

A Different Debt

1 Timothy 2: 1-7

Luke 16: 1-13

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1 Timothy 2: 1-7

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Luke 16: 1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

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How are we to hear the parable in Luke’s Gospel story? Remember--a parable by definition is meant to be confusing and confounding as it turns conventional wisdom and situations inside out and upside down as Jesus twists the familiar to reveal deeper truth and meaning.

A debt collector, a manager ---already an unsavory character--has been embellishing his manipulative and abusive income with kickbacks and embezzlement. He is caught in the act by his boss who prepares to fire him and calls him in so he can learn just how this manager took

financial advantage of him, and to see how he can recoup his losses. Knowing he could not handle manual labor, and still has far too much pride to beg, the soon-to-be unemployed man shrewdly devises a plan to reduce the debts of those who owe his boss. He reduces by 20%, 50%, perhaps taking off just his own profit, perhaps reducing the bill to its original amount without interest. The people are joyful and relieved to have this tremendous burden taken from them, so now with gratitude they will be happy to support this one who had eased their debt. He will no longer have financial security, but he will have ‘social’ security—people who will offer him a place to stay and food from their table—as his corruption has become his generosity. His shrewd behavior that once took advantage of others will now help him.

Do we feel badly for the boss who has been taken advantage of by his employee, or do we feel that he is now simply getting a taste of his own medicine as he has been exploiting the citizens with illegal, exorbitant interests and hidden fees?

We are not quite sure how to be thinking about this when Jesus leaves us completely baffled and bewildered:

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So Jesus certainly has us thinking here. Jesus calls the manager shrewd for his actions—not the ones that hurt, harmed and exploited the citizens—but for the ones that forgave so much of the debts. Ohh..... forgiving debts. Words we know well that Jesus taught us to pray: ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’ We are beginning to ever so slightly see where Jesus is leading us.

“...for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

The compliment for the ‘children of this age’ who are focused on this world does not fit Jesus’ many teachings on caring for others, welcoming strangers, and all the other ways that Jesus shared the good news with the children of light, and as he encourages us to gain friends by dishonest wealth. One commentaryⁱ offers this interpretation as a street-smart spiritual rule --- The children of light are focused on the kingdom of God. Jesus is calling his disciples to become as savvy to the ways of the kingdom as other people are savvy to the ways of the world. We neglect to look ahead for ourselves, to think long term, to store up treasures in heaven.

So why all of this smoke and mirrors—mismanagement and manipulation, embezzlement and exploitation, generosity and gratitude, and dishonest dealings?

Acknowledging ‘The Dishonest Manager in All of Us,’ Episcopal priest Whitney Riceⁱⁱ says that “...once again, we stumble over the nature of our God who doesn’t let us get away with easy answers. And why not? Because our lives don’t have any easy answers.

Jesus doesn’t tell simple stories because none of us live simple stories. Think of the way the connections you have to the people you love sometimes get hopelessly tangled and snarled, until you can’t remember what the problem was in the first place, but you sure can’t figure out how to fix it now. Think of the times you’ve been between a rock and a hard place, knowing that any decision you make will hurt someone. Think of the times you’ve been driven by circumstances to a place where compromising your integrity seems like a small price to pay if it will just get you out of this mess.

There's a bit of the Dishonest Manager in all of us, wheeling and dealing in front of God and trying to "manage" our lives to look good before the Divine. Jesus tells us today that he sees right through us – and loves us dearly anyway.

Jesus knows that our lives are not black and white, and he also knows that we need guidance to live out of our better selves. And so he gives us the gift of forgiveness. He offers his forgiveness openly, freely and without restraint. There is nothing we can ever do that will take God's love away from us. There is no way we will ever be anything less than God's most cherished children, no matter how many mistakes we make or people we hurt. We are forgiven before we know we are going to do wrong, because Jesus loved us even unto death.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." That's what happens in this parable. The dishonest manager is forgiven even as he forgives others. And this is the best part: It's not neat and tidy and clean cut. There are still loose ends and ethical questions and uncertainty.

Because once again, Jesus knows that this is what our lives are like. We are not God, and we cannot offer one another perfect love. We are human, and we are always going to have mixed motives, and mess things up, even when we're trying to do the right thing; in part, we really want to have integrity and in part we just want everyone to see us as having integrity.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves, and in this parable, he tells us that it's OK. It's OK to have mixed motives and make mistakes – what's important is that we keep trying. If we waited to forgive each other until we had perfect charity in our hearts, we'd be here until the apocalypse. Jesus is saying just do it. Forgive everyone. Forgive people even if you know they're wrong. Forgive people when you know you're wrong. Forgive people when you don't feel like it, when they aren't talking to you, when you aren't talking to them, when you don't have time. Forgive people you've never met, forgive faults so small you are ashamed that they bother you. Forgive even if you've done it a thousand times; forgive even if you've never forgiven before.

We are reminded that we have been forgiven a different debt—an unpayable debt—by Jesus' death and his resurrection--the One mediator, the ransom, between God and humankind. We can respond in joyful gratitude that our tremendous burden has been lifted, has been redeemed, but we cannot repay the ultimate gift of mercy, love and grace. Amen.

ⁱ <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/new-testament-luke-161-13/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-dishonest-manager-in-all-of-us-proper-20-c-2013/>