

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for September 21  
Luke 16:1-13

**Don't Be a Scrooge**

May only truth be spoken and truth received. Amen.

The Gospel reading today is kind of an oddball passage. We are no stranger to Jesus' parables, but this one seems to be a tricky one to decipher. And I'm not alone in this thought. Scouring the commentaries and blogs while researching what I was going to preach on this week, everyone seems to be befuddled by this particular parable. So, if you're also puzzled as to what today's lesson might be, know that you are in good company!

The story starts with a rich man and his manager. It is likely that the rich man lived far away, and it was up to this manager to run the business. Rumours were circling that this manager was cheating his boss out of his money. Word got back to the rich man, and he confronts his manager with the charges. The man's silence becomes an admission of guilt. Instead of having him thrown into jail, which is what anyone else at that time would have done, the rich man fires him and demands an audit of the books. The rich man appears to be unusually merciful.

Having been discovered in his deception, the manager immediately starts to think about how to get out of this bind. He is not strong enough for manual labour and is too proud to beg for money. He also knows that he could not expect to enter such a responsible position with another employer since everyone will have heard about his betrayal of his current employer.

The manager considers that his most promising course is to place others in his debt by granting them favors while he can still exercise authority. He figured that when he is out of a job, they would owe him something. Quickly calling up those who owe the rich man money, he hastily asks each one what they owe. These people he calls on are land renters, whose payment is a portion of their crops. The manager gives each one of the debtors the bill and tells them to change the amount owing – from 100 measures of oil to 50, and 100 measures of wheat to 80.

There is good reason for the manager's haste. If he were to wait until the news of his dismissal spread, then the debtors could not alter their debts. In that event, they would be implicated in the deception and would not have an opportunity to gain the use of the land again. But the wily manager quickly makes arrangements before the debtors know; therefore, they act in good faith and have no way of knowing that the manager no longer has authority to adjust the rent amounts.

It takes little imagination to understand the kind of hero that this scoundrel would appear to be to the townspeople. In all likelihood he assured them that he had talked the rich man into this generous act. Even when they found out that the manager was fired from his job, they likely would have admired him for tricking the wealthy landowner without implicating them. He might be a tricky scoundrel, but he has cleverly made sure he will have some "IOU's" when he no longer had a job.

Once word of the reduced rent got back to the rich man, what could he do? The rich man was already becoming a popular figure. His tenants were praising him as a generous and understanding man. He could have gone to those who have had their rents reduced and explain that it was all a big mistake. But that would have cancelled out the good will that had been heaped upon him. Instead, he recognized that he had been outmaneuvered and worked to solidify a reputation for being generous and understanding.

The praise the rich man makes for his dishonest manager, as heard in verse 8, was not out of satisfaction with the result of his trickery, but out of begrudging recognition of his cleverness in self-preservation. His manager may have been a scoundrel, but he was indeed clever.

And there you have it. The parable of the dishonest manager. The question remains, what lesson can we pull from today's story? Jesus ends this parable by saying, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, your co-conspirators may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Did we just hear Jesus say that dishonest wealth is great and honor among thieves is a virtue? It sure sounds like Jesus is praising the dishonest manager, but perhaps he's doing a bit sarcastically. Hard to tell without hearing his tone. But yes, Jesus says that this guy is smart. Now imagine what he could do with his smarts if he were honest and generous!

He's been cheating his boss (almost certainly by overcharging customers and keeping the extra for himself). Now he calls in the ones he's cheated and offers to cut what they owe. Perhaps now he's actually charging them what should have been the original price. Maybe he keeps his job; maybe the boss is happy; maybe the customer is happy. What's wrong with this? He is still dishonest! It doesn't seem that he's sorry for what he's done, he is just relieved he was able to save his own skin, but there is no change of heart.

Thinking on this dishonest and shrewd manager, I'm sure there's at least one character we are reminded of...Ebenezer Scrooge! A wealthy businessman who cared about nothing except for money. He wouldn't give even one cent to charity and what did all that wealth get him? Loneliness and a ghost story. Can you think of other characters, or other humans in our lives who remind you of our dishonest and shrewd manager?

The bottom line is that you cannot serve both God and wealth. If all we care about is getting wealthier, our relationships grow less important. We don't care about the customer, just the customer's money. We'll give up time with family and friends to focus on what we think is more important at that moment. We don't hang with our kids because we think we're trying to make a better life for them.

If all we care about is getting wealthier, our bodies will suffer. We'll be more stressed, less healthy, we'll play less and sleep less and eat things that aren't as good for us. Because time is money, and you don't get rich by taking walks and riding your bike, or by growing a garden and making a nice salad.

If all we care about is getting wealthier, our spiritual lives shrivel. We can't love God and money. But it's hard to figure out the balance. We need to pay the rent, buy shoes and school supplies for the kids, save up for college funds, and make sure we'll someday be able to retire without burdening those kids. Jesus doesn't say it'll be easy to do, finding this balance. It will likely take a lifetime for most of us. But it's worth the work of balancing. It's worth the spiritual act of seeking money's proper place in our lives and souls. Our relationships, our bodies, and our spirits will suffer if we don't.

Jesus' parable invites us to reflect on our relationship with money and how it shapes our character. There is nothing inherently wrong with money, but money should never overshadow our values or faith. There is nothing inherently wrong with having wealth, but God calls us to steward our resources faithfully, letting go of the desire to hold on to wealth and, instead, centering our lives on generosity and compassion. This week, consider how you can reflect Christ's values, making choices that honor God above worldly wealth.

Amen