

Lighten the Load

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 30, 2022
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So, he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:1-13, NRSV)

Today, we continue our short sermon series on Jesus' parables. As you know, the series title is "Pushing the Limits" and features five parables over five Sundays that have something important to say to us in these days when we – as individuals and as communities (and even as a society!) – may feel that we're at an impasse ... and that to move forward faithfully, we're going to have to think "outside the box" and be OK with coloring outside the lines.

Last week, we began with the Parable of the Unjust Judge, and saw in that unusual story a way of seeing how God relates to us – teaching us not only persistence in prayer but giving us an unforgettable image of *God* as persistent and *pleading* with us to commit to justice!

Today, we take up a parable that is every bit as challenging, and not just because its call to us is hard, but also because it's not clear at all what that call *is*! This story – the so-called "Parable of the Dishonest Manager" – has stumped many students of the Bible for generations, and I'd be lying if I told you it has never stumped me. Commentators far more learned than I have sharply disagreed over its fine points and its great take-away(s), but then, as we've seen, maybe that very uncertainty and ambiguity *is* part of the point *too*! Surely the *openness* of parables and the fact that they *are* subject to different readings is part of their power.

But this one is puzzling in a special way. It's not only unclear *what* Jesus is teaching here, but it even *sounds* like he's teaching something we *know* to be simply wrong! As one hears or reads it, the mysteries pile up:

- First, having a *Dishonest Manager* as the lead character of a story that's supposed to teach us about living faithfully ...
- Then, the manager – having been cornered by his employer about dishonesty – quickly and quietly lowering the bills for his employer's debtors!
- And then, of course, there's the *really* confusing bit about the employer actually *commending* the disgraced manager for *doing* this!
- And finally, the unforgettable kicker – Jesus advising us to “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

What?!

Needless to say, interpretations of this parable have been mixed, with divergent views of the characters and the actions taken. As was the case last week, we have an unsavory title character who ends up doing something said to be good or commendable, which then clears the way for the lesson. Of course, last week there was no suggestion that the unjust judge was really just – only that if even such a man can do the right thing under pressure, how much more can we hope that God, who loves us, give us the justice we seek as we remain persistent in prayer.

This time, we have a similarly shady figure who, having been accused of dishonesty and apparently about to lose his job, calls his employer's debtors together and unilaterally lowers their bills! On first read, it seems like he's doing a *swell* thing for those debtors ... *but cheating his employer once again!* Even the way it's narrated has an underhanded quality to it, as if he wants to stick it to his soon-to-be former employer one more time – though, as we look closer, *revenge* is not his motive. Self-preservation is!

Yes, he pulls this little trick to ingratiate himself to his employer's debtors, so as to better his prospects once he's out on his ear! As he put it himself:

What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.

And yet, for all this sneaking around, the employer finds out, and if you didn't already know how this story ends, you *might* think the employer would do more now than just *fire* his manager, but have him thrown into *prison*, on fraud and embezzlement and any other charges he could think of! But that's not what happens. Instead, we are told that the employer

commended the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly – apparently admiring his quick thinking and clever (if thoroughly self-preserving) instincts!

We're not told whether this was enough for the employer to keep the manager on. But apparently, it was enough for Jesus to draw his mysterious conclusion – that this now oddly admirable manager can serve as an example to the “children of light” (that's us) to be “shrewd in dealing with our own generation and, as he puts it, to “make friends ... by means of dishonest wealth” so that when it is gone, they may welcome [us] into the eternal homes.”

Whatever this parable is teaching, I think we can safely *rule out* the idea that Jesus is encouraging us to be dishonest, any more than in the parable last week he was excusing being “unjust.” This manager is not a “good guy” – he's about to lose his job for good reasons. But then, there's *something* about what he does that Jesus seems to think we can positively learn from. But *what?* Fudging the numbers? Engaging in some creative accounting? Isn't this just one more example of dishonesty ... the icing on the cake? And why does the employer *commend* him for doing it?

Now, some interpreters will split some hairs here and say that the commendation is not an *approval* of what the manager pulls off, but simply a grudging admiration for cleverness – the way some might admire the slipperiness of someone running from the law and escaping again and again, without condoning the crimes that forced the fugitive to run in the first place. While this is one possible reading, it may be off the mark in another way.

Here's where we may be losing something in translation, so to speak ... something that would have been understood by Jesus' original hearers, but is not so obvious to us. *Perhaps* the employer doesn't fly into a rage when he learns of his manager's little debt reduction trick because whatever foul deeds this manager had done, *this wasn't one of them*. Perhaps he responds the way he does because, at least in this case, *he's not actually being cheated*.

The manager's dishonesty is already presumed at the beginning of the story. He's *already* earned that reputation, by “squandering” his employer's property, whatever exactly that means. But *any* manager – dishonest or not – for a wealthy property-owner of the time would have charged a commission, *added* to the bills of the employer's debtors'. And a *dishonest* manager, such as our friend here in this parable, likely charged exorbitant commissions.

So, what's happening here? A shady manager, used to extorting extra money for himself from those already in debt, here greatly reduces or even eliminates his own take in response to the threat of his losing his job, and thereby doing something genuinely helpful for others – lightening their loads – even if his self-preserving motives are less than pure.

Even the unjust judge eventually granted justice when pressed night and day, and so, how much more will God grant justice when we persist in prayer. Even the dishonest manager eventually foregoes his selfish gain and lightens other's loads when pressured, and so make friends in the process; and how much more might we, when faced with the truth of our own

lives and the precariousness of earthly wealth, use what wealth we have to “lighten the loads” of others, make unexpected friends along the way, and one day inherit the *true* riches of God.

And so, we see that, in the end, Jesus’ call in this parable is a call to faithfulness ... to a re-examination of our relationship with our possessions ... to set aside our own selfish interests and lust for gain and recognize what our wealth is truly for ... and so live out a gospel that lightens loads and sets people free.

We all have burdens in life, you and I ... some heavier than others. Some that are obvious, others much less so. Some that can be seen, others that cannot. But whoever we are, wherever we come from, we carry loads, and as we encounter others with loads of their own, we have choices to make. And if we are to be followers of Jesus, and claim to represent him in some way, then these choices matter. How we use the time matters. Using our powers to lighten the loads of others matters.

Christian blogger and bestselling author John Pavlovitz simplifies this and boils it down to simply helping make others’ lives a little easier, and if we can’t manage even that, at least not making them harder. He wrote this a little while back:

I walked around today and I looked at people; those passing me in the grocery store, driving beside me on the highway, filling my newsfeed, walking by the house. I tried to really see them.

I tried to look beneath the surface veneer they wore; to imagine the invisible burdens they might be carrying beneath it: sick children, relational collapse, financial tension, crippling depression, profound grief, crisis of faith, loss of purpose—or maybe just the custom designed multitude of the nagging insecurities and fears they’ve been carrying around since grade school and have never been able to shake.

As I looked at all these people, I wondered what kind of specific and personal hell they might be enduring, and it reminded me—so I’m reminding you:

Life is stunningly short, and it is eggshell fragile. Most people are having a really tough time. They are almost always in more pain than you think they are. Everyone is doing the very best they can to get through this day, and many are going through all manner of horrors in the process. No one is immune from the invasive collateral damage of living. And you don’t have to save these people or fix them or give them any special treatment. They are rarely asking for such things.

The thing these wounded and weary human beings most need from you as you share this space with them—is for you not be a jerk. It’s really that simple.

They need you to not contribute to their grieving, not to compound their sadness, not to amplify their fear, not to add to their adversity ...

At the end of the day, so many of the grieving, struggling, fearful human beings filling up the landscape you find yourself in today, are hanging by the very thinnest of threads. They are heroically pushing back despair, enduring real and imagined terrors, warring with their external circumstances and with their internal demons. They are doing the very best they can, sometimes with little help or hope—and they just need those of us who live alongside them to make that best-doing, a little easier ...

*These words are for me. They're for you ...
Life is short. It is extremely fragile.
People are grieving. They are struggling. They are hurting.
For God's sake and for theirs—please just don't be a jerk.*

In their own common way, John's words are not so different from Isaiah's! It's what Isaiah was talking about when he declared,

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke ...*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:6a, 9b-10, NRSV)*

To the Glory of God! Amen.