

Being as Smart as a Crook When You've Been Caught

Luke 16:1-13

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Every time we Christians use the word “stewardship” we are making an allusion to the stories Jesus told about stewards. They were Jesus’ way of giving us a sense of our place in the world. We are not the creators. We are not the owners. We are not the masters. Instead, our role as humans is to be stewards—servants whom the creator and owner of this world has entrusted with his property. We humans have been given great freedom, so we can live as if the owner’s interests don’t matter, but someday the master is going to come home. Someday there will be an accounting, and we will be held responsible for what we did with what was entrusted to us. All of that is behind the word “stewardship.”

In all of Jesus’ stories about stewards—and in many others—the theme is that there will be a day of reckoning. When Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, it meant on the one hand that God was going to act in this world to make everything right, but it also meant that judgment was coming. Of course it’s true that Jesus came bringing a message of forgiveness, a ministry of including sinners and outcasts, loving as God loves the human race. But if you read through the gospels—and especially if you read through the parables Jesus told—you discover that there is this message that a crisis is at hand. God is going to judge the world, and you’d better get ready for it.

This may seem like a contradiction to us, but to Jesus’ hearers that was good news. Jesus was preaching to a society where the poor were at the mercy of the rich, where religious life was full of hypocrites and religious leaders majored on the minors—kind of like the world Pope Francis was addressing a couple of days ago. In that kind of world, where the religious elite and the economic elite and the military elite are all in cahoots to take what little the poor have away from them and give it to the rich or to the military, the news that God is coming to judge is good news to the poor. When Jesus defined his mission in his inaugural address, quoting Isaiah, as “proclaiming good news to the poor,” he understood that to mean the news that the God’s reign was coming and the oppressors would be held accountable.

The story we are considering today falls under the general heading of stories about the coming day of accountability. This parable is called in the NRSV “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager,” but it has been known by many other names—depending on whether you wanted to think of the steward as shrewd or unrighteous. It has a reputation for being the most confusing of all of Jesus’ weird stories. I don’t deny that it can be confusing or that there are more interpretations of what it means than you can count on two hands. But Jesus was a guy who liked to be weird. He didn’t often say things straight out; he preferred, to use Emily Dickinson’s phrase, to “tell the truth but tell it slant.” He wanted to make you think differently, not just to repeat the orthodoxy you inherited. So often the story cannot be reduced to a “moral” like Aesop’s fables. They are stories to get us thinking about the strangeness of God. It’s possible that this story was “ripped from the headlines,” a takeoff on a local scandal that everyone would have recognized, but Jesus uses it for his own purposes.

I think if we read this story under the heading of “how to respond when you know the gig is up,” we can make sense of it. As scholar Joel Green has pointed out, a good place to start is by noticing the parallel between verses 4 and 9. Verse 4 says that since he’s been caught and

judgment from the boss is imminent, he's going to use what power he has so that "people will welcome me into their homes" when I'm jobless. Verse 9 says that this is what we ought to do: since we know that judgment is coming for us, we ought to focus our attention on making friends so that "they will welcome us into the eternal homes." If you've been unfaithful and you don't want to be homeless when the day of accounting comes, use whatever power and money you have to make sure that you have a home when that day comes.

The rich man in the story is an absentee landowner. We know a lot about those on Block Island. He has put an islander in charge of his property. In the old days, this would have been a large farm, so the debts are in terms of olive oil and wheat, but we can translate it into any kind of debt. The manager—also known as the steward—is not the owner of anything, but he is in a position of great power and responsibility. He stands between the rich owner and the sharecroppers who are using his land. The owner gives a farmer so many acres of olive trees to care for and harvest; the rent is a predetermined amount of olive oil which comes due once a year after the harvest. The manager's job is to collect what is owed and report it to the owner.

Let's say that instead of a farm in Palestine the story is about a business on Block Island. Let's say the rich man is a businessman from New York who has purchased a large hotel on the island. The rich man only comes to the island twice a year and he really knows nothing about the hotel business. He's basically an investor. He gives all the responsibility for running the hotel to his manager. After a couple of years the hotel is still not turning a profit. The investor doesn't like this, so he tries to find out why. What he hears through the Block Island rumor mill is that the manager has given himself very generous expense accounts for entertaining clients, and that he has adopted a policy of letting wedding parties and corporate events charge their bills on house accounts which he would collect—someday—with interest. On paper it might seem workable, but in reality there was a major problem with accounts payable. Collectibles is not the manager's strong suit since, you know, he is a people person.

So when the owner comes to the island, he calls the manager to his office. "I want you to turn the books over to me. I'd better not find anything else fishy in there. This obviously isn't working. This hotel is not a charity. You're fired."

The manager is now stuck on Block Island without a job. As many of you have found out at some point, that's a tough situation to be in. "What the heck am I gonna do?" he thinks. "I'm too weak to dig and too proud to beg"—which sounds to me like the chorus of a Motown song, but seems like an honest self-assessment. But then he thinks to himself, "What I really need now is some friends." So he comes up with an idea. This is where the story gets a little implausible to us, and I could give scholarly explanations for how it might have worked in the first century, but I think Jesus wants it to sound outlandish, or at least "out of the box."

He goes to the first customer who owes the hotel \$10,000 for a big wedding and he says, "Hey Joe, I'm leaving the business and am trying to settle accounts, but tell you what, I've always liked you, so just write me a check for five grand and we'll call it even." He calls a woman who owes \$5000 for a business banquet and gives the same kind of speech, saying "Between friends, let's just make it 3k and not worry about it." Done. Of course. He keeps doing that. Then when the word gets out that the manager has no job and no employee housing, his former customers start calling offering him a place to crash or a lead on a job.

Eventually, of course, the owner of the hotel learns what the manager has done. He's mad at the manager for making him lose even more money, but at the same time he leans back in his office chair shaking his head and says, "I'll be damned. He was smarter than I thought." It's a convention in Jewish stories beginning with the story of Jacob that sometimes the trickster wins.

Many cultures have stories of the Trickster who gets away with things and earns the grudging admiration—or even laughter—of the straight people. Think Br'er Rabbit or Robin Hood.

At this point in Luke we hear Jesus' voice: "The children of this evil age are smarter in dealing with their own kind than the children of light." Jesus is talking to his disciples, the people who are not loyal to this age but to the age to come, the kingdom of God. Why can't you be as smart as that crook? When he got caught, he focused all his energy on getting ready for the judgment. He took what he had control over and used it shrewdly to get himself a home after judgment day. What about you? Are you not getting it that you, too, have been found out? Get real. You haven't exactly been faithful stewards of what God entrusted to you. Now I'm telling you that an accounting is coming soon. Why can't you be as smart as that crook and put your money to work to make friends for yourself so that you will have an eternal home with them?

What does Jesus mean by "making friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth" or "unrighteous mammon"? There are other possibilities, but I think Jesus saw money as unrighteous or unclean in that it can pollute and corrupt the heart. All the money has Caesar's image on it, the image of the oppressor. All the money comes from an economy full of corruption from top to bottom, from bribed judges to merchants with their thumb on the scale. There is no such thing as untainted money, then or now. "Making friends for yourself" probably means—in light of what Jesus has been saying in Luke's gospel, and in light of the story of the poor man Lazarus which follows—making friends with the poor by helping them with your money. If you know you are going to be judged someday soon for how you managed the money entrusted to you by God, shouldn't you focus your attention on spending the money doing the things that God wants so that you can be with the poor whom God loves in heaven forever? It just makes sense to use your money to prepare for your future. This is your real retirement fund after your 401(k), the fund you will draw on after you die.

Jesus said back in chapter 12 of the same gospel, "Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:33-34). We think that if we give our hearts to God, our treasure will follow, but Jesus says it works the other way round. If we give our treasure to God—by giving to the poor, by supporting the spread of the gospel and worship in God's house—then our hearts will follow.

I think Jesus is saying to us through this very odd story that we too have been found out. God knows what we have done and not done. We have all cooked the books of our lives to prop up our sense of ourselves as good. The truth is that we have used for our own benefit what was entrusted to us by God, and not paid attention to his concerns—including his concern for the poor. So what shall we do about this? In the time that remains before judgment, Jesus says, focus on giving all you can that you might have a home in heaven. Invest in relationships, because those investments are the ones that will have a payoff beyond this life. How do we send our treasure on to heaven? By investing in people—the only thing besides angels and God we know will be in heaven.

At the end of this story, Luke has attached several sayings of Jesus about money which don't relate directly to the story but have to do with stewardship. You ought to reflect on each of them: If you're faithful in the little things, God can trust you to be faithful with big things. On the other hand, if you are unfaithful in small things—that is, if you don't put the interests of the owner above your own interests—then God is not going to entrust you with anything big.

And then this, the kicker: A slave can't have two masters. You have to choose. You can't serve the Father of Jesus Christ as your God and serve Money as your God at the same time. As

Bob Dylan sang long ago, “You gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” The whole question of stewardship is whether we will choose to serve God rather than our own finances. Which will be the priority in our lives?

Did you know that in New Testament there is no difference between the word for faith and the word for faithfulness? When we trust God by faith, we are trusting God to be faithful. Paul says we are saved by the faithfulness of Jesus. When the owner of everything comes and checks our books, will he find us faithful?