

“Follow the Money”

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Luke 16: 1-13

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Jesus said to his disciples, “There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your stewardship, or you cannot be my steward any longer”. No slave can serve two masters You cannot serve both God and money. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Jesus.

The parable of the dishonest steward is a puzzle. On the surface it seems that Jesus approved of dishonesty. It is about a steward who is caught either in mismanagement, or dishonesty, or both. He has been told to turn in his books for auditing. Aware that he is in trouble, he makes a number of apparently fraudulent deals with creditors, greatly reducing their debt to his master. He does it to curry some good will. The master discovers what he has done and, strangely enough, commends the dishonest steward for his shrewdness and foresight. I say strangely enough, because the master would appear to be the loser in the deal. But if he is, he doesn't seem to mind.

How are we to understand this rather strange parable? To begin with, we need to know that in ancient times, a steward was the manager of an estate. If the estate was large, he was in a position of considerable responsibility. He was in charge of the entire staff, and of the purchase and sale of all produce. Often the Lord of the manor did not even live on the estate. Most wealthy members of the nobility spent the winter months in Rome, where fashionable society all gathered. Meanwhile, back at the estate, the steward was in charge and responsible for all day-to-day decisions.

It may surprise you then to learn that most often the steward was also a slave. Slavery in Roman times was quite different from the type of slavery practiced in the southern United States that we hear so much about. In Roman society, slaves often held quite senior posts in government and industry and especially in education. Virtually all teachers were slaves. (Those of us like me who were, or are teachers may well feel that in this, nothing has much has changed!)

As well as being teachers, well-educated slaves were the experts in administration and banking. So valued were they that it was not at all unusual for a Lord to hold his steward in higher esteem than members of his own family. Usually after a number of years they were either given their freedom as a gift from a grateful Lord, or they grew rich enough to buy it outright.

Such a man would have been the steward in our parable. It seems that he was not exactly a shining example of a good manager — it seems he had been embezzling his master's money and someone blew the whistle on him. He was called to account and he was in trouble. But the way he reduced the creditors' accounts may in fact have been quite legitimate. Here is likely what happened:

By Old Testament law it was wrong and illegal for a Jew to charge interest on a loan given to another Jew. They could charge interest on loans extended to a gentile ... that was quite all right. But to charge interest to a fellow Jew — in the Bible that was called usury, and it was forbidden.

I would like to pause here for a moment and make an observation about fundamentalist Christians who claim that every verse in the Bible is equally inspired and that they believe it all. The reason they denounce gays, they say, is because of the Bible. Yet virtually all of these same strict believers are great capitalists. They love making money so much that many of them preach that if you're a true believer (especially if you donate to their Church!) God will increase your wealth. It's called the "Prosperity Gospel." There is a huge mega-Church in Houston, Texas that has been on the news. It's where all the flooding is. The famous star pastor, regularly on TV, is a prosperity-gospel preacher. The thing is this: our modern economy, with all its vast wealth, is totally based on charging and receiving interest on huge sums of money. Banks charge interest on loans and mortgages and they pay interest (a much smaller amount) to account holders. That is how banking works. And it's not just banks. Companies big and small; and all governments borrow money and pay interest. Any of us with a bank account or GIC's earn interest. And all of us who own a credit card pay interest. Without interest, everything would grind to a halt.

But according to the Bible, it's all wrong. Did you know that for centuries in Europe the Church simply did not allow it? The Kings of Europe, who were chronically short of money to fight their incessant wars, would borrow money from Jewish banking houses. (Remember it was okay for a Jew to charge interest on loans to gentiles!) There were no Christian banks — they were not allowed. And this is exactly how the myth that Jews had all the money arose. At some point in the late 1500's and early 1600's,

shortly after the reformation, the rules against usury began to be ignored, and they have been ever since — especially by our Bible-believing fundamentalists. They claim to believe everything in the Bible, but the simple truth is they pick and choose the scriptures they like.

But let's go back to the time of Jesus and our parable. To get around the law against usury, the Pharisees worked out a devious system. They determined that if a loan was made in terms of commodities like oil or wheat, rather than in terms of money, when it was paid back it was okay to share the profit on the deal with the lender. It was simply a way of getting around the laws against charging interest on a loan, while appearing to obey the letter of the law. It was a common practice in Jesus' time, and this is what was done in our parable. No wonder Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites!

What happened in our parable was that the steward removed his own share of the interest on the loans payable to the estate. Clearly no one was about to complain. The master would still make his profit, and the creditors got a lucky break. The only one to lose was the steward, and what he lost in money he hoped to recoup in good will. To us today it all sounds like a very strange story. It would not have sounded so strange in Jesus' day, because everyone listening to him would have understood the system, and just how it worked.

Jesus' summary of his parable is this: "The sons of this world (*normal people*) are often wiser in their ways than the sons of light." (*the Pharisees.*)

What I believe Jesus is telling us is that in the service of God, first we have to use all the wisdom, experience and influence we possess to help build God's kingdom. And second, money is not the ultimate goal. It is a parable that tells us to be realistic in the service of God. It seems to go against a lot of other things we learn in Church. We mostly hear talk about things of the Spirit, and things of faith, which on the whole are not accorded much importance in the world of practical value.

I remember to this day a conversation I had years ago with a university friend who went into the world of business in Toronto. At the time I had just decided to leave my position as a Personnel Officer with the Federal Government in order to go into the ministry. My friend was not at all impressed. "Al," he said to me, "*in the world of business, your religious gobbledygook is just a big joke.*" My friend had plans to make a big income. And he probably did. I didn't keep track of him.

It was many years ago, but I have not forgotten that moment. In part I think he was reflecting a common belief that the Church and its members,

although well-meaning, are naive and of no practical value. Certainly clergy are often depicted this way. In jokes and stories, films and novels, clergy are regularly depicted as either utter hypocrites, or well-intentioned but gullible 'do-gooders' who shouldn't be put in charge of a phone booth. (There used to be such things not long ago!)

If we go back to the beginning, to Jesus himself — he was never seen to be anything like that. He was *never* accused of being a gullible do-gooder — nor were any of his followers. If you just think about it for a moment; you will know that *gullible 'do-gooders' don't get crucified. They get laughed at, ridiculed, — but never crucified. But Jesus was.*

So what was Jesus like? He was strong, very strong. Yet it was a strength that showed itself in gentleness. A woman once told me that she always thought of Jesus the way she thought of her father. Her dad had been a Cape Breton coal miner. "He was a big strong man," she said, "but like most of the miners, he spoke softly and was very gentle." I think that Jesus was like that. Further, he had about him a wisdom that did not come from books, but from life itself and the presence of the Spirit. In his gospel stories he talked about the most down-to-earth, common, everyday things. He was so different from the rabbis of his day. He never used big words. He was straightforward and clear to the point of being blunt. And that is exactly why the common people absolutely loved him.

Jesus was a "disruptor." The term "Disruptor" is one of the latest buzzwords. It comes from the world of business. A Harvard Professor, Clayton Christensen, coined it in a book he wrote called, "The Innovator's Dilemma." He was trying to explain how it is that some people with a very bright idea who have minimal or no resources can quickly overtake huge and established business organizations. Steve Jobs and Apple Computers is an example. When he first invented the Macintosh, the computer world was totally dominated by one giant company - IBM. Yet Apple overtook IBM. Job's idea was to have a personal computer so small it could sit on your desk and be very easy to use. IBM computers took up entire office floors. Clayton Christensen called what Steve Jobs did "disruptive innovation."

And that is exactly what Jesus did in his day — he turned the religious world upside down. Most of the conservatives of his day stood somewhere between disliking Jesus to hating him. Why? He changed so many accepted ideas: he embraced sinners and tax collectors, and especially outcast women. He told people to let go of pride, titles, and status symbols. Jesus was about experiencing and living out grace and love, and being at one with the Divine.

Atonement means at-one-ment, becoming one-with-God. Faith is not about trying to climb some kind of spiritual ladder of success in order to please a perpetually out-of-sorts deity. Jesus made it clear that faith is about our natural home within God's Kingdom. This is not just a place we go to later, if we are good. Rather it is a union of deep goodness, love, and peace that we are part of, or can be, right now. Finding grace, forgiveness and love is at the very heart of what it means to be one in Christ. This was a radically different way of living — and the truth is, it still is. What counts in this life is not wealth, or all the stuff we accumulate, or popularity, or status. It is about humbling ourselves and becoming one with the Spirit of love, with all Creation. Amen.