

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus was a master storyteller, but that doesn't mean that Jesus' parables are easy to understand. Sometimes the point Jesus is making is clear; other times, Jesus Himself explains the meaning to the disciples and to us by extension; still other times, if you're like me, Jesus can leave you scratching your head. After all, Jesus explained that the reason he told the stories was so that "*seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*" (Matt. 13:13).

The parable that Jesus tells us in today's gospel falls into the head-scratching category. Scholar Kenneth Bailey acknowledged that "many commentators affirm that this parable is the most difficult of all the synoptic parables" (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke (Combined edition)*, chapter 5). Duncan Derrett, another scholar, pointed out that while "commentators disagree as to the meaning of [this parable], all are agreed as to the embarrassment it has caused," meaning especially that "conduct which appears on the face of it to be reprehensible, [is] held up as instruction, if not example, for the disciples" (J. Duncan M. Derrett, "*Law in the New Testament*, pp. 48-9).

On the face of it, indeed, for that's a misunderstanding of this parable that we'll want to correct. Let me state it at the beginning so that it's not misunderstood. Jesus does NOT commend the "dishonest manager" for his dishonesty! Look at the text in your bulletins now if you need to. It's not what the text says. We need to be faithful to the text.

Now in Luke 15, Jesus spoke a series of three parables meant, I claimed last week, not just for the ears of the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling at Jesus, but also for the tax collectors and sinners whom they were grumbling about. We heard two of those parables last Sunday. Today, though, Jesus turns His attention especially to the disciples and speaks to them — which is not to say that the Pharisees weren't listening in ... we heard that they were; but this parable was spoken to disciples.

I think that's important in understanding this parable. For all of the erudition of the scholars I read, they didn't really make this clear. But in Jesus' own example of explaining the Parable of the Sower, for example, the first thing He did was make clear what the things in the story represented: what was the seed? What did the different types of soil represent? Etc. Without doing this in the current parable, the explanations given by these scholars are less than satisfying.

So, in the case of this Parable of the Dishonest Manager as the ESV entitles it, or of the Unjust Steward as you might hear it called, let's identify the important

characters. The rich man can be none other than Jesus Himself. St. Paul says of the incarnate Jesus *“that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich”* (2 Cor. 8:9). Moreover, He is the one the manager calls *κύριός* — Lord.

The manager (or steward) represents the disciples — then and now. Yes, Jesus is speaking also to us who by baptism have been called to be His disciples and given a stewardship of His things, but who have to admit our own unrighteousness, our own squandering of the Lord’s things. *“None is righteous, no, not one; ... no one does good, not even one”* (Rom. 3:10, 12).

The other debtors represent all the other people who surely have business with the Lord, but who conduct that business through His agent, namely the manager. After all, St. Paul again says, *“there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist”* (1 Cor. 8:6). On the other hand, *“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?”* (Rom. 10:14). They come to know through those who share the word of Christ with them, through preachers and other disciples, who proclaim Jesus Christ as the *“only mediator between God and men, ... [the] ransom for all.”*

With this now established, we return to the parable: There was a rich man who had a manager. He is dishonest. He had been squandering his master’s possessions. The master found out about it, and he called the manager to account for his management. This is the way it is with everybody, stewards and debtors. We will all give an accounting of our stewardship. The books will be opened (Rev. 20:12). As the writer to the Hebrews says: *“all [creatures] are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account”* (Heb. 4:13).

The manager’s situation was dire. Was there anything he could do to save himself? Nothing, he decided. He wasn’t strong enough to dig; it was too shameful to beg. This is just the situation we all find ourselves in: we’re guilty of mismanaging our Lord’s things, and there’s nothing we can do to make it right.

The manager acted quickly — while He still had time and was still seen as His Lord’s agent. He called in the Lord’s debtors: *“How much do you owe?”* *“A hundred measures of oil.”* *“Quickly ... write fifty.”* *“How much do you owe?”* *“A hundred measures of wheat.”* *“Write eighty.”* *“The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness”* — not for his dishonest dealings, but for his shrewdness, namely, trusting in the goodness and mercy of his Lord. His Lord had shown mercy before; he hadn’t thrown the thieving manager into prison. The manager hoped for the same again, especially as these audacious dealings brought

glory and praise to the master. This was the shrewdness of the manager; this was why he was commended: he trusted in the mercy of the Lord, and by His deeds the debtors too gave glory to the Lord: “What a gracious Lord we have!”

In our own dealings with our Lord, let us not forget that regardless of all our efforts, we remain unrighteous, as the prophet tells us: “*all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Isa. 64:6). There is nothing about our efforts that would commend us before the Lord. We deserve to be fired ... cast out into the outer darkness, a place without hope, a place of “*weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matt. 25:30). But we are commended for our shrewdness, if you will, for our trust in the mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus means when He says, “*make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth.*” He’s not commanding dishonesty. Rather He is using this steward’s example to teach us to “do what [we] must to insure [our] acceptance and salvation, ... [namely] reconcile [ourselves] to God” (James Voelz dissertation, p. 99, and explanatory email), which we know happens by faith. Like Abraham of old, we are accounted righteous and we are saved when we trust “*in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom. 4:24-25). And we come to believe this when we hear the word of Christ preached to us and shared with us (Rom. 10:17).

Moreover, the good works that God’s stewards do, we do them not for our own glory but so that others — the debtors — “*may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16). More than that, we do them praying that God’s will may be done with regard to unbelievers, that, through our dealings with them, they too may come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved.

Therefore, God grant this to us ... that we who by Holy Baptism have been called out of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9) and been made “*sons of light,*” may continue to walk in that light by faith, that we might let our lights shine in good and faithful works, and that others may turn to You in the righteousness of faith, in the knowledge of the truth, and in the doing of good to all — for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.