

## Sermon Notes 18th August 2016 Luke 16: 1-13

Jesus would never approve of anything shady or unscrupulous or corrupt, would he? He tells the story of a manager accused of abusing his position, and to get himself out of trouble, he commits a series of frauds against his boss, and the story ends with him being commended for his ingenuity. And pious preachers have been trying to find a way of explaining away the mess ever since!

One thing you can be absolutely sure about is that Jesus really did tell this story. Even the most sceptical of commentators have no doubt that this one really came from Jesus. No matter what your understanding of the origins of the Bible, the only possible explanation for a story this inconvenient and perplexing finding its way into the gospel is that Jesus actually told it. At the end of the story, there are other sayings of Jesus relating to money, honesty and dishonesty and the need to be shrewd and prudent, and it would appear that these sayings are here, not because Jesus said them right after telling the story, but because the gospel writer was looking for other things Jesus said to try to make sense of this story. In this context, they come across as an anxious attempt to explain away the difficulties. They don't actually answer the questions that the parable leaves hanging. I don't think that there is supposed to be one correct understanding of every parable Jesus told. I think Jesus told stories, and good stories are always multi-levelled. So I'm certainly not going to claim that I've solved the puzzle and found the perfect explanation of this story.

I want to propose how to read this parable in relation to its context in Luke's gospel. As I've suggested, Luke adds a bunch of additional sayings after the parable, clearly trying to make a connection. These sayings are more connected with the parable that goes before this parable.

What comes before it is the parable of the prodigal son. At first glance, the two stories seem to go in very different directions. With the prodigal son we seem to have a bad boy who decides to go home, turn over new leaf and become a good boy. Whereas with the unscrupulous manager we seem to have a bad boy who, when he gets caught, pulls an even bigger swindle to save his own skin. There are some parallels which justify looking to one to help us understand the thrust of the other. Not only are they side by side in the gospel, but both the prodigal son and the unscrupulous manager are accused of "squandering the property". Each of them is then described as having a conversation with himself saying "what will I do now? I know what I will do..." And what both are trying to do is come up with a plan that will result in them being accepted into places that they might otherwise have not been welcome in. And both end up receiving far more mercy than they expected.

Now if you go with the idea that these links are encouraging us to interpret the second parable in light of the first, then one important question that it reminds us to ask is "who is the target audience?" The parable of the prodigal son was explicitly addressed to the respectable religious types who were grumbling about Jesus consorting with people they had shunned. And in that parable, Jesus casts these pious grumblers as the whinging older brother who is oh-so-sure of his own righteousness and who resents mercy being shown to the one who deserves it so much less. So given that the first story ends on that note, isn't it likely that when we come to the second story, Jesus is now continuing his commentary on the respectable religious types and their treatment of everybody else?

If so, then it is the religious establishment that Jesus is now casting as the ones who stand accused of mismanaging what has been entrusted to them. And it is God the owner who rouses those who have been acting as his representatives in the world, and calls them to account for failing to properly care for what God had entrusted to them. Isn't that exactly what Jesus elsewhere accuses the religious establishment of? He is scathing about the way they have misconstrued God's priorities, and tied heavy burdens of impossible expectation on people's backs and not lifted a finger to help them. He is scathing about the ways they have interpreted the law as though God cared more about sabbath breaking than healing and reconciliation.

And of course, it is primarily the religious leaders who are in the frame here, but all of us, the entire church, have to face the question of how faithfully we have fulfilled our call to represent God in the world and steward the things God has entrusted to us. Have our behaviours and our attitudes represented God as abundantly loving and merciful and welcoming, or have they made people fear God and feel weighed down by debts to God that they can never repay? Now if that is a fair reading of the story up to that point, then suddenly the unscrupulous manager's next actions might be seen in quite a different light. What does he do?

*So he called in all the people who were in debt to his master. He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe my master?' '100 barrels of olive oil,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'sit down and write 50.'* Then he asked another one, 'And you—how much do you owe?' 'A 1000 bushels of wheat,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'write 800.' As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light."

He cancels debt. Or should I say, he forgives debt. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is quite specific: "Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who does us wrong". So when faced with the imminent loss of his job, he stops trying to manage all the debts owed to his master, and begins forgiving them, discounting them, writing them off. Suddenly, instead of keeping people bound in the debts they have accrued, he is setting people free and giving them a new start. And sure, he might be doing it almost entirely out of self-interest, but the surprise twist is that he is even commended by his employer.

We have Jesus suggesting that there is no such thing as a bad reason to forgive. Forgive because that's what God does. Forgive because you think it will make you popular. Forgive because you have got caught out and you are desperate to get yourself out of a bind. Forgive for any reason at all, but forgive. That's what Jesus is all about. Forgive, and you can be sure that forgiving will always be a far more faithful representation of God than carefully managing other people's debts. And one more thing that it seems certain Jesus is trying to get through to us with is that forgiveness of the size and scale that Jesus wants us to practice is always going to be seen as suspect, as financially unsound. This is just as big and uncomfortable a challenge to us in today's church as it was to the religious establishment of Jesus's day. We have continued to invest heavily in respectability. We would usually be the last people to use a story of a business fraud in any positive light, let alone to wink at the perpetrator of the crime and hold him up for commendation. But then, that's precisely the problem we often have with the gospel of forgiveness, isn't it? It seems to go soft on sin. It seems to wink at the perpetrators. It seems to violate every respectable code of law and punishment and properly measured consequences for wrong doing that will act as a deterrent and maintain decency and order. Wrongdoing is supposed to incur consequences. The wrongdoer incurs a debt and must be made to pay. And so if some reckless Galilean comes along and fiddles the books and writes off the debt, then clearly it is a fraud. Society has been defrauded out of the debt it intended to extract for the wrongdoing. It's a scandal. Jesus it is all about demonstrating the reckless, scandalous and out-of-all-proportion forgiveness of God, and if actually putting that in to practice leads to accusations of going soft on crime and undermining the values and foundations of society, then so be it. Jesus will wear that, and go to the cross if need be, rather than sell out the gospel and go back to portraying God as a celestial policeman with a big stick waiting to catch us out in wrongdoing.

It is because forgiveness — reckless and scandalous forgiveness — really is Jesus' big thing, his signature move. And as far as he's concerned, if that comes at the price of respectability, then respectability be damned. "Here, sit down," he says, "and let's write off your debt while no one is looking. And then let's open our homes and our tables and all the forgivers and forgiven can feast at the table of welcome together." No wonder they crucified him! And no wonder we celebrate him and worship him forever!