

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE QUICK WITTED STEWARD

Luke 16:1-9 (10-13)

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

1Then 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. 2So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3Then 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. 4I have decided what to do so that when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5So summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7Then 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.' 8And his master commended the dishonest (adikias-unjust, unrighteous) manager because he had acted shrewdly (sagaciously); for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

9And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of

dishonest wealth (ek tou mammoona tees adikias) so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes. 10Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you true riches? 12And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13No 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."

Author's notes: Both Robert Capon in "The Hardest Parable" (Parables of Grace, pp. 145-151) and Kenneth E. Bailey (Poet and Peasant, pp. 86-118) convince me that the parable of the Unjust Steward stands by itself (16:1-8); what follows is another "poem" on Mammon (the use of money) versus service to God (Luke 16:9-13). My analysis therefore will deal with "The Hardest Parable." Capon is convinced that the unjust steward is a Christ figure. He is a mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) on behalf of the Master and the tenants. But there are legalistic critics of Jesus who complain, "Who can forgive sins except God only!" We may be dealing with something more than just the virtue of prudence in the use of wealth. See the parable of the "Unforgiving Servant" (Matthew 18:23-35).

DIAGNOSIS: Unbelief Feeds Judgment and Death!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Accused Falsely*
James L. Boyce, Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year, (Pentecost 2, 1997 Series C), insists that the "charges brought against the steward" are malicious, slanderous and false. "The parable in no way assumes these charges were true." The phrase translated "charges were brought" normally means "falsely or

slanderosly”; trumped up charges (diaballoo, I slander or complain).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unbelief Condemns*

The “manager” or steward is held accountable on the basis of these accusations. He has assumed God’s authority to spend God’s “riches” in ways that can only be called “embezzlement”! “Who can forgive debts except God alone!” Malicious slander prompted by unbelief is the source of the judgment that descends on the manager.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dismissed, Fired, Terminated*

He is terminated. He has “squandered” the riches of the Lord. The “manager” as “mediator” is “unrighteous.” Condemnation awaits him. “We esteemed him stricken, smitten by God” (Isaiah 53:4-6). Jesus himself says it: “For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled” (Luke 22:37).

PROGNOSIS: The Manager Trusts the Mercy of God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Grace Is Stronger than “Justice”*

If it is true that Jesus has “squandered” God’s riches on unbecoming people and situations, He further squanders God’s riches by discounting what is “owed.”

He signs off on these discounts and forgiveness trusting that the Master will uphold the discounts. In this way He “makes friends of sinners.” “This parable, therefore, says in story form what Jesus said by His life. He was not respectable. He broke the Sabbath. He consorted with crooks. And he died as a criminal. He became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings,

lost for us losers, and dead for us dead. St. Augustine said: "The cross is the devil's mousetrap, baited with Jesus disreputable death" (Capon, p. 150). "Thus the seeming incongruity of a story that praises a scoundrel has been an embarrassment to the Church at least since Julian the Apostate used the parable to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith and its founder" (Scharlemann, Parables, 81; Ken Bailey). But God stood by Him, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

The Manager is commended because while he forgave significant portions of what was owed, thereby "making friends"; he acted prudently, with sagacity, with shrewdness. More importantly, He trusted that the Master would sign on. More, the Master was seen by the debtors as a generous and merciful Master. The manager was not disappointed. The Lord commended him. He trusted that his "Lord" would support the forgiveness of significant portions of debt.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting God's Support*

We are the intended recipients of the Manager's discount; we are the beneficiaries of his trust in the Master. Can we accept such shrewd grace? To accept it is to reap the benefit of having our sin discounted; but there's more: to receive this shrewd grace is to come face to face with the Master and survive—and thrive. It is death to the disreputable death that we deserve; it is life from life, Jesus' life in us.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Become Forgiven "Mediators" of Forgiveness*

While Jesus appears to be saying "use wealth" in the interest of being a benefactor, it could also be argued that he is telling us to use the wealth of God, the forgiveness of sins, by being its ambassador for the benefit of the debtors like ourselves.

"The parable provides unforgettable insight into the nature of God, the predicament of man, and the ground of salvation" (Bailey, Poet and Peasant, p. 110).