

## © WISE SHADY DEALINGS ©

LUKE 16:1-9 © TRINITY 9

INI

The parable of the Dishonest Manager is one of the more confusing parables in Scripture. After hearing it, questions about the story rise up. Like, “why was the manager praised by his master after he was dishonest with his money? Wouldn’t he be hysterical, looking for a chance to give him what he’s owed?” Or, “In verse 9 when Jesus tells us to make friends for ourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, is Jesus giving permission to engage in unlawful and unethical business practices?”

And to answer some of these questions, commentators on this passage have varying degrees of interpretation on this passage, which makes nailing down an interpretation difficult. Is the message of the parable about money? Is it about Business practices? Is about how dishonesty pays off? What in the world is it about?

To find out, there are some things we need to bring into the story. We need to understand the culture of the business. Well, what is the business? It seems most likely that the master owns and rents out real estate to farmers, who make a good living off that land. To collect rent, the master hired a manager to take care of the books. And this manager carries the authority of the master when collecting these debts.

With this in mind, let’s go over the parable and flesh out the meaning.

The parable starts out with the dishonesty of the manager in his previous dealings with folks. The manager was most likely making extra for himself under the table, undetectable to the master’s eye. He was dishonest with his master’s customers, reflecting poorly on the reputation of the master. The master was a man of noble character, generous, and respected in the community, and he wanted that reputation to remain!! He cared about the community enough to fire his dishonest manager when he learned of his bad business ethics.

Even though the Manager was fired from his position, the master's reputation of being a generous man shines through. Because normally, if an employee responsible with these large of debts is caught pocketing cash, he'd not only be fired, but thrown into jail on the spot for his dishonesty. But, out of the master's generosity, he let the manager go. Certainly, his manager's dishonesty isn't overlooked – the master expected obedience and acts in judgment to the manager by firing him from his position, but is oddly merciful by not throwing him in the slammer.

Now the manager had to devise a plan if he were to get out of this situation for the better. He thought about taking up another job – a laborer perhaps. But he decides he's not strong enough for that. He thought about begging, but its considered a profession of ill-repute within the community. Nothing seems to fit the bill for a man of his education and stature, so before the community knows he'd been fired, he went to his master's debtors and lowered the rental agreements. So, instead of 100 measures of oil from one farmer, he agreed to 50. Instead of 100 measures of wheat from another farmer, he agreed to 80. In each situation, the manager saves the debtor 500 denarii, a pretty good sum. But he urges them to do it quickly before the master or the debtors realize what he was up to. His hope is that through this dealing, these debtors would provide housing to a jobless man, otherwise he'd be on the streets.

Though this plan seems shady, it's actually quite brilliant. Because the manager's plan is to risk everything on the quality of mercy he's already experienced from his master. But the stakes are high – if he succeeds, he will be a hero in the community and get off scot-free. But if he fails, he goes to jail.

After the Manager is done making quick deals with the debtors, the master sits down with the transactions. Seeing what had been done, the master is left to react in one of two ways: first, he can go back to the debtors and explain why the deal they made with the Manager was a mistake. Because the manager was fired, thus his actions didn't represent the master's wishes. He was a rogue employee with no authority, deserving jail time. But by going with this option, the debtors and the rest of the

community would be outraged at the master! Their joy and favor with his generosity lowering the rent would turn to anger! He'd lose his reputation for being a generous, noble man in society. They'd curse him for his stinginess and lack of generosity.

The master's second option is to let it be – to keep silent, to take a loss financially for the sake of his reputation, accept the praise being given by the community, and allow the clever manager to be praised by the community as well. The master chose this option, demonstrating just how generous he is! So, the cleverness of the manager paid off, because the master was merciful and generous by choosing to pay the full price for his manager's salvation.

In a backhanded way, the manager's dealings are a compliment to the master's generosity. Because the manager banked on the generosity of the master to make this work. And it did – proving that the master is even more generous than anyone could've anticipated.

For this, the master praised the manager for his wisdom. The word in our translations is "shrewd", that the master praised the manager's shrewdness, but the Greek word more-so indicates wisdom in the way of skillfulness in self-preservation. The wisdom of the manager here is that he is aware of the one source of his salvation, which is the master's generosity.

Then when Jesus says "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light" He is pointing out that the Manager is praised for his wisdom knowing where his salvation lay, not for his dishonesty in business dealings.

So, to sum up the meaning of the parable, Kenneth Baily in his book "Poet and Peasant" describes it well: "God (the master [in the story]) is a God of judgment and mercy. Because of his evil, man (the manager [in the story]) is caught in the crisis of the coming of the kingdom. Excuses will avail the manager nothing. Man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master who, he can be confident, will accept to pay the price of man's salvation. This clever rascal was wise enough to place his total trust in the quality of mercy experienced at the

beginning of the story. That trust was vindicated. Disciples [of Jesus] need the same kind of wisdom.”

Jesus encourages us with this parable to take comfort in that his gracious generosity covers a whole host of sin – paid for by the holy blood of Jesus on the cross. For our heavenly Father took a loss of His only Son, so that we may have salvation, not being thrown into hell’s jail cell.

To be a disciple of Jesus today is to place your entire life and trust into the merciful hands of our heavenly Father, because our sin brings us nothing but judgment. Our shady dealings and life should land us in hell’s jail cell. Devising a plan of His own, our Lord comes to rescue us from our excuses of our wrongdoings. Because scheming a plan not based on our Lord’s generosity would destroy all faith we have in our heavenly Father. That won’t work. Instead, throw yourself upon your Father who’s generous to you. Throw yourself entirely upon God’s Son, who’s paid the price for your sin. Throw yourself entirely upon the Holy Spirit, who works to bring forgiveness from the cross to you in Word and Sacrament.

To answer the questions posed in the beginning of the sermon, this text isn’t about money, business deals, or dishonesty. The parable is called “The parable of the dishonest manager” but perhaps it should be called “the parable of the master’s generosity”. Because the parable is about the generosity of God to man. Now let’s be wise and throw ourselves entirely on our Lord’s generosity given here.

INI