

Money Can't Buy Me Love?

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 16:1-13

September 18, 2016 Pentecost 18C

As the baseball season is winding down, I read a story about a baseball game back in September 2007, between the Yankees and the Rays. Both teams were in the thick of the race. The Rays pitcher pitched the ball, which bounced off of Derek Jeter's bat. Jeter leaped back, winced, cried out, and clutched his shirt sleeve. He faked out the umpire, who awarded him first base for being hit by the pitch. Most of the people in the stands weren't as fooled as the umpire was, and Jeter admitted after the game that he had pulled a fast one on the umpire. So, on all the call-in sports radio shows, the fans argued. Was Derek Jeter a shrewd baseball player, or was he a cheat? Of course, whichever team you might root for could influence your judgment.¹

I don't know about you, but I get angry when CEOs give themselves golden parachutes before bankrupting their corporations. Stories of how Wall Street traders caused a recession by cheating and manipulating the market for their own personal gain, with pyramid schemes and hedge fund cheating and mortgage swindles make me sick.

So here we have a story of Jesus, a parable, about a manager who gets caught cheating, and finds a creative way to cook the books, and he comes out on top! Jesus, what is this about, anyway?

The story itself is about a steward—today we might call him a business manager—who pads the expense accounts one too many times. I remember when I started at CBP and was told to save receipts when I made trips on company business, so I could be reimbursed. A veteran employee told me a salesman who went on a sales trip on a windy day, and his favorite fedora blew away. He couldn't catch it, so he added it to his expense report. The company auditor refused to pay for the hat. So on the next trip, the salesman again added the hat to his expense account. Again, it was turned down. After the next trip, he added a note: "There's a hat hidden in here somewhere. Bet you can't find it." Anyway, this business manager had hidden a lot more than a hat in his business accounts, and his manager did find out. "You have a week to prepare for a final audit," the boss said. "What can I do?" the business manager wondered. "I'm too old to dig ditches, and begging just isn't my style. I'm sunk. Hmmm. No, wait a minute. Maybe I can make this work for me." So he cooked the books again, not in his own favor, but in his customers' favor. He settled for half payment, and wrote

¹ Adapted from Delmer Chilton, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost for Year C (Proper 20), lectionarylab.org

“Paid in full.” That way, by doing a huge favor to his customers, maybe they would do favors in return—maybe a new job; maybe a new place to stay. The surprising part, though, is how his boss, his master reacted. He could have thrown the rascal in prison. Instead, he complimented him on his shrewdness, on turning a bad situation to his own advantage.

An entertaining story, but why did Jesus, of all people, tell it? Was he advocating dishonesty? So I started digging into it a little. First, I discovered that this isn’t a parable where God is the master. Unlike the parable of the Prodigal Son, where God is the waiting father, this is a secular parable. It isn’t that God approves the antics of the shrewd steward, it’s just the steward’s own equally shrewd boss who does. So what kind of parable is it? It’s a comparison parable; an if—then parable. Jesus told a lot of those. If a sinful human father gives his child good things, then won’t your perfect heavenly Father do even better? If a crooked judge can be badgered by a persistent widow to give her justice, then won’t a loving, caring God not do even better? Mary Schertz in the *Christian Century* puts it this way: “If even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of the light realize that ‘true riches’ have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions?”² (unquote)

This is a parable about a steward, and Jesus goes on to teach about our stewardship to God. Remember the song, “I don’t care too much for money ‘cause money can’t buy me love?” Here we have a steward, a business manager, who could have just taken the money and run, but what he did instead was to use the money creatively to make friends, both for him and his manager. So maybe Jesus was saying that it’s a matter of proportion. Our treasures shouldn’t rule us, but they should be tools for creating good out of bad situations. There’s a saying that we should love people and use things, but instead we love things and use people. So Jesus was telling us to use our resources wisely and creatively, so that good things may happen. That’s back to the if/then parable. If schemers and crooks can use their resources creatively, shouldn’t honest people, Christians, have a kind of sanctified shrewdness?

Thomas Brackett, an Episcopal priest, has a good take on it. “Here is how the story breaks open for me. I think that the way it sounds to you depends on the character you inhabit in this power play. If you are the Master, this is insane. Your Profit and Loss statement just took a severe hit. If you are the one forgiven of debt, you’ll be telling your grandchildren about this turnaround moment for years to come. If you are the one who just forgave, and kept your job, this is a really great story! You resisted the criticisms and

² Mary Schertz, “Living by the Word, *Christian Century* Sep. 4.

the social norms, you took a huge gamble and it paid off - you gained the admiration of your Master and kept your job."³

Brackett goes on to suggest that we look at the parable in its context. What comes before Luke 16? Luke 15—the story of a prodigal father who didn't just accept his errant son back as a servant, but welcomed him back with a joyous party. All through the Gospels Jesus is going around healing people, and forgiving people of their sins. The righteous around him that it was an arrogant, even blasphemous, thing to do—only God could forgive sins. So here was Jesus—squandering God's love and grace and forgiveness. You're forgiven! You're healed! You're free! You're loved! Jesus was squandering God's love and grace and forgiveness just like the business manager in the parable was squandering the boss's money. Thomas Brackett, again, puts it this way. *"I choose to believe that this manager's crazy and irresponsible behavior is a description of the outrageous Divine generosity squandered on all of us."*⁴(unquote)

Remember earlier in the service, we prayed the Lord's Prayer like we've prayed it for years? Remember the part where we said, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us," or, as we used to translate it, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?" If his parable speaks to us of God graciously and willingly forgiving our sins, erasing our debts, then in the prayer we are offering to forgive others, as well. Sometimes we clutch hold of those old sins against us, and cherish them. We think of the cutting remarks that we could have made, or hurtful actions we could have done, to the people who have hurt us or who have hurt the ones we love. God has forgiven us; and that calls us to forgive others.

And there's even more to the parable than that. It does speak about money, and how we use money. That's why, at the end of the Parable, Jesus says, according to the Message, "If you're honest in small things, you'll be honest in big things; If you're a crook in small things, you'll be a crook in big things. If you're not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the store?"

No worker can serve two bosses:

He'll either hate the first and love the second

Or adore the first and despise the second.

You can't serve both God and the Bank." (Luke 16:10-13, The Message)

Jesus talks a lot about money in all the Gospels, but especially in the Gospel of Luke. In the story of the Rich Young Ruler, for example, he diagnoses the young man's hangups, and concludes that money is his master. The young

³ Thomas Brackett, "Jesus the Rogue Rabbi," Day1.org.

⁴ Ibid.

man's only road to spiritual health is to let go of that which holds him back—just like the cartoon on the screen. Did you notice in the cartoon what Jesus is offering the man tied down to his money bag? A pair of scissors to cut the rope. Jesus' message throughout the gospels is that money makes a great servant, but a poor master.

On October 9, we're going to be having Dedication Sunday where we turn in our estimates for giving for next year. So it's convenient that we begin now thinking about stewardship, even though today's story is about a bad steward who had to get creative. Stewardship is about commitment to God, and using that which God has given us for God's glory. It's not as much about supporting a church budget as it is about ordering our lives so that God's will is our priority. Stewardship is about the way we live our daily lives and make our daily decisions. And stewardship isn't just about the way we manage money, it's the way we structure our lives. It's how we use the time, the energy, the creativity, the compassion that God gives us.

We try to be good stewards. Sometimes we screw up. But we are always offered the same amazing grace, the same overwhelming generosity of a loving God. Amen.

By Michael E Dixon