

Sunday, September 21, 2025
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20C)
Luke 16.1-13
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Indebted”

I don’t know about you, but I get whiplash trying to follow today’s Gospel.

So, to recap . . . a guy is being fired because of cheating his boss. After being given notice by his boss, he further cheats his soon-to-be ex-boss by going to his boss’ debtors and reducing the amounts they owe. When the boss finds out about this, he actually commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. And then, in the wrap up of the parable, Jesus effectively says, “go and do likewise.” His exact quote is “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.” So, if I am understanding this correctly, when Jesus says elsewhere, “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6.20), he is actually saying you should get those treasures by whatever means necessary, including by hook or by crook?

But after Jesus commends the dishonest manager, in the very next breath, Jesus effectively renounces the dishonest practices of the manager: “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?” Thereby reversing his previous injunction to imitate the dishonest manager.

So which is it? Do what the dishonest manager did, or not? Admittedly, this is a very confusing passage. Having a hard time sorting it out myself, I turned to my favorite commentaries, hoping for some guidance. Alas, even among the experts, I found little help. Virtually all of them talked about how confusing the passage is. Perhaps one of the most confusing in all the Gospels. Well, duh! Even I could have told you that. And one commentary even noted, “It is no exaggeration to say that the parable’s meaning has stumped even the best and most creative interpreters of Scripture.”¹ To which I can only add, “of which I am not one.” Invariably, all these commentaries practically twisted themselves into pretzels trying to provide an explanation. Many of which were way too convoluted to even follow, let alone to try working into a sermon. So, here is my theological take on this incredibly convoluted passage.

The passage ends with Jesus saying, “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.” No disagreement there. But frankly, this almost seems to just be tacked on. As if the author had this message from Jesus and needed to work it in somewhere. Since Jesus uses dishonest business practices as a parable illustration, his overall message must be about money, right? But that is not at all what I get from the parable itself. And, I strongly doubt Jesus’ original audience, which was largely poor, would have been in the same position as the dishonest manager. Instead, I would posit that Jesus saying “you cannot serve God and wealth”

would more appropriately be rendered as a more general, yet all encompassing “you cannot serve God and the ways of the world.”

I say this based on Jesus’ previous statement that “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” This says nothing about money and everything about a distinction between two ways of approaching the world. This statement calls to mind the distinction between light and dark. A common dichotomy in dealing with God’s ways versus the ways of the world. In this saying, “children of light” obviously references those who follow God’s ways. That being the case, “children of this age” would logically refer to those living according to the ways of the secular world. Ways which, in pretty much any age—in the time of Jesus, as well as our own—involve a mindset of looking out for one’s own interests; of doing whatever it takes to get ahead. And more often than not, that means being transactional. I scratch your back, and you scratch mine. I do a little something for you and you do something for me. This is precisely what the dishonest manager is doing. Engaging in transactional behavior. Doing something that will benefit his soon-to-be ex-boss’ customers, trusting that when he finds himself on hard times, they will reciprocate. They will, in their gratitude, help him out.

But the ways of God are not the ways of the world. The spiritual life is not transactional. God’s love is not transactional. We are saved by God’s grace and God’s grace alone. We are saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, of God Incarnate. We cannot do anything to ensure our salvation. We cannot do anything to ensure forgiveness of our sins. We cannot do anything to ensure eternal life. We cannot scratch God’s back so he will scratch ours. God freely takes care of us without requiring any repayment. Emphasis on “without requiring.”

What then, does Jesus seek to convey in the parable of the dishonest manager? There is obviously something the dishonest manager is doing that we are to emulate in our own lives. Jesus said as much himself. By using this example, but also by having his boss commend his actions and then in Jesus echoing that commendation. Surely we are not supposed to cheat others to gain favor with God. That is, after all, contrary to the Gospel mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Given Jesus’ concluding statement that we cannot serve two masters, that we cannot serve God and wealth—or as we have redefined and broadened it, that we cannot serve the ways of God and the ways of the world—it is pretty obvious which side Jesus comes down on. The side of God, of course. That we, as those who chose to follow him, are to focus on living according to God’s ways. And interestingly enough, albeit it counterintuitive, the parable of the dishonest manager provides an example of just how we are to do that. No, not by cheating. But rather, by trusting. Realizing his own weaknesses and the potential peril that might befall him, the dishonest manager came up with a scheme that would ensure his well-being. Being a businessman, he trusted in the power of wealth and in his own abilities—dishonest thought they may have been—to make sure he was on a path to success. Trusting that in his actions of reducing the debt of his boss’ customers, they would be in his debt. He trusted in the generosity of those he helped hold on to their wealth to care for him and shelter him in his own uncertain future. If you could even call it generosity, as it was, in actuality, more an obligation than a gift. A transaction. A debt to be repaid.

Similarly, in our spiritual life, we are to trust in God's goodness, in God's grace, God's generosity, to care for us in our own uncertain future. The only difference from the dishonest manager being that we don't have to do anything to gain God's favor. We already have it. We just need to trust, as did the dishonest manager, that when we need it, we will be taken care of.

Another aspect raised in the parable and the actions of the dishonest manager that apply to how we are to approach the spiritual life is in terms of determination and zeal. Once he concocted his scheme to cheat his boss in a way that would ensure his longer-term future, he began undertaking it with determination and zeal. "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and [change it]." He acted immediately, as if his life depended on it. Which it did, in many ways. If he had applied such diligence, such determination, to his job in the first place, perhaps he would not now find himself in this predicament, facing unemployment.

As applied to our spiritual life, we are to have the same determination and zeal in tending to our relationship with God. To have the same zeal and fervor—if not more—than we apply to other areas of our life: to our job, to our significant relationships, to whatever passions we have. To spend intentional time tending to our relationship with God, beyond what we do here on Sunday morning. Time in prayer, study of Scripture, and engaging in ministry. Seeking ways to deepen our relationship with God and to living according his ways, which always includes care for others beyond ourselves. And in these uncertain times in which we live, when such things as jobs and financial security, even some relationships, may seem tenuous, perhaps the one thing that we can be assured of is our relationship with God. Perhaps the one thing that we can trust is our faith and our God. Precisely because, unlike so much in life, our spiritual life and our relationship with God is not transactional, even capricious, but something that we can count on with absolute certainty.

When it comes to our spiritual life, unlike the dishonest manager, we do not focus our energies out of a sense of desperate self-preservation. We do not focus our energies as a way of garnering favor for future benefit. When it comes to our spiritual life, we do not have to do anything to gain God's favor. God's grace is already assured. No payment required. However, if we truly are living into our spiritual life, if we are truly living according to God's ways, we seek in all things to fulfill the commandments to love God and love others. Particularly to love and care for those who are of greatest concern to God. We do not do this because we have to in order to ensure our place in heaven. We do not do this as payment. We do this trusting in God's assurance that when we tend to this one area of our lives, all other areas will fall into place, as well. That we will be cared for. But even beyond that, we do this out of gratitude for what God has done for us and which God promises to continue to do for us. We do this out of gratitude because we are indebted to God. A debt we cannot possibly hope to repay. By comparison, what we do out of gratitude is a small token to be sure. And yet, one for which I am sure God feels grateful and truly indebted to us in return.

¹ G. Penny Nixon, "Proper 20, Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 93.