

The Good News of Bad Management

Luke 16:1-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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September 22, 2019/ 15th Sunday after Pentecost

I want to begin this morning with a story about a conversation with my daughter. You might be tempted to think that once my kids hit the age of eighteen, they would transition *out* of the category of “potential sermon fodder.” You would, alas, think wrong.

Anyway, on Tuesday morning, in between requests to send pictures of her puppy and informing me that she needed money, Claire sent me a text message.

Dad. Can you answer this question?

Is there power in prayer simply beyond relational?

Whew. That’s a massive question. Where do you even begin on a question that touches on human freedom, divine providence, the extent of God’s knowledge, the problem of evil and suffering?

Well, I did what a good pastor-dad would do and sent a few essay-length texts back to Claire. I gestured toward the fact that it’s tough to understand the mechanics of prayer. How does it actually work? We’re not really sure.

I acknowledged that it was tough to measure how “effective” prayer is. I recognized that there are hard questions on every side: Is God reactive? Does God need prayer? How can God “listen” to so many different prayers at once?

I talked about how prayer is at least as much about changing *us* as changing *God*—that prayer is one of the ways in which we participate in God’s conforming us into the image of Christ, that prayer is about strengthening our spiritual muscles, to equip us to be people of faith, hope, and love, even in the midst of suffering and sorrow.

I took a deep breath after sending the last of my text-message essays, hoping that they would resonate with my dear daughter, that they might at least make some sense of a vital but sometimes confusing Christian practice. And I waited.

Eventually, I saw those three little dots that let you know that someone is responding to your text... Would she have an armload more questions? Would she be confused? Would she think I was being evasive?

Before I could agonize much further, her response came through.

Ok.
That answered everything.
Yay

I may have laughed out loud.

I'm not naïve. I don't think that I *actually* answered every question about prayer that Claire has or will have down the road. I think Claire will come to see this the longer she lives and prays and walks with Jesus. And she was probably just firing off a quick text before rushing off to class.

(But it still felt kinda nice to see her response 😊)

Why do I tell this story? Well, I think many people think of the Bible in roughly the same way as Claire's hasty response portrayed her pastor-dad.

I have a question, so I'll just consult the bible and get quick answer to everything. Yay!

As Christians, we bring all kinds of expectations to the Bible, not least on Sunday morning.

We know the drill. Each week, we hear one or two passages of Scripture read during worship. Then I or someone else will get up and explain what's going on in the text, make some connection between the text and our world, and then hopefully end with a few nuggets of application that we can take out into our daily lives.

And even if we acknowledge that things are more complicated than that, and that there are tricky bits in the Bible, as Mennonites we tend to take refuge in the gospels.

Yes, there are parts of the Old Testament and maybe Paul's letters and certainly Revelation that aren't the easiest to figure out, but it's all about Jesus in the end, right? So, we just go to the gospels, read about the teachings of Jesus and then go do that, right?

But even the stories of Jesus are not nearly so well-behaved, as we've heard this morning. Perhaps you were scratching your head during this morning's gospel reading. If you weren't, you should have been!

I can assure you that I was scratching my head on Tuesday morning when I began to prepare my sermon. And on Wednesday and Thursday and Friday. And on Saturday, when I was writing and editing in the back seat of the car while Paul drove back from Didsbury for MCA meetings. And when I deleted and added and edited three more sections over toast and coffee this morning.

I was comforted by the fact that every commentator I read on this passage seemed to find it equally difficult. Most claimed that it was the most difficult of any of Jesus' parables to interpret. One had this to say:

Luke 16:1-13 is one of the great exegetical mountains of Scripture. This bewildering parable and the positive use Jesus makes of its shifty protagonist may never be satisfactorily solved until faith is made sight.¹

Yes, that sounds about right. Until faith is made sight.

When it comes to the Bible, sometimes there are no easy answers, no obvious and applicable interpretations. Sometimes, the point of a passage of Scripture, whether in private reading or in corporate worship, is to wrestle and struggle with it and even leave feeling a bit frustrated.

So, I'm going to warn you now that I'm not going to give you the definitive interpretation of this parable and three application points for next week. I'll offer some options, but you may not be fully satisfied in the end. I'm not.

My hope is that we will continue to wrestle with this parable and other passages of Scripture that puzzle, confound, or irritate us. This wrestling, like prayer, is an important expression of faith.

¹ Charles B. Cousar, "Exegetical Perspective on Luke 16:1-13," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vo. 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 97.

So, Jesus tells a story about a rich guy who finds out that his manager has been mismanaging or squandering his resources. He summons said manager to inform that his services will no longer be required.

The manager, realizing that he's too soft for manual labour and too proud to beg, cooks up a plan to save his skin. He summons his master's debtors and begins to knock a bit off their bill. He's trying to make a few friends for when he's out of work—which, by the sounds of it, won't be too far into his future!

We would expect the master to be furious. His self-serving actions are affecting the bottom line, after all. But he's not. He even commends the manager for his shrewd behaviour.

This is followed by Jesus making some strange comments, including when he encourages his listeners to emulate the manager and "make friends by means of dishonest wealth." What's going on here?

We'll start with the parable itself before moving on to what Jesus says about it.

There are a few things to note about the first century world of Judaism. First, faithful Jews were prohibited by the Torah from charging interest (Deut. 23:19-20). So, many people would "creatively" get around this prohibition by burying anticipated interest revenues in the original price.

Most people knew this very well. It was just an accepted part of doing business, even if people agreed to it grudgingly.

It's possible that that manager reduced the debts in each case by the amount that people would have understood was the "buried interest" charge. It's also possible that he would have even been forfeiting whatever commission he would have been entitled to in the process. Desperate times call for desperate measures!

By doing so, he would have made friends of his master's debtors (who doesn't like their bill being reduced!) *and* put his master in an awkward position.

If the rich man condemned his manager and restored the original debt, people could surely point to the Jewish law which prohibited usury. The rich man knew that his manager sort of occupied the moral high ground, even if it was all kind of fuzzy and implicit.

This makes sense to me. The manager had taken a seemingly impossible predicament and maneuvered his way into something like the moral high ground with both the rich man and his debtors.

The rich man could only tip his cap at his manager's resourcefulness (and probably wonder where that resourcefulness was while he was mismanaging his property!).

But then there's the issue of how on earth Jesus can commend this guy!

Jesus, who teaches about honesty and transparency and fairness—how can he make a positive example of a guy who secured favour by dishonest means (presumably, the manager didn't tell his master that he was going to cook the books)? How can he hold this guy up as an example to his listeners?

The first place we must always start is context. Who is Jesus talking to? Why? What has he said leading up to this passage?

For that answer, we have to rewind one chapter to the beginning of Luke 15 (if you have your bibles or an app on your phone, please feel free to follow a long). Luke 15:1 says,

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So, Jesus is defending himself from the charge that he's not playing by the religious rules. He's hanging out with sinners and thieving tax-collectors. He's even breaking bread with them!

This is not how things are supposed to work.

What follows in Luke's gospel might be many people's favourite chapter in the bible—the stories we heard last week about the lost sheep and the lost coin and the famous parable of the lost son.

That's Jesus' *first* response to the charge that he's keeping the wrong company. He talks about how his heavenly Father is always seeking out the lost and that he will search them out wherever they are.

That's why Jesus hangs out with sinners. To lead them home.

But immediately after the story of the lost son, we go from the *most* preach-able of Jesus' stories to the least—this bewildering story about the dishonest manager. There's no break in Jesus' commentary here, even though in our bibles it's a new chapter.

And even though Jesus shifts to specifically address the disciples in this parable, we know that two other groups of people are still within earshot: "the sinners" and "the Pharisees and religious leaders."

This is evident because immediately after our story this morning, we read:

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus (Luke 16:15).

So the entire section, beginning with the Pharisees questioning the company Jesus keeps and ending with the same Pharisees sneering at Jesus, is Jesus' response to religious people grumbling about the sinful company he keeps.

Jesus is, in a sense, defending himself for hanging out with the wrong crowd, that he is, in a sense, acting like a "bad manager" of his Heavenly Father's resources.

Perhaps, Jesus is saying that he's actually being a more faithful manager of God's "wealth" than the religious leaders who obsess about the law and keeping themselves pure (and, enjoying the status and wealth that came along with their position).

Perhaps he's saying that sometimes "bad management" is good news for those who need it the most.

If we keep this in mind, this parable becomes not some kind of detached teaching on situational ethics, but Jesus trying to teach religious elites in a very specific situation who are obsessed with rule keeping that *desperate times call for desperate measures*.

God doesn't care so much about religious people keeping themselves uncontaminated from the nasty mixed up world; he cares about finding what is lost and leading wanderers home.

God is less interested in squeaky clean moralists who care only about people keeping the letter of the law (even as they fudge it to get around the rules, as many were doing), than with those who recognize that the situation is dire (as the manager did) and who set to work to creatively engage the complexity of reality.

On this interpretation, Jesus is saying to Israel—the people who were called to be stewards of their Heavenly Father’s resources— why don’t you act more like the dishonest manager in his own parable?

Why can’t you, as children of light, be as shrewd at recognizing the times and what it means to act faithfully in them?

Perhaps this is one way we can make some sense of this parable.

But as I said before this is a very poorly behaved passage. Much as we might like to tie it up in a neat bow and walk out the door thinking we’ve figure it out, it simply resists us.

The passage ends with a strange section that talks about how if we can’t be faithful even with what we’ve secured with dishonest wealth, how can we be trusted with true riches? This is followed by more familiar words:

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.

So, Jesus has taken us on a journey that involves commending a shifty character for manipulating a corrupt system to save his own skin and ingratiate himself to his master’s debtors, to examining the role of what it means to be a faithful steward in difficult times, to ending with a demanding call to resist the lure of idolizing money over God.

It’s enough to make our heads spin. Mine, at any rate!

I take comfort in the way this passage ends (at least in the NIV translation. The NRSV, which the lectionary uses, puts a section break in the wrong place, in my view!).

It ends with Jesus saying to the Pharisees (who, remember, were sneering at him after this story):

He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, **but God knows your hearts**. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.

Maybe this is the best place to end with a difficult story.

God knows our hearts.

God knows when we are pursuing the right things for the right reasons and when we’re not.

God knows when we are doing our best in this mixed up world where good intentions sometimes lead to bad outcomes and bad intentions lead to good outcomes.

God knows when we’re genuinely trying to make the best of a less-than-ideal situation.

God knows when our actions are motivated by love of God and neighbour and when we’re just being purely selfish.

God knows when we’re too easily settling for easy answers and when we need to keep wrestling.

God knows when we are honestly pursuing truth and when we’re just seeking to justify ourselves in the eyes of others.

God knows when our values are aligned with the kingdom and when we are chasing after things that have no eternal value.

God knows all of this and more.

It can be a scary thing to be known like this, for our motives are rarely pure. But the one who knows us is also the one who loves us, who guides us when we come to him with honesty and humility, and who forgives us when we ask.

There is good news even in a bewildering story about bad management. Thanks be to God. Amen.

