

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“JESUS: GOD’S DISHONEST MANAGER”

Luke 16:1-13

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Analysis by James Squire

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 manager because he had acted shrewdly; 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 so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. 10”Whoever 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 the 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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Worshipping Wealth

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Corrupted by Wealth*

Wealth corrupts. We serve wealth, and we are dishonest about it. We hang onto it as if our lives depend on it and spend it as if it can buy happiness for ourselves. When help is needed, we become fiscally conservative. When we see something we want, money grows on trees. We are never satisfied with our salary, we don't like the way our taxes are spent, and we are tempted to exact compensation through dishonest means. Moreover, when windfall wanders our way, we can't help but grab for all the gusto it promises, and we forget about other considerations. Most importantly we forget our role as the Creator's managers of creation. Assigned to manage creation, we instead squander it on ourselves.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Faithful to Wealth*

Wealth also demands our trust. “Money makes the world go round,” as the saying goes. When Oliver Stone's fictional character Gordon Gecko (played by Michael Douglas) preached to a corporate stockholders meeting that “greed is good” in the movie “Wall Street,” it was not too hard to imagine such an inspirational speech being made in real life America today. In theory, it may

well be a rational approach to life in a capitalistic society, but that only underscores the real problem with it: the faithfulness that Christ asks for cannot be allowed to damage the bottom line (or else one is accused of the evil called “socialism”). Faithfulness does abound however – to the American Dream, that is. Aid given to the poor and homeless is called “welfare” and a certain amount of charity is lauded as good corporate citizenship. We call charity toward corporations in the U.S. “incentives” or “investment” because the recipients have the power to keep society’s engine running (creating more jobs). The former is moderated; the latter is embraced. And we all are caught up in this model of life to the point that it is very hard to let Jesus in.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Destroyed by Wealth*

Just as Michael Milken must eventually crash and burn, Enron and Worldcom must eventually be exposed, and various businesses must eventually fold, so also we must eventually come to nothing in this kind of life. As Christ puts it, we end up with nothing that is truly our own – possessions have subsumed our identity, and none of it is true. Not one earthly possession or coin will cross the threshold of death with us. Earthly riches will extract all our devotion and give us nothing in return for it, and our allegiance to such riches keeps us from God’s providence.

PROGNOSIS: Rich in the Blessings of Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Christ’s True Riches Squandered for Us*

“The manager in Jesus’ parable resembles certain characters in this decade’s business scandals. He’s cooked the books, and when caught he doctors them again. Curiously, Jesus’ own behavior isn’t much different! He’s wasted God’s mercy on tax collectors and sinners, and soon his critics will not only fire Jesus,

they'll have him killed. How dare he spend God's time and wealth on scum!" (2004 Sundays and Seasons, page 305). Jesus indeed cooks God's books for us. It's the scandal to beat all corporate scandals, an injustice unparalleled in the course of human history. He showers God's wealth on the least productive members of society and on those who do not merit anything but scorn, often in defiance of the law of Moses. In economic terms, his investment program is fiscally irresponsible, not even worthy of Chapter 11. Surely he was sent here to promote God's own law, but if so, he had a very peculiar way of doing it. As Jesus points out in his parable, what the dishonest manager does while he is still employed seems to be binding on his employer. Sure enough, God is compelled to sign on to this radical new economy. But in Jesus, God silences all charges of scam by suffering the dishonest manager's punishment on the cross. And in Jesus, God makes alliances with all sinners so that his economic plan can go forward undeterred by death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Faithfulness Born in Christ's Wastefulness

One difference between Jesus' dishonesty and our dishonesty is that while ours serves our selfish desires at the expense of others, his serves the needs of others at the expense of his own life. And what he did for us builds a relationship with us, just as the dishonest manager built relationships with his master's debtors. For sinners who are facing an unpayable debt, it may at first seem ridiculous to have that burden lifted for free, but if it is the master's wish, who are we to argue? Besides, it isn't simply a "trick of the pen." When Christ cooks our books, he also changes our history and changes us in the process. We are a "work in progress" but we aren't a sham. The restructuring of our debts affects our whole life in new and exciting ways. Through faith in Christ, nurtured by the Holy Spirit, we learn to surrender our need to earn our own righteousness and find the

freedom that comes from the righteousness we receive from Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Blessing the World with the Riches of Christ*

The other difference between Jesus' dishonesty and our dishonesty is that while ours misuses a finite resource, his splurges an infinite resource that was meant to be splurged, just like the woman splurged that fine oil all over Jesus' head. Now we are authorized to splurge that infinite resource – God's eternal grace – on all who we encounter, in spite of the frustration it inspires among the old-creation economists in our world. To them we will be known as "dishonest managers." But the dishonest manager in the parable did not care what the world thought of him. He had his master's authorization and that was all that mattered. So do we, from our master who has guaranteed an eternal, joyous future for us. We freely fly in the face of the world's economy, flooding the world with Christ's "foreign" currency in a benevolent grassroots takeover bid. We use the grace that God has given us, along with the finite resources that God has blessed us with, to form the same kinds of relationships with others Christ formed with us, bringing to them the economy by which their debts are paid by Christ.