

## **Honestly?**

**Luke 16:1-13**

Thou shalt commit adultery! Honestly, that's what the Bible says, and you can look it up. Of course, you'd have to look it up in the King James Version of 1631. The word "not" was accidentally omitted. This typo so infuriated King Charles that he commanded that all copies be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition. As a result of a missing "not", this edition became popularly known as "The Wicked Bible."

Unfortunately, a lot of people these days are leaving the "nots" out of their Ten Commandments; especially the commandments dealing with honesty. Part of the trouble is in our currently brutal moral and economic climate. It rewards short-term gains over long-term investment; particularly in the area of personal character. And let's face it, honest folks don't always come out on top. Drawn by the fear that they won't be able to compete otherwise, normally upright folks can get drawn into dishonest scheming. For some, the potential benefits of cheating the system, seem to outweigh the risks of any potential punishment.

In light of all this leaving out the "nots", what does the message of the Parable of the Dishonest Steward from our Gospel lesson this morning have to say to us? At first glance, it almost seems to be a recommendation to join in with everyone else.

From the start of the story, we learn that this fellow is a part of the cheating culture. He is charged with mismanaging the property of his rich boss, and he is immediately given his two-weeks' notice. "What will I do," the shady steward says to himself (v. 3). He knows that he is not strong enough for manual labor,

and he is ashamed to sit in the street with a beggar's cup. So, he comes up with a plan. In order to guarantee that he will have a place to land, he summons the master's debtors and gives them some wonderfully deep discounts. To the one who owes 100 jugs of olive oil, the steward says that the debt is now just 50. To the one who is in debt for 100 containers of wheat, the steward announces, "You're in luck — your bill is now 80!"

This sounds pretty slippery, doesn't it? At the very least it sounds unethical, if not outright criminal. So, what's going on here? How could our Lord possibly be recommending this steward as an example for us to emulate? I mean, look! The steward is a crook. He uses creative accounting in order to gain the affection of the debtors. Honestly, how is he possibly a case study in how we are to live.

And there's another problem. The master's reaction is all wrong. The parable tells us that the rich man commends, *commends*, the dishonest steward for being shrewd. How's that even possible? The rich man has just been cheated. Even if we can rationalize the rich man not pressing charges, we can't rationalize his offer of a commendation. And here's another problem: how on earth will this help the steward get another job? Who in their right mind among those debtors would offer him a position protecting their own interests? It's unthinkable! Honestly, what kind of parable is this?

A parable that's missing a key piece of information; a piece of information it assumes you and I already know. Jesus' listeners knew it as did the Gospel writer, so there was no need to mention this minor detail. You see, in first-century Palestine, a steward such as ours here, would have earned most of his living through commissions that he attached to his master's transactions. Thus,

if a debtor owed a sum of money or goods, when he eventually paid up, a certain amount would be tacked on for the steward's commission: a transaction fee, if you will; part of the cost of doing business. The steward in our parable was not actually cooking the books with his master's money. He was cutting his own commission as a way of ingratiating himself with a possible future employer. That potential future employer would have assumed the steward's discount as an act of generosity. This explains how the steward's actions would have given him somewhere to go.

Now we could object that the amounts of these commissions were unrealistically high; and we'd be right. But this would explain the "accusations" brought against the steward at the beginning of the parable. He was greedy: overcharging his master's debtors; a practice that would have reflected very poorly upon the master's financial reputation. That, in turn, would have resulted in injury to the master's business and assets.

With this piece of the puzzle put back in the picture, we can now look at this story as Jesus intends. The steward actually is a shrewd businessman, at least by the end of the story. He becomes willing to sacrifice short-term commissions for long-term benefits. And now the master's reaction makes sense. The rich man commends the steward for acting shrewdly, because he knows that a sacrifice now can yield great dividends later. Besides, the rich man hasn't lost anything himself. The steward has at last managed to do his job. The master's money is finally coming in. He's not out anything if this former employee takes his earned commissions with him.

Now we are ready to hear the point of this parable. The point of the parable, says Jesus, is this: "No slave can serve two masters." That is, no one can serve God while making a God of money. Jesus

is talking about our central purpose in life. We cannot maintain a dual allegiance. As is true in the story of the Dishonest Steward, there are times in which we have to sacrifice the commissions of this world so that we will gain the greater, eternal blessings of God's world. It is a question of character. Will we simply acquiesce to the cheating culture, or will we invest in growing the character to operate ethically no matter what? Jesus is saying that to live in this world his way, investing in character, will require the sacrifice of dishonest gain. In the end though, you and I will be the real winners, for character, humanity, virtue, God's love in us, and God's purposes working through us, saving the world, these are the things that truly last. These are the eternal investments. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today's passage by saying, "You cannot serve God and also make a god of wealth," or make a god of anything else for that matter. (v. 13).

Our cheating culture encourages us to focus on short-term gains and worldly commissions at the expense of anything and everything else; to make such gains the directive, our real god, in our lives. It tempts us to cut corners in pursuit of power and success. It pushes us to twist the truth in order to beat the competition. It drives us to deny love and human compassion for the sake of winning. Today's Scripture challenges us to step back from that culture, to focus on Christ's higher calling, and to forego such temporary commissions to gain lasting wealth.

Honestly, this parable is a call for us to be people of character, who sacrifice in support of God's work in the world. In this one way, says Jesus, we are to follow the eventually wise example of the steward in the story; a person who, finally, gets honest, and shrewdly trades the short-term gains of the cheating culture, for God's long-term purposes. May you and I follow that example.

Step away from the gains of the cheating culture. Invest instead in a good character and a better world. And, honestly, there's nothing dishonest in that.