

WPC  
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Dirty Rotten Scoundrel  
Luke 16:1-15

[READ COTTON PATCH VERSION OF PASSAGE]

Normally at this time of year, I like to start a new sermon series and preach through a book of the Bible. But since I'm hoping to finish my dissertation for my Doctor of Ministry degree by next summer, and since the three preachers I'm writing on are all lectionary preachers, I've decided that I will mostly preach from the lectionary this year.

The Revised Common Lectionary is used by many different denominations. It's a three year cycle of readings in the Bible. So in other words, instead of me choosing the text to preach on each week, the texts for each week have already been chosen for me. Naturally this first week's text is a real doozy. (Great time to start using the lectionary, Ken!)

Although Jesus never gives a title to this parable, it's become known as the Parable of the Unjust Steward or the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. It's one of the most perplexing, challenging, outlandish, even offensive, of the parables of Jesus. A rich man's steward (or manager of his household) is charged with *squandering* his master's property. This is the

same Greek word used in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the previous chapter, where the son went into a distant country and *squandered* his property in dissolute living.

Here the rich man summons his steward and confronts him with this charge. Facing an audit which will expose him and which will result in his losing his job, and realizing his limitations (he's not strong enough to dig and he's too ashamed to beg), he comes up with a plan. The guy calls in his master's debtors telling them, "Here, I'll cut your debts to my boss, just to show you what a nice person I am," thinking, "When I'm fired for my dishonesty, these people, for whom I've written off huge debts (at the expense of my boss) will help me out so that I won't be stuck on the streets."

And here's the shocker: when the master finds out what this manager did, he commends him for his shrewdness! He basically tells him, "Great work, you little crook; I wish everyone in my company showed as much initiative and creativity as you." What in the world? How can this be?

To muddle things even further, v. 9 says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

The same word is used in verses 9, 11, and 13 that's translated "dishonest wealth or wealth." Notice that there's a footnote in those verses,

footnote *o*: Greek *mammon* (KJV uses this word). The Greek lectionary translates the word as wealth or property, but scholars note that the word always carries a “derogatory sense of the materialistic, anti-godly and sinful,” and in our passage it means “possessions acquired dishonestly” (Kittel, p. 389-90). So it’s a bit baffling, because while v. 13 says “you cannot serve God and mammon,” v. 9 says to use mammon to gain an advantage.

Let’s take a closer look at this parable. First, I guess it’s no wonder that many readers are offended by it. After all, a rascal, a crook, a dirty rotten scoundrel is commended. Anthony Robinson notes, “The story of the unjust steward relativizes the importance not only of money but even of our claims to virtue. A rascal is commended. Does this mean we are to be unjust or to lie? [No]. But it does mean that we are not justified by wealth, propriety or respectability. We are saved by grace and grace alone. The parable offends us because a bad actor is commended. But our offense, and that of the Pharisees, reveals where our trust truly lies, in our alleged virtue, our right handling of money, our claim that we deserve what we have” (Anthony Robinson, Weekly Reading, Sept. 13, 2010).

As Fred Craddock says, “everyone is a mixed bag of the commendable and the less commendable” (Craddock, Luke Interpretation

commentary, 191). The good news is that we have an outrageous savior who knows how sinful we are and still loves us. As Martin Luther said, “When we were right, God laughed at our righteousness.” The great gospel truth is that Jesus Christ came to save *sinner*s.

A second thing we should notice is that the master is NOT saying that it’s o.k. to steal or to love money so much that you would devise various clever and even devious ways to have monetary success. That’s clear from the fact that the manager is about to lose his job because he’s been stealing from his master, and because v. 13 is so unambiguous: “you cannot serve God and mammon (dishonest wealth).” Jesus did not commend the manager’s original dishonesty. “For all the dangers in possessions, it is possible to manage goods in ways appropriate to life in the kingdom of God” (Craddock, p. 191).

But if Jesus does not commend the manager’s original dishonesty, then why does he commend his shrewdness in dishonestly using the master’s resources to get himself out of his mess? I believe the key to understanding this is to realize that the debtors didn’t realize the manager had, in essence, been fired, and thought the reductions of how much they owed were legitimate. Who then would they have praised for their good fortune? The rich master, who in turn commended the steward.

Let me share with you a story told by Bruce Van Blair, who used to be pastor at Mercer Island United Church of Christ: An enormously rich man has a large estate on the outskirts of town. Contact between the rich man and the people is mostly indirect. In such a village or town, everything is actually dependent on the rich man's capital. He owns most everything, and everything else exists because of his enterprises. He has a steward set over his affairs who is supposed to be the liaison between him and the villagers. This steward is given complete charge of handling all the rich man's affairs in the town and with the folk who live there. He represents the rich man in an absolute way. That is, the people who live in and around this town know the rich man only through his steward.

The steward is wasting (squandering) the rich man's possessions. That is, he is using his position and power to feather his own nest. Word has finally seeped back up the hill to the rich man that the steward is not trustworthy, that the steward is keeping some of the profits for himself. The evidence is apparently quite certain. There is no doubt in the parable that the charge is true, that the steward is [dishonest and deceitful].

It is now imperative that *we* identify with the steward. God has given us gifts, mercy, love, forgiveness, guidance. God has appointed us to be stewards. We have kept the Message to ourselves, tried to get privilege,

wealth, and positions of control by means of the abilities and trust and favors that God has bestowed upon us. Only now the jig is up – we are being called to account, and we know what the account will show (between what God has asked us to do – how God has asked us to live – and what we have been doing.)

So I'm the steward walking up the road to the rich man's house. I always feel a little anticipation and nervousness, knowing how my stewardship matches what I am supposed to be doing. But so far it's nothing unusual. Then I get into the presence, and the rich man says, "You scoundrel! I trusted you, gave you this position, made you everything you are. And this is your thanks? Go get the accounts and we'll go over them. You are through!"

I have always dreaded it, suspected it, but hoped against hope that it wouldn't happen. But now it has all come to light. It is total disaster. My reputation is ruined. I am too old to start over. How can I face my friends? What will happen to my wife, and kids? What will become of me? These thoughts are streaming and screaming through my head as I go back down the road to get the books. It's over, and there's no help for it. There's no way out. There's no recourse. What can I do? My God...oops, that won't help this time – that's the rich man. What can I do? What can I do?

In total desperation, I hit upon a plan that will never work, but any hope is better than none. If I do all the townspeople some big favors, maybe they will remember, and take me in for a while when I am ruined. (This will never work because as soon as the powerful are brought down, no gratitude remains. But it is the only hope left.) Now I look for the only thin thread of resource I have left. And what I have, my only advantage, is a very small amount of time. I am still steward; the townfolk do not yet know that I have been found out and let go. Once I am no longer steward, I am nothing. The only thing I have going for me is the time it will take the rich man to figure out I'm not coming back, and the time it will take him to come into town himself and see to things.

And now, half running on the way to my office, I start calling to every person I meet, "Hey, meet me at my office right away! I have something important to tell you. And tell Jake and Bill and Susan to meet me there too. Hurry!" (I am the rich man's steward – of course they will do anything I say!)

Back at my office I get out the books. Very soon people start to arrive. I bring them in one at a time, but as quickly as possible. And I say, "You know, Bill, I was talking to the rich man about you. I was telling him how hard you work, what a good man you've been all these years. And I

told him about your wife being sick lately, and what a struggle you're having. Well, he said it was fine if we gave you a bit of a break this year. So this debt of one hundred measures of oil that you owe – here, so you will know for sure, *you* write in fifty!”

Imagine Bill's stunned surprise, and then his reaction. When he gets outside, and the shock starts to wear off, how is he going to feel? And how is he going to feel about the steward? And about the rich man? Meanwhile the steward is doing this with person after person, just as fast as he can.

Eventually the rich man figures out that something is afoot. The steward should have been back by now. So he heads into town. And what does he find? Well, there is an excited gathering around the steward's office – and by this time the whole town has turned out – and the entire township is in *wild* celebration. (Christmas at Disneyland pales by comparison.) When the rich man now appears, guess who is the most popular, the most wonderful, the most beautiful, highest, dearest, greatest hero in the entire universe? The people thank him over and over, with tears and laughter and genuine amazement. And remember, the rich man (who represents God) has always wanted the affection and good will of the townspeople. But they were always afraid of him before and, thinking him aloof and scary, they kept aloof and avoided him. So he is starting to be pretty pleased. In fact,

this is precisely what he has always wanted. And is the rich man now going to tell the townspeople, “Hey, this was all a big mistake?” Not likely!

Remember that this rich man is *enormously* rich. And he is enormously generous. In fact, he has always been generous to a fault, only nobody would ever believe it, or get up enough confidence to truly ask for very much. In short, the steward cannot bankrupt him, or ever begin to make him worry about such a thing.

So when the excitement and the party has finally died down – the steward and the rich man are finally alone again – the rich man says, “You wretched blighter, you finally got so desperate that you did something right! You are a self-centered, thieving, conniving rat. But congratulations. By complete accident you stumbled onto the only secret that could save you. I really love these people and I am enormously generous. Looking out for your own survival, under this kind of pressure, you got unprincipled enough to trip and fall into my true principles. You finally started using my resources to benefit the people – willy-nilly – without asking or caring who deserves it, or who you like; without having time to really consider or control what the return will be for you. Naturally I am not going to get rid of you now. The townsfolk would never understand. But I’m on to you, and you don’t have any more chances. You keep the books straight. And you

keep treating the people according to what you learned today, or you're going to be a lot worse than fired!" (Bruce Van Blair, *The Believer's Road*, p. 170-174)

Aren't we all stewards? Whose money and property is it anyway? What are we supposed to be doing with it? How much time do we have? Isn't that what Jesus has always been trying to tell us? Amen.