

Being Shrewd or Unethical?

The gospel narrative of Luke is full of parables, many of them unique. And if you took a survey of those of us who every three years encounter this particular unique parable in the lectionary—the consensus would be that this one should have been omitted. This is almost always referred to as the most difficult parable of all to understand what Jesus is trying to teach those around him. Luke has just presented a series of parables about things lost: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin, and even a lost son which is better known as the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother. There is a hero there; the seeker of the lost. There is a theme there about the joy felt when the lost is found—and the emphasis is on the joy felt on that finding by the seeker. The usual interpretation is that God seeks that which is lost, and rejoices when the lost returns. Those parables are about the nature of God. There is something of a transition as it seems that Jesus is now speaking not so much to the crowd but is more specifically and directly to the disciples. And there seems to be a shift in the theme as well. Even before the passage is read, the title given to the parable is a clue that the translators of our texts, like the commentators, don't really know exactly what to make of this parable. Different translations insert various titles before the actual text within chapters. Here the subtitles vary but include the following: The Parable of the Dishonest Manager, The Dishonest Servant, The Unjust Steward, or the Crafty Manager, and that is just a sampling. The original documents had no chapters or subtitles, so each of these are insertions by translators which indicate their struggle with what the parable that follows means. The text begins: "Then 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.'" As the story proceeds, it reminds me of a TV show called "Let's make a Deal". But before we get to that aspect, I would like to try to tie this parable to what has gone before—to the other stories which Luke has placed together. What is Jesus trying to convey with this parable? For Luke, what connection does it have with what Jesus has just said, particularly in the parable about the prodigal son? To begin with, it seems the rich man in this parable is definitely not representing God as the father was in the parable about the prodigal. However, there is an interesting word used in the beginning of this parable like the one from the prodigal. The son who asked his father for his inheritance and then traveled to a distant country squandered his property in dissolute living. The meaning of the word squandered in Greek is to scatter. There is no inherent unethical or immoral meaning in the scattering in the Greek. That has become attached in our English understanding by the associations found in these parables. So the initial information we are given about the manager of the property is not that he is acting dishonestly, his squandering of the property may be just that he is a poor manager and has made poor decisions in the handling of the property. Considering the cultural context, the manager was probably actually a higher servant or slave in the rich man's household, so just having charges made was enough to cost him his position. At least that seems to be the course that the narrative takes as he was summoned told that he could no longer hold that position. There is no evidence given. The accused manager does not try to defend himself but responds by saying, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me?" Now, do we assume this is an admission of guilt, or a look at the

reality of the situation? Noticing that this manager now refers to the rich man as his master, we can see that although he had a position of status within the household, he too was probably like those he managed in many ways. He views his future as having to dig or beg, and so comes up with an alternative plan. This alternative plan is where the parable begins to sound like “Let’s make a Deal” as the soon to be dismissed manager summons his master’s debtors into give an accounting of what they owe the master and quickly offers to reduce the debt of one by 50%, the debt of another by 20%. There is no explanation why the one who owed 100 jugs of oil was asked to only pay 50 while the one who owed 100 containers of wheat only was relieved of owing 20 containers. Various explanations based on what is known of the economy of the time and human nature have proposed that the reduction was actually the manager seeking to collect what was actually owed to the rich man and forgoing his “cut”. The parable makes no such claim. And it is here that what is called the weirdness of the parable begins to stand out. In verse 8: “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;” Here we have confirmation that the rich man had convicted the manager of dishonesty, but Jesus has only said he squandered. We might feel that this dealing was dishonest, but the manager evidently did not conceal it from his master, who now commends him for being shrewd. At this point, it seems that narrative moves from the story of the rich man and his squandering manager to a generalization about disciples and the world. “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” This gives us a clue that like all of the parables the point is about relationships—sometimes relationships not only with God but among us—how we treat each other. The reasoning of this manager for his cutting the deals was so that he would be welcomed into homes when he lost his position. Then in the first person we have, “And I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” What eternal homes? This segue into the meaning of the parable is certainly not as clear cut to us as we would like. In fact, it seems as clear as mud. Of course, many of the parables Jesus told did not make sense to his disciples and we often find that they asked for explanations. But there are some indications that Jesus and our scriptures were no strangers to the use of irony and sarcasm. There is also the pattern of radical forgiveness which Jesus does endorse, and which we rely on for our own forgiveness. When we come to the end of this passage, verses 10 through 13, give the message which seem much more consistent with what we expect. But in God’s economy, such radical slashing of debts as the manager did is standard practice for God. God does not dispense the same per cent forgiveness for debt. God expect us to forgive others debts to us. When we participate in freeing other of their burdens, we are truly being stewards of the mysteries of Christ and faithful administrators of the kingdom. In this parable, all of those debtors know to whom, ultimately they owe the debt. When the manager marks the debt paid at the lower amount, they know who really paid the price. They may be grateful to the middle manager, but they recognize the largess of the owner of the debt who allows the cancellation to stand. It is really thanks to the owner that grace abounds in this story: grace abounds for the manager and for the debtors. And although there is a temptation to equate these debts solely to forgiveness of sin, those last verses remind us that Luke’s gospel is very much concerned with the way we use other gifts we have been given—those gifts of riches—“Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been

faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" It seems that Jesus' parable is calling us to loyalty and service to the One who is merciful and abounding in steadfast love, teaching us to scatter grace, not to squander our gifts but not to hoard them either. We are called not to misplace our allegiance to the things of this world but to use them well. The tendency to waste and abuse the good gifts we have been given like the manager, to be loyal to the wrong things and neglect those things which God calls us to tend is often where we fail to be faithful to our call. At the end, this parable which is called Jesus' weirdest leaves us with a clear message: "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." That is two ways of saying the same thing. There is room for only one Number One in our life. As the passage ends we are told: "You cannot serve God and wealth." Perhaps the parable tells us more about God's grace that we thought at the beginning. It is radical, not based on deserving or on a rational algorithm. It is not fair according to human standards and makes no sense. It is grace. It is abundant. And the one who gives it to us, call us to also extend grace to others: forgiving as we are forgiven, loving as we are loved, being servants to others and scattering that grace we have received faithfully. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.