

**THEME: 'Serving the Master'**

The parable of the Unjust Steward, or perhaps of the Incompetent and Wasteful Manager, is perhaps the most difficult of all the parables of Jesus. It spooks most interpreters, and challenges most Biblical commentators.

**Here are some of the attempts to deal with this parable:**

1. The point of the parable is not the servant's dishonesty, but his wise decision-making in the time of crisis.
2. The servant is a man of the world, who works and thinks with diligence to protect his interest. What if all people would have the same commitment to the kingdom as they do towards their work or hobbies?
3. The parable may be an irony. The idea that the master would commend this servant for such unjust behavior is so absurd that no one would believe it. It's a story about a cheater who expects to be commended for his dishonest actions. Understood this way, perhaps Jesus is attacking the Sadducees or Pharisees.
4. There are suggestions that the steward was acting within his legal rights in reducing the debts as he did. Wealthy landowners would sublet their land to men like this steward. The steward would let out the work to other workers. Sometimes the steward would loan the workers money and charge an exorbitant interest. So, in the parable, the steward is canceling his high interest on the note given to the workers. This becomes a parable against excessive profits.
5. The parable can be about the right and wrong use of money. If the steward or the master were charging a high rate of interest, money may have been the most important thing in their lives. Jesus says to make friends with your money -- use it rightly. Use it for human services.

6. By reducing their loan agreements so generously, the manager has done these debtors a significant favor; because he is still this wealthy man's manager, moreover, his agreements with these debtors are binding. In this way, the manager has entered into his own patronal relationship with his master's debtors, apparently themselves also persons of means. He has become their benefactor and, in return, can expect them to reciprocate by extending to him the hospitality of their homes.

The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35) bears some similarities; the master forgives a servant his debt, but sadly the forgiven servant does not forgive the debt owed by his fellow servant.

The point of this parable is that grace works only on those it finds dead enough to raise.

None of the six alternative explanations I have given do justice to this parable or indeed make much sense of it. So:

**I beg your patience and indulgence as I quote some words by the late Episcopal priest and author , Robert Farrar Capon:**

'The same point is made in this parable of the unjust manager, but by a reversal of the story's device; forgiveness in this parable starts from the bottom up. Here the master is unwilling to die to any of his bookkeeping: he will not die to the manager's speculations, and he will not die to the accounts past due that he has not succeeded in collecting.

The manager, however, does die; and because he is freed by his death to think things he could not have thought before, he is the one who, from the bottom of the heap as it were, becomes the agent of life for everyone in this parable.

He becomes life from the dead for his lord, because somehow the sight of a loser like this bringing off a coup in the midst of the losses suddenly loosens the old boy up.

Somehow, between verse 2: (What's this? You're fired!) and verse 8: (My dear boy! You're a genius! I never thought I'd ever see a dollar from those accounts!),

the master of the manager has turned from an unforgiving bookkeeper to happy-go-lucky celebrator of any income that comes along.

But the manager is also able to be the resurrection of his lord's debtors because they wouldn't consent to deal with anyone but a crook like themselves: they would never have gone near him if they hadn't been convinced that he was dead to all the laws of respectable bookkeeping.

As far as I am concerned, therefore, the unjust manager is nothing less than the Christ figure in this parable, a dead ringer for Jesus himself.

First of all, he dies and rises, like Jesus.

Second, by his death and resurrection, he raises others, like Jesus.

But third, and most important of all, the unjust manager is the Christ-figure because he is a crook, like Jesus.

The unique contribution of this parable to our understanding of Jesus is its insistence that grace cannot come to the world through respectability. Respectability regards only life, success, winning; it will have no truck with the grace that works by death and losing - **which is the only kind of grace there is.**

This parable, therefore, says in story form what Jesus himself said by his life. He was not respectable.

He broke the Sabbath.

He consorted with crooks.

And he died as a criminal.

Now at last, in the light of this parable, we see why he refused to be respectable: he did it to catch a world that respectability could only terrify and condemn.

He became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us losers, and dead for us dead.

Jesus is the only mediator and advocate the likes of us will ever be able to trust, because like the unjust manager, he is no less a loser than we are – and like the manager, he is the only one who has even a chance of getting the Lord God to give us a kind word.'

Verse 8a 'And the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.'

*Mark 9:7 This is my beloved Son, hear him!*

Verse 8b For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

*<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

*<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

**The THEME: 'Serving the Master',** really becomes; Being served – and redeemed - by the master, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

Thank God for that!

Lucky for us, we don't have to deal with a JUST manager; because then we'd be sunk! Amen.

*Pastor Malcolm Pech*