

The Dishonest/Shrewd/Unjust Manager

Luke 16:1-13

We have for our lectionary reading from Scripture a passage that, in my opinion, is one of the more difficult readings in the Bible to dissect. Depending on which translation of the Bible you read there is confusion on the description of the manager in the story. Some translations call him the Dishonest Manager, some the Shrewd Manager, and some call him the Unjust Manager. The different commentaries that I researched discussed quite a variance about the translation of the story. Some point out that the manager was not dishonest at all, the Aramaic word for “accused” is in the passive tense and means that he was falsely accused they say. Others point out that he was not accused of dishonesty, but merely of being “wasteful” or incompetent in the matter of managing his master’s possessions. Others discuss the issue of the manager’s response to being called before his master as the indicator of his dishonesty and improper handling of the responsibilities assigned to him; since he called the debtors and told them to adjust the amounts they owed to lower amounts than were actually owed, he acted with impropriety. In so doing, he established that he was not above dishonesty. Some ask the question, was the manager only trying to earn the favor of the debtors by encouraging them to lower the amounts of their debts or was he trying to make them complicit with him in cheating the master? In so doing, was he spreading the guilt and eventual possible punishment?

Then we have the issue of Jesus seeming to condone the dishonesty of the manager. Does Jesus really commend the manager for acting “shrewdly” in cheating the master? Some commentators discuss the issue of the personality of the master. Surely he must have been a rogue himself to have reacted the way he did to the manager’s manipulation of the books. They point out

the in Jesus' time it was common for the rich masters of the world to charge exorbitant interest to their debtors. They were quite often 'absentee' landlords who assigned to the stewards or managers of their estates the task of collecting from debtors the usurious payments. This would put the manager in a difficult position of having to demand unfair payments from his peers and neighbors in the community. You can see how the managers would almost be as unpopular as tax collectors who collected outrageous taxes from the Jewish people on behalf of the Roman authorities. If you look at the situation from this perspective, you can see how the manager was hoping to earn the favor of the debtors so that they would later be hospitable to him. He knew that he was about to be put out by his employer and would now be at the mercy of the community with which he had been dealing harshly. Perhaps he was merely righting the wrongs that he had been forced to perpetuate on his neighbors. Some say Jesus was merely commending the manager for correcting the injustices of his past.

I don't know, I think these all miss the point to some degree. I could not help when reading this passage but to be reminded of my own history in corporate management. I think it was the energy or the lengths the manager was willing to go to in order that had an impact on Jesus in the story. It was the manager's resourcefulness that is commended. In my first career I was responsible for the operations of retail stores for a food service company. I began early in my career as a unit manager, was promoted to area manager with responsibility for four units, then to city manager with several areas in my territory, and so on until I was director of a large area that covered several states with fifteen cities and a total of eighty to ninety store locations in my territory. I have had more than my share of experience with the hiring and firing of managers who were either dishonest or incompetent. On more than one occasion I had the experience of informing a store manager or multi-unit manager that

he or she would be the subject of an audit from the corporate accounting department. I found that you could discern much from the reaction of persons to the news that they were about to have their books and management practices inspected by a CPA. Just think of the reaction the average American taxpayer might have to being informed that the IRS was going to audit their finances and you have an idea of the type of reaction I often witnessed. If someone was casual or unconcerned upon learning such news, there was a chance they knew there was nothing to fear because their management practices were proper and honest. If however, their reaction was more on the excitedly frantic range of the scale you might have a clue that something was suspect in their management style.

Now I will tell you that financial audits were standard practice in our corporation. You did not necessarily have to be suspected of mismanagement or dishonesty to be subject to an audit. The accounting department would go throughout the company and review the financial records and management practices of corporate locations and territories on a regular basis. This was just good business practice. However, if for some reason or other, a particular manager was suspected of incompetence or dishonesty an audit would be scheduled to determine what course of action should be taken, usually resulting in the termination of the suspect manager. Sometimes, in cases of theft, the manager would be brought up for criminal charges and could be subject to jail time. Now considering the possible ramifications of an audit bringing to light management practices that might be considered not in the best interests of the company, you can see how an insecure manager might have a strong reaction to the news he or she was about to have their books investigated. I have seen many a manager go into a frenzy of activity, working overnight, cleaning up the store, getting files and books in order, calling in employees to

coach them on their possible responses to the auditor all in the hope of getting a good score on the upcoming audit. Many a time I could not help but think that if they had only put forth half the effort in their regular daily management practices that they put into suddenly getting ready for the audit they might not have been in such a dire situation in the first place.

When Jesus commends the manager for his “shrewdness” (Aramaic word for Shrewd: resourceful, prudent, sensible, and practically wise in relationship with others.) and compares the sons of this world to the sons of light, I wonder if He is not speculating about our efforts. How many times do we put inordinate effort into making amends or trying to cover up for having stumbled in our spiritual walk? Does God ever wish we would put as much effort in our daily walk as we put into our occasional representations of piety? How often do we come to the altar of worship on Sunday to engage in our religious practices only to leave the church and Christ behind when we go to work on Monday? We battle our way through traffic as we commute to our places of work, struggle our way through the workday in a dog-eat-dog world, return home tired and discouraged, and crash in front of the television to escape for a few hours. By the time the work week is over and we collapse into the weekend we just want to recover from the toll the world has taken on us. We come to worship again on Sunday to be renewed, restored, and relieved of the encumbrances of the secular world that have attached themselves to us. And then on Monday we start all over again.

And where is our identity in this passage as a church? Are we diligent in our stewardship? Do we have a pattern of staying ahead of our commitments and obligations? Or do we find that as the year goes by we end up behind? Have we met our goals or do we find that late in the year we will have to struggle to catch up? We are

entering that time of year where we begin to plan our stewardship campaign. As we look back on this year will we find we have met our budgeted goals or will our giving to our church finances have fallen short? This is my first year at WUMC and I can't know what has been the pattern in the past without looking at the books. I do know that in my previous experiences it is not uncommon for a church to run behind leading up to the Fall season and have to put on a big drive or campaign to be able to satisfy all their financial obligations before the end of the year. What does Christ say to us in the passage from Luke? Would he wonder if we are being shrewd or resourceful with our stewardship? If true stewardship in our spiritual matters concerns more than our gifts and also includes our "presence, our service, and our prayers" would we fare well in a spiritual audit? I know that I have fallen short in my call to this church as a 'steward' for the Adult Education and Formation program. We recently ran a survey of this congregation to discern our interest in Adult Education and Formation and we had just about a ten percent response. Only ten percent of this congregation expressed an interest in seeking deeper commitment in their spiritual walk on the subject of Bible study and spiritual formation. That tells me that I missed the mark of making the point of the importance of the program to our congregation. Maybe I did not correctly hear the Adult Education Committee when we discussed in which programs this church wants to be involved. In any event, the response did not indicate a strong commitment or desire for a deeper spirituality from the membership of this church. Last May this congregation was asked to fill out a survey of interest in volunteer ministries and less than thirty percent of the membership of this church responded. I know that more than thirty percent of our membership want to serve in ministry, I see it every week. Perhaps we have not communicated the importance of making a formal statement or commitment to those ministries.

You are good people! This church is involved in many wonderful ministries. We reach out to the community in several ways and are known to be a church that embraces visitors so they will feel welcome and comfortable. But are we doing what it takes to help build new members into true disciples of Jesus Christ? Is each of us doing what is necessary to become a stronger disciple ourselves? How many of us come to church on Sunday and maybe one or two other times during the week and think we have satisfied Christ's call to us? I am called to ask you, if God asked us for reckoning this very day would we be confident and secure in our spiritual stewardship or would we want a couple of days to get things in order? Could we get things in order in just a couple of days, or in an eternity? I am also called to give you the good news, Christ died for us while we are still sinners, that proves God's love for us. It is not by our works that we are saved; it is by our faith in Christ through the grace of God that we have the promise of salvation. Does the realization of that wonderful and undeserved gift cause a change in our hearts and motivate us to try to better? Not to earn a gift that can never be earned but in gratitude for the gift? **The gift of the life of the Father's only begotten Son.** Knowing I, you, we, all of us are saved by grace through faith makes me want to try a little harder. I know that is what God is calling out to me, and I know that is what He is calling out to all of us. **He is calling us to "greater things"; I know we can do more.**

Please join me in Prayer:

Dear Lord God, I ask that you forgive me for all the ways I fall short of the mark you have set for me. I ask that your forgive each of us. Work on my heart that I may be a better disciple and minister for your work in this world. Help me to be 'in' this world but not 'of' this world, not beholden to the things and "mammon" of this world. Help us all to keep our hearts and our minds focused on you. Help us to

do the “greater things” that Christ promised us we would do in His name. In Jesus’ precious name we pray. Amen.