

Commentators routinely remark that today's parable – the Parable of the Dishonest or Corrupt Manager stands among the most challenging texts in the New Testament, often regarding it as the most perplexing of Jesus' parables.

One commentator wrote about this strange parable under the amusing heading: Watermelon Rugby with The Shrewd Manager. She described how when she had served as a youth pastor that she had her youth play a game called "Watermelon Rugby." You rubbed crisco over a watermelon and played touch football with it. You never caught it. You just grabbed at it while it slipped out of your grasp. She feels the same way about this parable – it slips and slides away even as you think you have it in your grasp.

In 1935 C.H. Dodd offered, what I still think, is the best definition of a parable out there: "A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." By this definition, this parable definitely teases the mind into active thought.

"Active thought" is of course one of the things that most irritated, annoyed, disturbed and intrigued the people who first heard Jesus tell these strange stories. They were infuriated because truth was they didn't want their minds teased into active thought... two thousand years later nothing much has changed – we would rather everything was short, easy, clear, unambiguous. Life would be a whole lot easier if each Parable had its own explanation attached. Make it a whole lot easier to get to the Panthers game if our Pastors could just tell us in a few seconds what these Parables mean! While many people would rather avoid active thought, preferring simplistic answers or the wisdom found on bumper stickers, this is and will not be the way here at OAPC!

Commentators are all over the map in their opinions of what we should make of this parable. The following are just a few of the possible interpretations offered by very faithful and intelligent scholars. If John were not away with the campus ministry retreat this weekend he and Mary Katherine would be well-advised to take note of these possible interpretations because next time this Parable rolls round in the Lectionary.... Possible interpretations include:

- "Will we manage our money, or be managed by it?"
- "The dishonest manager realizes that generosity is the best investment. He gets himself out of a hole by building social capital."
- "The manager in Jesus' story used all his resources to secure his future. We must be no less resourceful."
- "Jesus does not commend the manager's practices, but rather his insight into the connection between resources and relationships."
- "The more you forgive; the wiser you are."
- "What's in my heart and yours matters, to be sure. It matters to God."

These are just a few possible ways into this Parable – there are others, many others, there can never be just ONE right, ONE correct, ONE complete way to unpack this story – engaging with scripture is not a linear, literal exercise but an openness to having our minds, imaginations, emotions and feelings irked and changed.

I am going to try to offer yet another way of allowing this story to impact our living. I want to point out that once again the editorial comment inserted into the Biblical text which identifies this parable as

that of the Dishonest Manager is not too helpful. If we skim read the story too quickly, we might assume that the steward is dishonest because he lowers the amount each debtor owed his master. But the parable doesn't tell us that the steward is dishonest because of what he does in Luke 16: 5-7. What it does say is that charges were brought to the rich man against his manager, that he was squandering his employer's property. This may well be the issue on which this story turns - was the steward squandering his master's property or did somebody or some group want the rich man, the owner, to think that he was?

In New Testament times the steward was the middle man between the landholder and the merchants and tenants in the exchange of goods and services such as buying and selling grain, oil, and crops and collecting rents. Like the much-maligned tax collectors of the day, the steward earned his living by taking a little extra on each transaction. So long as the master still showed a profit and the steward did not over extend his reach everything was hunky dory. Of course if things got out of whack the merchants and tenants had little power to get to the master, their only recourse was to seek to go to the master through the steward and thus when there were problems at the olive press or the grain mill they had to rely on the tabloid press or the rumor mill to put pressure on the steward, and to get the master's attention. Thus it was that the tenants sent word to the big boss that the steward was squandering his wealth.

We can see that in such a scenario the steward's position is both somewhat privileged and certainly vulnerable. He had a relatively high standard of living, resulting from his level of education and literacy and numeracy, but he was completely dependent on the goodwill of the master.

Faced with accusations and gossip, he is in dire circumstances. There is no way his brains can compete with brawn, there is not much else he will be able to do to keep body and soul together if he loses the goodwill of the master. Once again let us note that the parable does not directly state that the steward was indeed squandering his master's property or acting dishonestly. All it says is that such charges were laid out before the master.

Within this approach to this parable the two references to "dishonesty" (in verses 8 and 9) are probably related to the charges brought against the steward at the beginning of the parable, rather than a reference to his dealings reported in verses 5-7. Those dealings, while shrewd, were not, strictly speaking, dishonest. The Law prohibited charging interest, usury was oppressive and outlawed, but as so often is the case the wealthy found ways around these prohibitions and interest was added to the total amount owed, it was presented as part of the total, not as a separate line item

The adjustments the steward makes are not random, he is quick, very quick on his feet, he knows the marketplace and can do the math. Then as now, the more risky the commodity, the higher the interest that was chargeable. The interest on oil was 50% because it could easily be spilled or spoil. The interest on wheat was 20% because it was a more stable commodity. Explaining why he instructed a different write down.

Out of his panic comes shrewdness and diligence. The debtors get asked in one at a time, they cannot compare notes, they cannot continue their collaboration against the steward and at the same time they are all delighted by the markdown they are offered. Yes, maybe the manager is motivated to win some favors when he receives his pink slip, maybe he hopes he can preserve his reputation and find another

similar job, but as it happens a yet better outcome results. According to the parable the actions of the steward please the debtors who now owe the master less and his shrewdness please his master who is able to marvel at how well his manager has absorbed the business acumen he has shared with him over the years they have been together. Convinced of his quick mind and deliberate actions, seeing the gratitude of his debtors as the result of the stewards' actions, the master can keep him on, likely already thinking about a way that he can recoup his temporary losses.

Luke, with his characteristic concern for the prudent use of money, places after this parable a group of sayings that narrows its focus to the responsible use of wealth, including the injunction that you cannot serve God and money.

Thus the meaning of this Parable lies in the attitude of the steward – who was not serving his master, who was not serving God, when he squandered the owner's, or God's property.

And yes this parable is about more than our attitude to wealth, though it certainly relates there if for no other reason than these warnings about not being able to serve these two specifics – God and money at its conclusion. The Parable should also well be applied much more broadly, about our need to be training as sinners such that we will always take shrewd, decisive action in response to God's call and claim on our lives.

We should note that this Parable is the filling in a sandwich put together by the author of Luke's Gospel. The sandwich here is what we could call "an urgent" sandwich. In Chapters 13-15 of Luke we keep hearing about our need to respond to some sort of limited time offer (fig tree, banquet, lost sheep, lost coin, lost sons). And the same urgent need to be found, to find, to change, to give is also found in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that comes up in the next verses, the second piece of bread for this "urgent" sandwich.

Now of course it is our turn, how is it that we are to pally the message of this parable in the context of our urgent need to respond to God?

Given the interpretation we have tried to follow today do we see that the kind of self-centered storing up treasures for ourselves that we tend to engage in is actually to squander the gifts and the graces of God. Rather than acquire and grasp and hold on to we are to use, share, utilize all the gifts God has given us – we are to use them all our material resources, our talent, time, all our gifts, the very earth itself shrewdly for the causes and concerns of Go. Even if we have been in the habit of squandering now is the time to start acting shrewdly. Our training as sinners will never free us, in this life, from our propensity to look out for ourselves but there is another way....

This parable depicts the kingdom of God as a reality in which we are to practice a new sort of economics. This strange story disrupts the conventional definition of what is in our best interest, as well as the patterns of actions toward that goal.

It is not shrewd for someone with wealth and power to be indifferent to those who are poor or on society's margins, much less to oppress them for their own continued gain. On the flip side, it is shrewd for one who is being taken advantage of to seek justice by opposing the unfair practices of those in power.

It is shrewd for someone with resources and influence to advocate for the disadvantaged. Whatever rung we are on in the social, economic ladder, we need to take immediate, decisive, shrewd action to secure our future, which, within the kingdom context, can't be separated from the future well-being of the entire community.

This is where we will end the sermon today, yet each of us are now left to “tease our minds into active thought” as we consider how we will live, what we will do, how we will act, what we will give, how much we will care, as we seek to be good, and faithful stewards of our Master. Each of us on our will feel like we are playing watermelon rugby, but all of us together, paying closest attention to God's call and claim – we will benefit from our training to be sinners, as we embrace the game and live into faithfulness as stewards of the Master. Amen.