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# What the Dishonest Steward Teaches Us About Grace

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A Sermon By  
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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-09-18-AAA.mp3>.

The Rev. Amanda A. Akes  
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The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
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Amos 8:4-7  
Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

Of the parables attributed to Jesus, this one, commonly known as, “the parable of the Dishonest Steward,” is widely held to be among the most difficult to understand. Some of the difficulty arises because of uncertainty about the financial and contractual relationships involved between the characters in the story. But for most listeners the story is troubling because it appears to condone dishonesty. The story is unsettling. It takes unexpected turns. So, if you were at all a bit confused by what was just read in the center aisle, you are not alone. This text has challenged readers, scholars, preachers, and commentators for centuries.

But the parabolic challenge is the point. There is an old saying that if you must explain a story, its point has been lost. Jesus, the great storyteller, did not usually interpret the stories he told. He would upon occasion assist his listeners in fleshing out the meanings of certain stories, however, more often than not; Jesus used stories to help people learn to think for themselves. He used parables to encourage people to use their heads and hearts to form their own interpretation about God’s character and the nature of God’s Reign. We’ll take a stab at it today. But before interpreting this parable, it may be helpful to review just exactly what was happening in the story.

The story centers on two figures – a rich man and his steward or manager. The rich man entrusted the day-to-day oversight of his property to a manager who acted as his agent for business transactions. The rich man learned that this man had been “squandering his property.” We don’t know exactly what the squandering entailed, but it’s clear that the manager somehow acted carelessly with the rich man’s property. The rich man confronted the manager, asked him for an accounting, and then not surprisingly, the rich man dismissed the manager.

We don’t read that the manager disputes the charges nor does he plea to keep his job. Instead, we enter his inner thoughts as he ponders the threat of unemployment. He’s not physically suited for labor and doesn’t want the social stigma of being a beggar. He decides to take action so he won’t become a social and economic outcast. He reaches out to his master’s debtors and reduces the amount they owe.

The debtors are both relieved to have some of their debt forgiven and bound to the manager because of his leniency toward them. According to custom, they will have to show him generosity in return for the generosity he showed them. The manager has put himself in a good position for when he is laid off. He now has people indebted to him.

At this moment, we begin to lean forward, wondering what will happen to the self-centered manager out to save his own skin, and indeed what happens next is surprising. The rich man commends his manager for acting so shrewdly! He’s not taken to task, he’s praised! The manager’s actions have not only restored his credibility with his master, the reduced debts have made his master look generous and benevolent, while also placing the manager in a good position

with the people. In the end, the manager's actions benefit not only himself, but also his master and his master's debtors.

The way in which these benefits come about though, tests the limits of moral code. The guy did it to save himself! Yes, he did good for others, but that was only a byproduct. He did good to others so that when he lost his job, they would remember his kindness and repay him in kind. Be this as it may, there's something important that this manager of questionable ethics understood that it seems like Jesus' audience struggled to grasp: dishonest or not, this man understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger goal. Believers take note, Jesus seems to say. If those who are dishonest can use what is entrusted to them for a greater purpose, how much more, then, must the children of light, a.k.a the disciples, be responsible with the riches entrusted to their care?

Basically Jesus is telling the disciples, "You are entrusted with the Kingdom of God. I want you to be smart in the same way this manager was — but for what is right." Jesus uses the parable of the dishonest steward to instruct his listeners about how to act with what is entrusted to them. They must employ the same shrewdness, wisdom, and prudence as the manager in their service to God.

To do this, Jesus warns, choices have to be made and loyalties will be tested. This is not an easy message to hear or comprehend. Our pericope ends with an even more challenging message, "You cannot serve God and wealth." This does not mean money is bad, nor is the possession of material goods, however Jesus wants his listeners to recognize that the economy of God is different from the economy of this world. They are two rival systems with two rival gods. Money in and of itself is not evil, but it can take on a deity like existence that demands loyalty. This loyalty can become all consuming — we become bound by our debt or beholden to making more and more until we reach the ever-elusive feeling of having "enough."

I think Jesus was trying to remind his listeners that they already have "enough." God alone is enough. Jesus' message and ministry pointed to a God of abundance who wishes abundant life for the people of God. We're reminded of this in the parable of the dishonest steward. The fact that the manager in many ways did not really deserve to be commended makes the point. The God of abundance showers grace on us all. God's grace is often surprising. It comes when we least expect it, even to those that seem unredeemable, even to the manager. The manager in our story today reminds us of something that is critical to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is about trusting a generous God who squanders grace on each and every one of us and we in turn are expected to share that grace with others, using wisdom and skill. May we rise to the challenge. Amen.