

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

The Parable of the Dishonest Steward (and something about money)

Luke 16:1-13

Parts of the Bible are rather puzzling, and the parable of the Dishonest Manager certainly fits into this category. Not surprisingly, scholars interpret it in various ways. Here's one way of understanding it.

There are two key characters. First, the manager who is caught out being dishonest. He's paid to look after the properties and is entitled to take a commission for each contract. It's in this that he's probably been dishonest – taking more than his share. Then there's the rich owner who is upright, good, compassionate, and merciful.

The owner, learning that the manager has been misusing his position of trust for his own financial gain, summons the manager and demands an explanation, telling him he's fired and to get the accounts into order.

Being a cunning character, the manager decides to risk everything, putting all his hopes on his understanding that the owner is merciful and good. If he gets this right, he'll be saved. If he gets it wrong, he'll go to jail. So, the manager goes off and calls in the owner's debtors and heavily discounts their debts.

The manager is playing on the knowledge of the rich man's generosity and mercifulness. We can imagine the manager saying to the debtors: "I talked the boss into giving you this special discount. You know how kind and generous he is. He's heard about your hardships, and as you would expect, he's acting in this way." The debtors would be delighted, and there would be celebrations. But then, when they think about it, it's not really that surprising, because this is the sort of treatment they've come to expect from the rich man. Nevertheless, nothing quite like this had happened before. It's generosity of an ilk they've never before experienced.

The manager goes back to the owner. Imagine the consternation on the rich man's face when he looks at the accounts brought to him. He's dismissed the manager for dishonesty and now finds that his accounts have been drastically altered. He would've also heard by now of the community celebrations being held in his honour. He can go back to the debtors and explain that the manager was dismissed. The joy would then turn into anger, and he would be cursed for his meanness. Or he could keep quiet and allow the praise of his generosity to continue. So, he turns to his manager and says, "You're a crafty one. You recognise my character for what it is, but I've got to say, you've judged right." Or, as Luke puts it, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

So, what might this story be about? As in many of the parables this one is based on the idea of the lesser to the greater. In other words, if the rich man is like this, how much more will God show these same qualities. If a human can act in such a generous and merciful way, how much more will God act in this way towards us.

The manager knows what the owner is really like and pins all his hopes on that understanding. It's a simple but vital point. We're to act in life as this man did – not unscrupulously – this isn't biblical warrant for financial skulduggery. But we're to act knowing God's true character. We're to live our lives knowing what God is like. We may think that the manager is playing on the master's kind

nature, but the fact is, that's exactly what Jesus wants us to do. We're to rely on God's mercy and goodness, faithfulness and forgiveness – what we call grace.

We've been given a picture of how God treats us – with amazing generosity. It's what we see on the cross – a love that's so amazing – that knows no bounds. God's kindness, mercy and forgiveness have no limits. It's unexpected and undeserved – and we're being invited to base our lives on this knowledge.

The comment is made at the end of the story, "...for the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The manager is the child of this age who acted shrewdly or wisely. The religious people in the audience are the children of light, but they acted unwisely as if they were in darkness. In other words, they failed to recognise and act upon the master's character. They didn't get what God is really like.

There's judgement in God, and like the rich man, we're called to give an account of our lives, and yes, not infrequently, we fail – our excuses will never stand up before God. We've only got one option, and that's to rely on God's unfailing mercy. So, I wonder, to what extent do we live our lives on the basis that God is like that: generous, good, merciful, and forgiving? And if we see God like that, then it becomes a pattern for us to follow as we relate to and treat others.

This rather challenging parable offers us an encouraging insight into how we might live out the Christian life. But then Luke follows it up with some rather challenging sayings about money. Next to the kingdom of God, money / wealth / possessions was the subject that Jesus spoke about most often. And why? Because money is a rival god. It's the central focus of most people's lives, as it is the in news and the current elections. So, what's Jesus got to say about it on this occasion?

A key to these sayings is the opening verse about *faithfulness*. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much..." Money isn't a possession that's ours by right. It's a trust. It's a matter of stewardship. It's entrusted to us by God to use for God's good purposes – to be used to God's glory and the well-being and welfare of all God's people. And how we choose to use money – the place we give it in our lives – our attitude towards it – reflects our priorities and values. It also says much about the place that God has in our lives. As the final verse puts it, '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.'

At the end of that parable, Jesus 'commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.' Being shrewd requires knowing what rules our heart, knowing whom we serve. If we serve wealth for its own sake, we will fail. But if we serve God and shrewdly use what we have for God's purposes – even in the small, ordinary stuff of life – we'll enjoy the blessings of life with God.

We're posed with a question about what or who rules our heart? Where do we put our trust? What or who do we serve? Who or what is the presiding deity in our lives – for we ultimately discover that we can only give our love and loyalty to one – and only one of them is, as the parable described, merciful good, faithful, and forgiving.

Alister Hendery
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