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ARE YOU A FAITHFUL STEWARD? Luke 16:1-13

Let us pray: Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today/now and always. Amen.

I recently read a story which was of great interest to me about a teacher's experiences in the classroom, which had made him such an expert in handling troublemakers. He taught school in New York City.

The situation was so bad that there were policemen stationed in the halls. Teachers were routinely assaulted and intimidated. He learned the realities of life quickly. On his first day of class, things seemed to start off well.

The students all sat relatively quietly in their seats and gave some attention to him. But, at a pre-determined time, the entire class got up out of their seats and went to the back of the classroom, where they proceeded to "shoot craps."

This teacher did not react. But the next day he came prepared. He had taken note of the fact that at the place where they "shot craps" there was a metal plate. (This plate seemed to give them the right surface on which to carry on.)

He electrically wired the plate, and the next day, when the class went to the back to carry on their game, he charged the plate. Things happened quickly, as you would expect. One extremely large student walked up to the teacher and said, "Nice touch, professor. Nice touch."

I think you can tell that, on the one hand, the fellow did not appreciate getting zapped with electricity. And yet, on the other hand, he had a kind of admiration for the way in which this teacher had handled things. The teacher was shrewd in dealing with this difficulty.

My point in telling you this story is that it is possible for one shrewd person to appreciate the shrewdness of another, even though he has suffered from it. The student did not really appreciate getting zapped, but he could not help but appreciate the motivational methods of the teacher.

To see the teacher, do a masterful job at influencing his class was, in one sense, an inspiration. The same can be said for the rich man in our text in Luke chapter 16.

He surely did not appreciate being "ripped off" by his steward, but he did at least have an appreciation for the skill, the shrewdness, of the steward in making provisions for his future. I must confess, I am troubled by today's gospel parable.

Down through the centuries, right up to the present day, many other preachers and biblical scholars have been troubled by this parable too. I think it is the hardest parable that Jesus ever told.

Luke 16 is known both as "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward" and "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager." Can it be both? If the conflicting titles of the parables seem confusing, the parable itself appears to be almost a riddle, one of the most debated and debatable passages in the New Testament.

So, what does it mean? What was Christ trying to teach us in this parable? Is the lesson still relevant to us today? Well, here is the parable in a nutshell:

A wealthy landowner calls in his business manager to give him the heads up that there have been rumors going around that the business manager was being careless with his estate, maybe another way to look at that is wasteful, might even be cheating.

So, the business manager thinks to himself, "Uh-oh, I could get fired. This stinks. I can't afford to lose my job and I'm not in the mood for manual labor and begging would hurt my street credibility so, I'd better come up with a Plan B. At least, then, I'll have a place to crash."

The dishonest manager, now in crisis mode, does not fold his arms in paralyzed despair and helplessness. No! Rather, he spends every ounce of his energy on planning his future. The guy is a crook, he is unethical, and thinks only of himself. I don't know about you, but I find it hard to like such a scoundrel.

If justice were served, he should be convicted of fraud and go to jail. However, that's not what happens. So, he calls in his boss's biggest debtors and forgives the debtors a portion of what they owe the landowner for them to be indebted to him--the business manager--personally.

But when the landowner finds out about how his scheming business manager reduced the bills of his debtors behind his back, the landowner is so mad that he yells at his dishonest manager by saying, "Now, that is some seriously shrewd thinking, it goes to show you that kids today are so much smarter than geezers like me."

And just to amplify the moral of the story, our Lord and Savior says, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, your co-conspirators may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Wait, what? Did we just hear Jesus say something about how dishonest wealth is great and that honor among thieves is a virtue? Is that what this parable means? Why is Jesus praising this shrewd/dishonest manager?

Well here's the answer. In biblical times, it was not uncommon for powerful men who held a monopoly on resources to manipulate their books to make it appear as though their debtors owed more than they actually did. In fact, some people would say that type of practice goes on to this day.

I mean, is it terribly different than, say, the many scandals of today? Anyway, in order for a wealthy businessman to pad his pockets for an extra profit here or there, he would need a business manager that was less than scrupulous too.

So, the steward here or the business manager was padding the books for his boss. And, of course, with all that padding going on, a less-than honest steward of your less-than-honest business might be inclined to make a little nice padded landing for himself as well.

Which is exactly what the dynamic of this story is all about: A shady guy working for a dishonest businessman. So, when the scheming landowner suspects his business manager might be more of a scoundrel than even, he bargained for, he gives the man a chance to prove himself.

The steward sees this as a battle he's not likely to win so he decides to out-scheme a schemer by pulling out the books and making some calls. So, he rings up the first guy, "How much does my boss say you owe him?"

The man says, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." "Well, if he says it's a hundred, it's more like fifty. Put down fifty, pay up and consider yourself even with my boss."

Next guy, same thing. "If my crooked boss says you owe him a hundred bails of wheat, it's more like eighty, trust me. Pay it and we're even. Now just then the wealthy landowner discovers that he just got out gamed by a gamer--the gamer he was about to fire; and, you know what, the wealthy landowner had to begrudgingly respect the guy for it.

I mean, after all, the landowner's coffers are now full, his accounts receivable are at zero, his customers are happy because they got some debt relief, the landowner's clients have now bonded to his manager, and the very guy he hired to be shrewd in business turns out to be even shrewder than he thought.

At the end of the day, the guy is a keeper, the perfect guy to run this type of operation, somebody who is both a "dishonest steward" and a "shrewd manager" at the same time. But why does that earn such high praise from Jesus?

Well, seemingly to Jesus, none of this earthly wealth mattered all that much anyway. How much money we have means nothing to God? How we conduct ourselves around money, however, that is different. And you know the rest.

Jesus says, "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."

But isn't the dishonest steward a guy who is seemingly making money his God? Well, maybe not. He might be wasting his boss' resources, he might have been taking a little for himself, he might be complicit in the padding of the books; but in other ways, he was what we might call today, a whistle blower.

But on the other hand, the dishonest manager doesn't waste a moment. He acts immediately, hatching his plan to build bridges with the master's debtors by asking them to pay, in the case of one, only half the amount owed, and in the case of the other eighty percent of the amount owed. Think about that. How timely is that story.

He was being the trickster. He was the guy who was kind of blowing the lid off the scheme of his own boss. Now, to be sure, he only became a truth teller to save his own skin but that just makes the parable more entertaining.

And maybe, that's all the Parable of the Dishonestly Shrewd Manager really is--an entertaining story, with a surprise ending and a great moral.

Now let's be clear here, I'm not telling you to be dishonest in planning the future. I do not think the Church should practice dishonest, unethical means to reach future ends.

However, what I am saying; and I believe what Jesus is teaching us here is that the Church has the potential to be blessed in many ways by faithful Christians being proactive in planning and visioning for the future.

I like that story by William Barclay, the New Testament scholar. That says, "One time, Johnny Christian died, and he went up to heaven. Johnny Christian came up to the pearly gates and said, "Hi Simon Peter. I'm Johnny Christian." Peter said, "O, am I glad to see you. Come on in through these pearly gates and I will show you around."

Johnny Christian said, "Where is my house up here? Where am I going to live?" Peter said, "Hop in my car and I will give you a ride to your destination."

They pulled out in the car and drove through a neighborhood with some of the fanciest houses that Johnny Christian had ever seen.

He thought to himself, "This is what heaven is all about. Big mansions." Johnny Christian loved those palatial palaces, especially those that were on the lake.

As they drove by the mansions, Johnny Christian was carefully looking at the names listed on the mailboxes, but he didn't see his name on any of those fancy mailboxes.

Peter continued driving right through that fancy neighborhood and drove into a lesser neighborhood. That neighborhood had little three-bedroom bungalows with white picket fences and campers in the back yards.

Johnny Christian was again looking carefully at all the mailboxes of these smaller modest homes, but Johnny couldn't see his name. Peter's car then drove further outside of town to a slightly rundown apartment complex.

This rundown apartment complex had a long wall of mailboxes out in the parking lot, but Johnny couldn't find his name on any of those mailboxes in the parking lot. Hmmm. Simon Peter and Johnny continued driving and drove and drove until they came to a lot near the edge of a garbage dump in heaven.

And there was an old tar shack. Simon Peter pulled up to that old tar shack and there was the name of Johnny Christian on an old dilapidated mailbox. Johnny Christian said, "Simon Peter, I kind of liked it back there in the neighborhood with all the mansions on the lake or even the three roomed bungalows with white picket fences.

But what's going on here?" Peter said, "Johnny Christian, we used all the material that you sent up here to heaven. That is all that you sent up when you were living down there on earth."

"Are you smart? Have you been sending good building material for your long-term retirement?" If a dishonest manager works so diligently in planning his

future; how much more diligently do the followers of Jesus work to plan for the future of the Church.

Are you making plans for your long-term future? Are you smart? Are you shrewd? Are you planning for twenty years or twenty light years? Where do you put your energy? So, I ask you, are you a faithful steward? Amen.

Let us pray: God of all creation, like the apostles, we are both called and sent. First, you were with us as we gathered to share and understand the Word. Now be with us as go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Amen.