

March 12, 2023

The Gospel of Luke
LIV. Betting on God's Grace
Luke 16:1-9

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

This is a hard one – let's just admit that right up front. This is a hard one, and the church has been wrestling with what this parable means since the early days. But hard does not mean indecipherable. The key to understanding the meaning of this parable about the dishonest manager lies in making two connections. The first is to grasp that this parable is deeply connected to the parables of Luke 15 – those parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons. And especially to see that what lies at the center of those parables – the love and grace of Jesus Christ towards sinners – lies also at the heart of our parable this morning. And the second important connection to make in understanding this parable is to connect it to its time and place and cultural setting. In fact, the heart of this parable – its central point – will only become clear to us if we do so, if we try to hear in it what Jesus' first audience would have heard.¹ So, let's get started!

“There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.” Here is the set-up – a very wealthy landowner has an estate manager overseeing all of his fields and properties, all of his deals and denarii. And word has come to this rich man, from very reliable sources apparently, that this estate manager has been dishonest in his dealings. That he is, in fact, stealing the rich man blind. The rich man calls his estate manager into the main office and demands of him, *“What is this that I hear about you?”* Which means, not so much, *“What is it I hear?”*, so much as, *“I've caught you red-handed and your goose is cooked.”* And, on the spot, the rich man fires his dishonest manager: *“Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.”*

Now, note two important things here. In that culture, time, and place, we would expect the dishonest manager to protest his innocence, or at least to offer alternative explanations for what the rich man has heard. But the dishonest manager doesn't even try – which, again, in that culture and time and place, meant that he was guilty on all counts. Really, really guilty. Probably guilty of even more than the rich man had heard about!

And then, second, and this is the really critical part for understanding everything that happens next. Notice also what the rich man doesn't do – which, in that culture and time and place, he would have been expected to do. He fires the dishonest manager – but – he doesn't have the dishonest manager thrown into jail until he can pay back all that he has stolen. And that would have been, in that culture and time and place, the expected response. So, this rich man is behaving, responding, in a most unexpected way. Essentially, in not throwing the dishonest manager into prison, the rich man is showing extraordinary mercy to his dishonest manager.

So, at this point – and, again, this is what is critical to understanding everything which follows, as well as the meaning of this parable for us – at this point, because of how the rich man has treated him, this dishonest manager has now learned two very important things about the rich man. That, number one, while the rich man is honest and just and requires obedience and frowns on crime – nonetheless, number two, that the rich man is at heart a very merciful fellow. A man willing to show rather a great deal of mercy even toward a scoundrel like the dishonest manager. This insight about the rich man’s heart of mercy explains everything the dishonest manager decides to do next. Basically, he decides to place one huge – his life hanging in the balance huge – one huge bet on the merciful heart of the rich man.

This is what happens. He begins by deliberating within himself over what to do next, now that he has been fired. He reasons that he is too old for manual labor and too proud to beg. So, how is he going to keep food on the table and a roof over his head in a time when there are no unemployment benefits headed his way? His only option, he concludes, is to find a new management position with another rich person – this is what is meant when he says to himself, “*I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.*” He’s going to line up another job managing the estate of another rich person.

But how to achieve this – especially given that it will soon be known far and wide that he was fired for having been a dishonest manager and a thief? Who will hire him then? And that is when his plan comes together – a brilliant, shrewd, scheming plan worthy of Wile E. Coyote and then some. And this plan, let me say it again, is entirely based on what he has just learned about the merciful nature of the rich man. Because, basically, his plan is to bet all the marbles, indeed bet his very life and future, on the merciful nature of the rich man.

This is the plan. Word has not yet gotten out that he has been fired – in fact, he still has all the rich man’s account books in his possession. As far as anyone else knows, he is still the legitimate, official, and authorized manager over all the rich man’s holdings. So he has a brief window of opportunity to implement his plan – and this dishonest manager is nothing if not quick. He summons two of the rich man’s largest debtors – one-by-one so they won’t compare notes with one another – he summons them in to his office to discuss their accounts. Now, these two debtors are also quite rich, as shown by the amounts which they owe the rich man. And what the dishonest manager is hoping, by what he does next, is to land a new job with one of these two, even after they find out what he has done to the rich man.

So the dishonest manager, as far as anyone knows still acting in the employ of the rich man, still carrying out the instructions of the rich man, summons in the first rich debtor and asks him how much he owes – “*A hundred measures of oil.*” Cross that out, says the dishonest manager; you now owe only fifty – an unbelievably large reduction of his debt. The second rich debtor – how much does he owe? “*A hundred measures of wheat.*” Cross that out, says the dishonest manager – from now on you only owe eighty – a reduction, in denarii terms, every bit as large as the one given to the first.

Now, just imagine the effect all of this would have had on those two rich debtors. They must have walked out of the dishonest manager’s office in utter disbelief and in utter joy at the

apparent generosity of the rich man in instructing his manager to reduce their debt to such a great degree. And, no doubt, and all according to the dishonest manager's plan to gain new employment, feeling also quite kindly towards this dishonest manager for his part in helping to bring about such a generous gift. Maybe even grateful enough to hire him on, even once they learn what a shrewd and dishonest manager he really is – thinking, perhaps, that it would be better to have such a shrewd and dishonest fellow working for them rather than for someone else against them!

In any case, the rich man finds out pretty quickly what his dishonest – and already fired – manager has now done. And here is where we see the shrewdness of this plan, and how it is such a huge bet on the rich man's merciful nature. Again, this dishonest manager is literally betting everything on the demonstrated fact that the rich man is, indeed, a merciful person, as he demonstrated by not throwing the dishonest manager in jail right from the start. Here's the bet: when the rich man discovers what the dishonest manager has done in greatly reducing the debts of his two largest debtors – the rich man quickly must have realized that he had been caught in a trap in which he had only two possible options in response. He can choose the way of justice – and remember, that was lesson number one about the rich man's character that the dishonest manager had learned. That the rich man was just, honest, expected obedience, and punished disobedience. So the rich man can choose a response of justice, law and order. He can throw the dishonest manager into jail for real this time – and toss away the key. And then – since the crime would become known anyway – he would have to go to the two rich debtors and explain what the dishonest manager has done, how it was all a fraudulent scheme cooked up by an already fired manager who had no authorization nor power to reduce their debts. And that, therefore, they still owed the full amount of their debts. That would be the path of justice – and who could blame the rich man for pursuing such a response? Otherwise, he stood to lose a lot of money here.

But, of course, those two rich debtors would not be too happy about this. In fact, they would probably be pretty upset with the rich man. No doubt they were already celebrating – champagne flowing and fatted calf being eaten – at what they thought to be the rich man's extraordinary generosity towards them. For the rich man to now come tell them that it was all a fraud and that they still owed the full amount of their debt – well, their joy at what they had thought was his generosity would probably quickly become an equal measure of anger and resentment at what they now would perceive to be his stinginess and greed.

So, option number two for the rich man is to choose, well, mercy. To just keep quiet about what his dishonest servant had now done, pretend that it was all his own idea and personal instruction to the dishonest manager to do this, and accept the loss for what the dishonest manager had done. Everyone within a hundred miles would then hear about what a generous man he was – his reputation would probably skyrocket, in fact, by this scheme of his dishonest manager. And the dishonest manager, no doubt, would indeed find a new position with one of those very happy rich debtors who had benefited from his crime. Again, better to have such a scoundrel working for you than against you! So, which option will the rich man choose – option number one, act on his sense of justice; or option number two, act on his already demonstrated depth of mercy?

He chooses mercy, of course. He calls in the dishonest manager a second time and even commends him – commends him – for his shrewdness. And now we see clearly the meaning of the dishonest manager's plan – the wager he made on the merciful nature of his master. He is

commended by the rich man, not because of his dishonesty, but because he has rightly understood and rightly wagered his freedom, life, and future on the true character of the rich man's heart. He bet everything that the rich man would choose mercy a second time, because of his nature – and that is exactly what the rich man has done. The dishonest manager could have ended up in jail this second dishonest and sinful go-round – but the rich man has shown him mercy again. In that time and culture he could even have been sold off as a slave – at least then the rich man would get back some of his financial losses – but the rich man has shown him mercy. He could have been exposed as a crook to the two debtors in such a way as to insure that he never had another decent job his entire life – but the rich man has shown him mercy. This dishonest manager, so deserving of condemnation and punishment, instead meets with mercy because he had rightly perceived that the heart of the rich man really was merciful. He has wagered everything on the merciful heart of the rich man – and he has won!

And therein lies the meaning of this parable for us. In telling us this parable, Jesus is confirming yet again what He told us about Himself and His mission – and, indeed, about His own divine heart – in those three parables of Luke 15. Those of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons – and of the God who only wants to find what is lost, return it to Himself, who is seeking out sinners that He might show them His love and His mercy. He is telling us again that while, indeed, God's justice cannot abide sin, and that our sin is a real and terrible concern before which we should be trembling – nonetheless, at the center of God's great heart towards us is not a longing for justice and for punishment upon our sin, but the longing of His love for us. His desire to forgive our sins in order to return us to His love. And that of the two options God has faced in response to our sin – punishment or mercy – He is choosing to show us mercy, if we will but let Him. Because what God wants more than anything else is to have us found – like that lost sheep, that lost coin, and those two lost brothers. Found and forgiven and embraced. In Jesus Christ, we see the true nature of our God, the true reflection of His attitude towards us. And it is love. And it is mercy. And it is grace for sinners such as you and me. For is not that why Jesus came to us in the first place – because God so loved the world?²

The beloved Christian writer, Philip Yancey, tells a great story that captures all of this through another human parable. His church had a program called “Mom's Night Out,” which provided babysitting one night a week at the church so that parents could have a night out on their own. One night, the church's pastor and his wife dropped off their three-year-old son on their way to a quiet dinner. When they returned to pick up their son, they were met by one of the babysitters who had a very amused look on her face. Apparently she had been playing a game with the children in which each child was to answer the question, “What is mommy's favorite thing to do with you?” And their son, already a true preacher's kid, had said, “*My mommy's favorite thing is to clean me up!*” That story went like wildfire through the congregation, of course – so much so that the pastor addressed it from the pulpit the next Sunday. He explained that, in truth, that this was not actually his wife's favorite thing to do with their son. Rather, he said, cleaning him up was just a wonderful excuse to get to hold him. And then he added this, “*Absorbing the mess is just part of the process of getting close. And it's the same with God.*”³

In the heart of our God, this parable tells us, we will find a strongly, steadily beating rhythm of unconditional, immeasurable, unyielding love for us. And that's why He sent Jesus to us. That's why Jesus went to the cross for us – Jesus Christ absorbing for us and from us the mess which we

had made of ourselves. All so that He could get close to us again. All so that He could get to hold us forever. All so that His mercy should overcome our sin – and that the celebration of His joy, in us and with us, should be complete and never-ending.

And therefore, like that dishonest manager, the shrewdest, smartest, wisest move you and I will ever make in these lives of ours is simply this: to bet it all on that grace. Bet it all, body and soul, past and present and future – bet it all upon God’s grace. Bet our very lives upon this gracious God who has come down to earth to clean us up and to embrace us.

¹ These insights, as well as my exposition of this parable, are deeply – one might even say entirely – indebted to Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 332-342. Bailey explores this parable even more deeply in Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 86-118.

² John 3:16.

³ Philip Yancey, Rumors Of Another World (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 157.