

Sunday, August 14, 2022

A Scandalous Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus" – The Prudent Manager)

(Message Nine)

(Luke 16:1-8)

Scripture: Luke 16:1-8

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

³"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶"Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

⁷"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

⁸"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

Message

Eugene Peterson tells the story of going to John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore to visit a parishioner who had had surgery.

With no parking garage in sight, he circled the hospital three times looking for a parking spot. Nothing. He remembered friends who said they prayed for a parking spot and found one, so he said a prayer. Twenty feet ahead, a car pulled out. He parked and locked his car. He was pleased. He had a parking spot – a minor miracle – and a great story to tell certifying he was an effective pray-er.

After visiting his convalescent friend, he returned to his car only to realize he had locked his keys inside. He stood there helpless looking at the keys in the ignition wondering what to do when a young man about ten years of age said, "Something wrong, mister?" "Yes," Peterson said, "I locked my keys in the car." The boy said, "I can help you." He took a piece of wire from his pocket and in less than thirty seconds he had the door open. He reached in and handed Peterson the keys.

Peterson said, "I'm sure glad I was here when you showed up." The boy grinned, "Is it worth five dollars to you?" Peterson reached for his wallet, "It's worth ten!" and handed him the money.

The parable of the prodigal and his brother (Ch. 15) is one of the world's best-known stories. Today's story is often known as the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Ch. 16). It is one of the most ignored, avoided, and even outrightly dismissed stories. Like most of Jesus' stories, it shocks the listener.

At first glance these back-to-back stories seem to have little in common. The story of the lost brothers and their patient and compassionate father touch us deeply. While the two brothers both treat their father shamefully, he responds graciously. Books have been written about that short story; paintings painted. We love that story.

This story which immediately follows the prodigal story bypasses our heart strings and even seems to present a story where the main character is commended by the master for being a liar and a thief. (Julian the apostate says it makes Christianity an inferior religion; it has long been seen as an embarrassment to the church.)

There are some interesting similarities in these two stories we should note in order to try and understand this controversial parable. In **Luke 15**, the son throws himself at the mercy of the father; in **Luke 16**, the manager (steward) looks to the mercy of his master to redeem himself.

Both the son and the manager are desperate, have wasted and misspent their lives, and have brought shame on themselves. One made a mess of being a son; the other made a mess of his master's affairs. Both betrayed trust. Luke uses the Greek *diaskorpidzo* (**Luke 15:13**; **Luke 16:1**; meaning squandered, wasted, and scattered) to define both the prodigal and the manager.

Both are offered "amazing grace." The son is not banned from the family; the manager is not jailed. They do not reap what they sow. They do not get what they deserve. After a lifetime of getting it wrong, they both welcomed back.

The son is invited to a celebration; the manager is given a (surprising) commendation. Both stories lack a “proper” ending. We are not told what the older brother does; we are not told what happens to the manager.

The storyteller pulls the listener into the stories and into the world of **grace**. What are we to **do**? Answer: We don’t do **anything**. We are talking about **grace**. Grace is not what we expect after disrespecting a parent or betraying a boss; grace is not what we expect from a religious teacher or from a righteous God; grace is not what we expect for prodigals and disloyal managers.

Both stories leave us with an invitation to receive everything – meaning we bring or contribute nothing - from One who loves us and offers us his grace. Remember, parables are stories that tell us about the Kingdom of God.

STRUCTURE

Jesus again uses a structure consisting of seven parts: 1,2,2,3,-2,-2,1. It is known as a *modified prophetic rhetorical template* (in case you’re ever playing a trivia game ☺).

Luke 16:1 focuses on the master and steward; **16:2** and **16:3** on their losses. In **16:4**, a solution is identified. This is the heart of the parable where the shrewd manager finally figures out how to proceed with his crisis and live his life. **Luke 16:5-6** and **16:7** focus on gains (the opposite of losses). **16:8** focuses again on the master and steward.

In the last scene the steward is seemingly **commended** by his master after he **cheats** him again! We, the listener/reader, must discover the reason for the “commendation.” Understanding this parable is deeply embedded in Middle Eastern culture.

THE STORY

Luke 16:1 – “There was a rich man who had a **manager**...”

Like most of Jesus’ parables, there are three main individuals/groups in this story:

1. There is a very wealthy **landowner** who is well respected in the community. There is no hint of criticism to his character. He is a noble individual who is kind, generous and just – even though he is to be revered because of his awesome authority.
2. There is a “trusted” **manager** who helps the landowner manage the rental of his land to farmers who pay rent in kind (i.e., in olive oil, wheat, etc.) at the time of the harvest. We’ll soon discover he is an ignoble character.
3. There is the ever-present **community** in the background (just off stage). (They appear in **16:14**.)

A wealth magnanimous landowner and a rascal who plays a major role in the story is quite typical, quite rabbinic, and quite Jesus. It is just like Jesus to use a scoundrel for the hero. He used a Samaritan, Zacchaeus, a prostitute, a tax collector, etc. In fact, Jesus was well-known for associating with characters of ill repute.

Undefined, but reliable, **charges** of wasting and **squandering** the master's resources were brought against the manager (same as prodigal). The manager is not only inefficient, he is also dishonest. While he would have received a good salary, he is likely also receiving kickbacks from renters grateful to use the land.

Luke 16:2 – *“Turn in your stewardship, for you can no longer be a **manager**...”*

After being informed of his dishonesty (an umbrella word including embezzlement, theft, lying, squandering, wasting, etc.), the owner summons the steward: *“What is this I hear about you?”* (A classic opening for a confrontation.)

This manager is too clever. He knows the game; he refuses to play. He responds with silence. Sins are eventually exposed.

After a few tense moments, the steward continues, *“Turn in the account books for you can no longer be a manager.”* He is **fired** on the spot - meaning everything he does from this point is not binding on the master. But the account books, which give him power and leverage, are still in his hands.

What do Jesus' Middle Eastern listeners expect the manager to do? They expect him to negotiate – to offer a vociferous defense to save his job! No person would expect otherwise.

“Beloved Master, I have served you. My father served your father; my grandfather served your grandfather. Surely, you're not going to dismiss this long-time relationship over some little misunderstanding about money?” (or)

“This really isn't my fault. I have done my best. I can't watch or know everything. The people I work with are thieves.” (or)

“It was just once. I promise it will never happen again. I will pay it all back with interest.”

“Bring in those liars who tell you I am stealing. Let me confront them. We'll see if those cowards have the courage to confront me.” (or)

He might even send his most influential friends from the community to plead his case.

We've all tried these methods to minimize and explain our ineptitudes and to escape the messes we've made.

But notice, he does not protest his innocence. He doesn't try to figure out a scheme to get his job back. He knows with this master those maneuvers will achieve nothing; his excuses for failure will fall on deaf ears. He is **silent**. He makes no excuses. His silence is a **confession** of his guilt.

His silence is an admission he cannot manipulate or pressure his master. This is a master who expects **obedience** and acts in judgment on the disobedient. This is a master who shows unusual **mercy** and generosity even to the dishonest. The manager is dismissed; he is not imprisoned. He and his family are not sold to pay back what he embezzled. He is not even scolded.

The manager's **acceptance** of his dismissal is stunning and unimaginable. The theological significance cannot be overlooked. Beginning with Adam, sinners (and we are all sinners), when confronted by God, can never successfully offer excuses for the evil they have committed – but like Adam, they (we) all still try.

Luke 16:3 – “What shall **I** do...”

He needs a job. On his way to collect the account books, he reflects.

He rejects digging ditches. *I am not strong enough*. He can't work as a laborer. He rejects begging. *I am too ashamed to beg*. Plus, he doesn't meet the “qualifications” – blindness, broken back, loss of limb, destitute, etc. He is left with few redeeming qualities: a realistic appraisal of himself and some residual personal honor. But for how long?

And who will hire him? Soon, everyone will know, and his reputation will be ruined. He has long lived, apparently successfully, by his **wits**, by his shrewd **calculations**. He now glimpses another way – a better way. In his silent reflection, his entire life turns around. He embraces a world he's never known before – a world of **grace**.

Luke 16:4 – “I know what **I** will do...”

He gives his full attention to what he will do next. He comes up with a plan. He has experienced mercy; his plan is “to risk everything on the quality of the **mercy** he has already experienced from his master.” If his plan fails, he will certainly go to **jail** and likely his family with him. If he succeeds, he'll be **celebrated** in the community. That is the choice...and the risk.

When the manager loses his position, he loses the honor that accompanies it. The fear of disgrace in middle eastern (and oriental) culture is overwhelming. Shame and humiliation must be avoided at all cost – by both the manager (and the master).

The manager's ultimate goal is to be welcomed and received into someone else's house (cf. the Prodigal). It is a secular expression for "*getting another job*." He longs to be a manager again, but it is ultimately about "coming home."

Here is his plan. He knows no one yet knows he has been fired; he knows what he is about to do is illegal; but he knows he has one "ace" he can still play...and he does. He knows if word of his firing is simply for corruption, no one will ever hire him. With his own financial ruin at stake and the unbearable shame it would bring, he takes drastic measures. In order to land on his feet when people find out, he must demonstrate his **shrewdness** and be **well-liked**.

Luke 16:5-7 – "*Summoning his master's **debtors** one by one... 'Take your bill and sit down quickly and write fifty...'*"

Sin begets sin. While a servant caught stealing should **repent** and **reform** his life and make amends, this manager decides to steal more from his master in an even bolder and more aggressive fashion.

Instead of going to his master's debtors, he summons and talks to them individually, privately (lest they talk amongst each other). The servants who do the summoning still believe the steward is in authority (or they would not be taking orders from him).

The farmers believe he still represents the master's bidding – and has a legitimate message from the master for them - or they would not come. These are community members with a long-standing relationship with the master. They would not risk losing the opportunity to rent from the master.

The reason for haste is obvious. Once people find out, the "dealing" is done.

"*How much do you owe my master?*" (He is not asking for information, he knows...) These debts (**payments**) and the reductions are enormous. This is big business. Three thousand liters of olive oil is an incredible harvest! Thirty tons of wheat is substantial. These are already well-to-do farmers.

The manager wants it in the renter's handwriting so everyone will know the renters have been contacted and have already accepted this offer in writing.

The farmers return to the village and share the **good news** with family and friends. Word spreads. The villagers begin to celebrate the most generous man who ever rented land and praise his manager who convinced the master to reduce their rents.

The fired manager returns the books. When the master realizes the changes that have been made, he knows he is in a pickle. This is a character test. He has two **choices**.

1. He can go back to the farmers and **explain** the reductions were not authorized, that the manager had been fired, and that the full amount was due. That would **anger** the debtors. Their joy over his generosity would quickly become cursing over his stinginess. (or)
2. He could **remain quiet**, pay the hefty price of the shrewd manager's *salvation* (there is always a price to pay for grace!), continue to enjoy the praise of the community for his **generosity**, and allow the manager to stay true to his character and enjoy his popularity.

Generosity is a nobleman's prized virtue; grace is essential to his **character** and **identity**. The manager knows this!

In light of the extraordinary grace he had just received, and knowing his master's mercy, this manager decided to risk everything. He builds his ruse on the unshakable awareness of the **generous** nature of his master.

He sins that grace might abound. He will be condemned for his action; but he is commended for his confidence in his master's gracious, unchanging nature.

The manager succeeds only because of his master's grace. In providing a generous discount to his master's renters, he is actually helping someone besides himself (albeit self-serving). It is a small step. But it is a step. The community (world) will discover the details and be amazed at his wisdom and daring. They may not trust him, but they are now likely to employ him – they will want him to work for them and not their competitors or opponents.

Abraham Lincoln wanted his opposition to work for him. He filled his cabinet with his rivals. He wanted to keep them close so he could keep a watchful eye (check out *Team of Rivals*, by Doris Goodman).

The community will employ this steward for the same reason – to keep him close. (And it didn't hurt that he saved them a boatload of money!)

Meanwhile, the master pays the full price of the steward's "**sin**" and for his "**salvation**." Sounds like Gospel!

Luke 16:8 – "*Then the master recommended the dishonest **manager** for his prudence.*" (RSV; *acted shrewdly* in NIV, "*knew how to look after himself*" in The Message)

While the manager shrewdly gives away discounts and explains his position to win favor from his master's renters, the rich landowner again displays magnanimity and nobility by commending his astute business practice. The master continues to stay true to his gracious character.

The manager and master are now "heroes" in the community because of the master's generosity. The master commends the steward for his prudence, for

wisely **leaning** on his **grace**, and for the backhanded compliment he gave the master.

A crooked manager praised for an act of dishonesty. Hmmm. A ten-year-old with a skill of unlocking doors praised for his questionable survival technique. Hmmm.

T.W. Manson notes, *“There is all the difference in the world between ‘I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted wisely’ and ‘I applaud the wise steward because he acted dishonestly.’*” The steward is not commended here for his ethics (they are a mess!) but for his accurate perception of his master’s nature. He reads his master correctly. He takes advantage of his master’s grace Jesus longs for his disciples to have the same informed perception of His Father.

The sinner emerges as a somewhat carefree metaphor for the improbability of grace – not unlike the ten-year-old on the streets of Baltimore.

For some, this parable is a “Tom and Jerry” story. A little mouse matches wits with a big cat and wins. This parable is premised on an oppressed peasantry which was common in Galilee in Jesus’ day. The steward is reminiscent of our Robin Hood. But at the end, Jesus calls him out and condemns him as *“a person of this **age**/world”* because of his lies and deceptions.

He must be smart enough, wise enough, prudent enough, to know that his only hope is to put his entire trust in the unqualified mercy of his generous master because his morals are deplorable.

SUMMARY

This story that has been worked over endlessly by people trying desperately to find some edifying moral lesson here in order to save Jesus from commending a crook for being a very clever crook, becomes the story of **embracing salvation, the kind of story that is at the very core of Jesus’ proclamation of **Good News**. A sinner experiences grace!**

Too often the focus of our attention in this story goes to the manager. The focus is on the master who graces people who take advantage of him.

This story describes the behavior of a rascal who narrowly discovers himself reveling in a huge world of generosity – of God’s grace. God is the one with whom he now has to deal. God is the one with whom we (everyone) have to deal. The **gracious** action of God must **define** his life - not his obsessive scheming, embezzling, or cooking the books – as it must ours. Do people know by how we live that our God is generous and gracious? Are we generous to others because we’re taking advantage of God’s grace to us? Do people commend us for our generosity and grace?

This parable teaches us that God's grace is unlimited. God, like this master, allows the release of our debts to stand and commends the dishonest manager. It is the scandal of grace.

It is so God. It is so Jesus. Jesus came to save our **souls**. Salvation is by **grace alone**. One day, we'll be able to go home – not because of anything we've done – but because of His grace!

Jesus entreats us to use every ounce of our wisdom, like the dishonest steward, trust completely, and take full advantage of the **grace and mercy of our God for our **salvation**. The prodigal made that wise decision. So must **everyone** who longs to be saved...**

Prayer:

Father, we give you thanks and praise, that while we continue to be stubborn and self-righteous and have often taken advantage of our generous and gracious nature, that you have continued to love and accept us.

Thank you, that in your mercy you have not sentenced us to the punishment we deserve. Thank you, that in your grace, you have offered us a way home through Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.