "Do business with this until I return." 14 But his fellow citizens, however, hated him and sent a delegation right on his heels, with a petition: "We do not want this man to rule over us." 15 As it turned out, he got his royal appointment and returned. He had those servants summoned, to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what profit they had made. 16 The first came forward and reported, "Master, your investment has increased ten times over." 17 He said to him, "Well done, you excellent servant! Because you have been trustworthy with a small amount, you will take charge of ten cities." 18 The second came forward and reported, "Master, your investment has increased five times over." 19 And he said to him, "And you are to be in charge of five cities." 20 Then the last came forward and said, "Master, here's the money you gave me. I tucked it safely away in my mattress. 21 For you see, I was afraid of you, because you are ruthless: you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." 22 He said to him, "You incompetent servant!... 23 Why didn't you at least put my money in the bank? Then I could have collected it with interest when I returned." 24 Then he said to his assistants, "Take the money away from this guy and give it to the one who made ten times as much." 25 "But my lord," they said, "he already has ten times as much." 26 He replied, "I tell you the truth, to everyone who has, even more will be given to them; and from those who have nothing, even what they do have will be taken away."

Sermon

So what's going on here?

Jesus' parable seems to be encouraging the adoption of a single-minded focus on the task of making lots of money. Not only were the servants in this story given large sums of money, they were directed to "invest and trade" so as to make even more for their already super rich and powerful master.

We also do not know how they made their money, but they are rewarded by the master for their efforts and the reward rose according to the amount earned.

Meanwhile the one who returned with only the principal still intact, was punished by taking away what he had and giving it to the one who was already the highest compensated of the ten servants.

Jesus also fails to make any comments about an unjust economic system, or possible corruption needed to secure such large gains, or any of the possible moral perils of accumulating wealth.

Well, I think that there are a couple of things happening here.

First, Jesus is telling a story and his audience is likely made up of the poorer folks in his society. And a good storyteller must not only grab their audience's attention, but they must be sure to keep it.

Devices such as conflict, exaggeration, humor, as well as incorporating current events, are just a few that are being used here.

Often when we read the parables of Jesus, we do not catch all of these and sometimes may miss the point all together.

Jesus also liked to use the material from the everyday lives of his audience and he typically managed a reversal of fortunes in the end.

Sometimes those reversals pleased his audience, making them laugh and cheer, while other times it also left them troubled.

Parables and allegories are much the same thing. An allegory is "a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one."

But the meaning of this morning's parable hardly seems hidden - those "who have" actually deserve even more while those who have the least, even that will be taken away.

As in Jesus' day, in our times, this seems to be both the common practice and popular sentiment in our world. But maybe knowing a bit of the historical context, maybe there is a reversal of fortunes and a more consistent moral to follow?

According to the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, in the year 4 BCE, Herod Archelaus became ruler of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea upon the death of his father, Herod the Great.

And though he ruled for only nine years, his rule managed to be similarly ruthless as was his father's. Even though they were of Jewish decent, both faced harsh criticisms by the religious authorities of the day, as well as numerous popular insurrections.

These threats to their authority were met with mass incarceration, mass torture and the massacres of many innocent folk.

Soon after his father's death, Archelaus sailed for Rome in order to secure his title from Caesar Augustus.

Josephus also recounted that many others also sailed to Rome from Palestine to oppose his confirmation.

One was a cohort of 50 religious leaders, who wanted Augustus to appoint a less corrupt and a more just ruler. His brother, Herod Antipas, also showed up in Rome to oppose Archelaus, because he desired to have the throne for himself and his cronies.

Upon return, his rule was very unpopular as he continued to cruelly suppress the local Jewish populace.

Finally in the year 6 CE, he was removed by another Caesar, Tiberius, and exiled to what is now France.

No doubt, as well, all those who had faithfully served him and who were enriched by their servility, likely found themselves in either a dungeon, or also exile or executed.

Those in the audience would have known this back story and would have caught that fact that the actual historical events were not at all like the allegorical one that Jesus had woven into his parable.

The fact that a system of patronage is necessary to keep Kings and tyrants in power is, we could say, “just the way things are!” and as history has shown, “the way things have always been.”

Most in that audience would have had a lived experience that would have borne this reality out.

Jesus was not asking his listeners to use their imaginations. They knew all too well the consequences of living under the rule of corrupt and malevolent leaders and their pawns.

In his audience there were the underpaid laborers and the tenant farmers who were constantly cheated by their landlords, as well as the small landowners who were being taken advantage of by both commodity traders and bankers, whose land was constantly being foreclosed upon, thus expanding the holdings of the rich and powerful.

But a good story does not necessarily avoid the harsh realities of life, right here and right now, especially if we want to make real change.

Corrupt rulers have and can be removed, empires have and will fall, and sometimes the value of community among the weak and poor, is of far greater value than taking part in all of the constant lies and corruption, and the incestuous intrigues of the rich and powerful.

The other and perhaps even more likely interpretation is that Jesus is, simply put, as we sing each Christmastime, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And similar to Herod Archelaus, he has gone off to heaven to receive his coronation and he will return someday to take up his rightful place here on earth.

In the meantime, we should get busy since we know not at what hour, nor on which day or in what year, he will return from his journey.

What better examples can we find in our world than the rich and powerful who continually desire and scheme for more and more. We know that they will go to great lengths, take huge risks and spend immense fortunes to expand what they already have. For many their entire lives are dedicated to it!

Why then, Jesus is saying, shouldn't the people of God be just as captivated and motivated to bring God's rule into reality?

But of course, there are some reasons that we do not do this. In some cases, the poor and powerless do manage to "make it" and quickly forget their past and leave their fellows behind.

While those of us in the middle class, well... since we have one foot in both worlds, it's really hard giving up some of the benefits of the current system that does not benefit everyone.

And for those of us who are actually truly wealthy, it can be quite painful to give it all (or even much of it) away.

Sure, cynically, another lesson that we could learn from this story and from history, for that matter, is "The More Things Change, the More They Remain the Same!" Or that, "Things are simply what they are!" So why even try?

In either case, Jesus likely got his crowd nodding their heads in agreement with him as he laid down the reality of it all.

But what if we were to be as singularly committed to God's way of justice and peace in the same way that our corrupt and tyrannical rulers are committed to world domination?

Would things maybe start changing for the better?
Can't we also learn from history that,
"Nothing as it is, necessarily needs to remain as it is!"

I'm guessing that most, if not all of you, have undergone many changes in your lives. I'm also guessing that these changes have likely caused you to find immense value in those things that money cannot buy? That you value most of the things that are not typically valued quite as much by the rich and powerful?.

But that also means that, even though the world around us may think we are strange, we understand and live into a reality of another kind of power.

Maybe we say that we live with “alternative” facts and understand reality that reverses the common narrative?

Our assumptions are different and strange precisely because we seek to upend the assumptions of those who try to control the narrative and who think they are in charge of keeping things just as they have always been.

For you see, for some reason, I actually don’t agree, but believe in the reversal of those fortunes.

“The Way it Is, isn’t always The Way it Should Be!”

**And that my brothers and sisters, I believe,
Is up to us to decide!**

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