

After a fine dinner and provocative conversation in the home of a prominent Pharisee, the crowds following Jesus – the crowds of tax-collectors and sinners gathers in – leaning into the windows and doors - to hear his words. I can just hear the Pharisees muttering in their beards, “Scandal, I say, Scandal!”

Jesus responds to their grumbling with the three parables on lost and found – the lost sheep and coin – and then after those two...the Prodigal son. All three emphasize that it is worthwhile to pay any price both to search for that lost thing and then party with abandon when the search is successful.

Our parable today follows immediately after these three lost and found parables. And it is one of the parables that cause pastors to groan and moan and pull out their hair as they try to figure out what on Earth Jesus is talking about.

In one commentary I read, this parable was described as slippery and slimy and, at first, second, and 15<sup>th</sup> glance – confusing. Another commentator likened this text to playing football with a Crisco-covered watermelon - You never catch it – you grab at it while it slips through your grasp. Still another said, “I think I’m supposed to get this...I think it’s about me, but he’s not speaking my language.”

Have I got you all excited now to hear this parable?  
Hear now, the reading of the Gospel, according to Luke 16: 1-9

**Luke 16:1-9** Jesus tells this parable,  
“There was a rich man who had a steward,  
and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.  
<sup>2</sup> So the rich man summoned the manager 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.'

<sup>3</sup> Then the steward 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.  
<sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that,  
when I am dismissed as manager,  
people may welcome me into their homes.'

<sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master's debtors one by one,  
he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'  
<sup>6</sup> He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.'

He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'

<sup>7</sup> 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.'

<sup>8</sup> And his master commended the dishonest steward 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

So, when we look at this text and are completely overwhelmed by its meaning it helps to look at it from different angles - and this is what we will do today.

One of the first things I found in my study of this parable was that biblical scholars are apt to disagree on many things, but on this one thing they do not disagree: Luke's putting this parable here (right after all these lost and found stories – and in this setting with the banqueting pharisees) is meaningful and significant.

However, the biblical scholars do not all agree as to whether the sayings about money following verses 9-14 belong with this parable or whether they were added afterwards by Luke to make a loose segue to the next parable about money and wealth and all its trappings.

And this is important to note. If we place the parable firmly within the group of parables about the lost and found, then we get an entirely new insights and definitely a less confusing parable than if we were to place the parable with the moralistic teaching of money that comes later. And this is the approach that I want to make today.

One more thing before we look at the text of this parable again. It is helpful to remember, when studying scripture, that the text – while it applies to us today – was not written during our time and our context, nor in our political setting.

Jesus preached these parables, and Luke recorded and compiled them during the

prime years of the Roman Empire's occupation of much of the Middle East, Northern Africa and parts of Europe. This was not a capitalistic lifestyle, but rather more feudal in nature. Within the citizenry were the Patricians and working class Plebians and among the countries now made into provinces were the citizens, the non-citizens and the slaves. And even among these there were different classes.

Among the audience hearing this parable would have been all three – citizens, non-citizens and slaves – and all would have heard their own story in the words Jesus spoke. Knowing this too changes the way we look at the parable.

So, let's look at the characters.

First, *The Master/ the rich man*. He was likely a citizen of Rome – likely the sponsor/ owner of a large trading business. He would not be the day-to-day dealer of the duties – but would have stewards manage the books for each of the arms of his trading empire. It becomes easy to blame the steward and side with the master when we look at this from a capitalistic framework. But the steward of our parable today is just managing a portion of one of the branches in the master's small empire.

*The Steward/Manager*. We don't know whether the steward was a citizen of the Roman Empire – but we do know that he did not want to lose his job because he was afraid of what would happen to him and his family. In verse 3 the steward says, “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” Ditch digging was not an easy job for the strongest of people – and having been trained a steward and not focusing on his physical strength would mean that he wouldn't be able to keep up with those who had been digging ditches for a while – and would be likely be flogged, removed from the team and force to beg. Even those who were not too proud to beg did not thrive and many died too early. The steward knew that if he did not do something really radical, he and his family would likely be separated and die.

*The Indebted* were likely the small merchants who owed money to the master. NT Wright writes “Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many got around this by lending in kind, with oil and wheat being easy commodities.”<sup>1</sup> The merchants who were indebted to the master were owed by the farmers who were, in turn, owed by the slaves. Or, we could say this differently: Each hand kept a

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N. T. *New Testament for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Pr, Lexington, KY, 2001, p. 193.

portion of the product for themselves as a “tax” for their service. The servant was indebted to the farmer who was indebted to the merchant who was indebted to the master. This was usury – A sin, according to the Law of Yahweh (Exodus 22) yet a common practice at the time.

So now we know more of the characters and the setting. Of course, the Pharisees would have knowledge of how all this worked – but even more so, it would be known to the rabble who were leaning in from the windows and the doors listening to Jesus tell stories of the lost being found.

And knowing all this now of social class and citizenry and even the way money was exchanged helps us to make more sense of this parable.

If we were to sum the parable, we could say that the master heard a rumor about the steward’s mismanagement of the master’s affairs. The rumor likely came up the ranks from those near the lower levels of the class system – the farmers or even the farmer’s slaves. When the lower class were unhappy, they could rise up and rebel – but before rebellion there was muttering and rumors of discontent. Whether or not the rumors about the steward’s mismanagement was true, was not the issue...The issue was that people were not happy.

So, the master called the steward and said, “I’m going to fire you, please show me the books.”

The steward thought to himself, “Oh no! Who said these things about me? I must figure out something quickly because I need this job – I can’t be fired! The only other jobs available are ditch digging and begging and...Uh, I can’t even think of how that would be.”

So, the steward quickly determined to cut out his master’s portion of the interest. He knew that the master would still get what he was owed. So he does just that – he called in his merchants and set the price lower. The merchants went out and spread the good news to the producers and farmers who, in turn demanded less from their slaves.

The end of the parable is the opposite of the beginning. In the end, everyone was happy. The Master was paid, the steward kept his job, and those who were at the bottom of the lowest step of the ladder got a bit of a break.

Jesus commended the steward because through his shrewd business sense he ingratiated himself, not only to the master – but also to those beneath him.

We remember that Jesus spoke this parable after having told three parables of the lost being found and rejoiced over. He spoke these at a dinner with the Pharisees as well as with the poor and slaves and servants and the indebted children of Israel listening in.

This parable was, perhaps, an even more radical parable than the three before – because every person would have identified with at least one person or group of people in the parable. And every single one of the people in the parable was saved - even the steward and his family.

You see, sitting at table with Jesus were the stewards of the Law of Yahweh, the Pharisees. They were pulling in – holding tightly - the regulations of the Law and finding in the Law reasons to limit the love and the grace and the welcome of God for their sisters and brothers. Thus, in their very upholding of the Master’s “books” the Pharisees were excluding the poor, the slaves, unclean, the lost, the forgotten, the sick, - and anyone who did not meet the *gold standard* of the religious purity. God, the master, heard the cries of the lost and will hold the stewards of the law to account.

To this, then, Christ at the table of the Pharisees said, “see, the steward in the story was far more clever than you when it comes to letting things go.” To his friends, the lost and unclean, Christ said, “See, the Master has heard your cries and is holding the stewards to account.”

This past summer we spent times learning about and studying some of our most precious words of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount. We learned about how God’s kingdom is now and to come, about how God desires us to be in God’s presence – how God loves and blesses the lowly, the grieving, the lost - how we are called to act with integrity, justice, and respect – and to do it, not because we know that’s what God wants us to do – but because we love God.

And since we have resources by which to reach out God’s kingdom to the lost of this world, then, like the clever steward, we need to think about the impact of our decisions and actions and then boldly take risks for the future of God’s kingdom.

If we were to take this parable to heart – what would that look like – knowing what we know of God’s will for our lives?

N.T. Write says, “[The parable] has nothing to do with commending sharp practice in business or personal finance. Rather, it advises us to sit light to the

extra regulations which we impose on one another...which are over and above the gospel itself.<sup>2</sup>”

All of Christ’s followers – the stewards of the Gospel – need to reassess what matters and what doesn’t.

We need to ask, what does God really want from us vs what are we demanding from each other and from the community at large? In other words, how is who we welcome and embrace as a sister and brother in the church different than who Christ welcomes and embraces as a sister and brother?

At the end of the parable, the steward is saved because of his clever moves of reducing the debt by cutting out the interest (the extra little bit). What interest are we holding against our sisters and brothers in the world?

Are you ready to risk God’s grace and love on the sinners and the tax collectors and Pharisees among us? What about the opinionated, the noisy and the wealthy? The broken, the beaten down and the despairing. What about the crude, the mean, and the bullies? What about those people who think they know the truth and we know that they’re wrong (that’s me being facetious...but you know what I mean) Are you ready to open the doors of this church to let the grace and peace and wind of the Gospel of God’s love scour out the dust and cobwebs as it pours through?

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, 195.