

Luke 16:1-13

WHAT ON EARTH...?

What on earth did Jesus mean by telling this strange parable about the dishonest manager? And, why in the world did Jesus praise the shrewd shyster in the story and then commend him and his actions to those who first heard Jesus' parable and to the Church in every generation since? Without a doubt, this is one of the hardest and strangest parables Jesus ever told. In fact, this story qualifies for entry into those utterances of our Lord that we wish he had never said!

It's also interesting to note, following this story, Luke or some later scribe added on extra verses in order to "clean up" the story or at least salvage the parable by making a moralistic point or two about whoever is faithful over a little is faithful over a lot, and, no slave can serve two masters - thus, you cannot serve God and wealth.

What on earth was Jesus trying to convey to his audience then and now about this shrewd manager, who wastes his boss's money, is caught, called on the carpet, and is soon to be sacked, who cuts deals and cooks the books with those who owe his master money, in order to ingratiate himself with them, at the expense of his boss, and then, in the end, the boss praises the crooked dealings of the deceitful manager? Furthermore, why would Jesus exalt this thief and suggest that we follow his example?

Eugene Peterson helps us to understand what Jesus was saying by the fresh way he translates the ending of the parable: "Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way - but for what is right - using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior." (The Message, p. 1892)

Two things become clear. Jesus is not encouraging us to be dishonest and cheat people to the best of our abilities. Rather, Jesus employs this shocking story in order to wake us up for we tend to be careful, cautious, deliberate, and conscientious. While these are all good traits, we are missing the point if we settle for playing it safe. Jesus wants total commitment from his disciples and that will entail doing anything God asks. We are called to take risks by stepping out on a limb of faith, rushing forward to do something that needs to be done, scrambling to act in love in the face of danger or discomfort, and abandoning ourselves to uncertainty. For those of us who want to be and stay in control, Jesus' brand of discipleship may be difficult for it leads us to feel vulnerable at times.

In the parable, "the children of this age" are the people who don't know and follow God. They know to operate creatively in the world to get what they want. We can learn from them to a degree. We need to learn how to be more creative - not how to be unethical but how to be more astute. The dishonest manager was shrewd. However, to put a positive spin on shrewdness, Jesus is urging us to be clever, insightful, prudent, and even wise. He wants us to be just as creative and committed to making our Christian witness as others are in making money. We are called to be bold, decisive, imaginative, and even risky in how we live out our Christian faith before others.

This parable seems less strange when we remember the One, who first told this story. In Jesus, we see what a bold life looks like. We see Jesus taking risks by bucking the religious establishment, eating with tax collectors and sinners, enjoying life on the Sabbath, and giving himself fully to God's will - no matter the cost. In him we see total commitment to God lived out and even snuffed out on the cross. To be Jesus' disciple is to be a follower of the crucified and risen Lord. Of course, he has every right to expect and demand a decision from us as to what has top priority in our lives. Jesus does not give us the option of being part-time Christians. He wants us to invest ourselves fully and boldly in loving God and neighbor. What on earth? Yes, that is precisely what we are here on earth to do, to give ourselves away as a gift offered wholly to God and others.

A Presbyterian missionary in the West Indies told of an incident that happened in a church there on Children's Day. All the boys and girls came to church wearing their Sunday best. Each one carried a gift to place before the Lord's Table. During worship, the minister noticed a small girl over to the side who was not dressed in Sunday finery and she had no gift. She stood apart from the others because she had brought nothing with her. At the close of the service, the minister asked the children to march down to the table and present their gifts. After all the gifts were collected and the children had returned to their seats, the minister led the congregation in prayer. Afterwards he raised his eyes, and noted that the girl was no longer there. He looked around for her but he could not find her, until glancing back at the Lord's Table he saw the girl sitting in the midst of all the presents. When he asked her what she was doing there, she replied, "I have nothing to give to the Lord, so I gave myself,"

When we quit playing it safe and take risks of faith, here's the payoff - as we grow in giving ourselves away, it is then that we live, really live, and become more fully alive than ever before. When we imitate the Christ and follow in his footsteps, they will lead us to life - abundant and eternal - and, most of all, they will lead us to Christ and to the One who sent him. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
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