

“The Dishonest Steward” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Jordan Redding on 18 September 2022.

I

So cards on the table. What I’m about to tell you is probably wrong. And I’m going to tell you anyway. The parable we just heard from Luke’s gospel is incredibly confusing. When I first read it this week, I literally raised my eyebrows and looked at the lectionary passages to see if there was something easier to preach on.

Then I thought better of it and went to look at three separate commentaries on the passage. All of them invariably said that this is one of, if not *the* hardest parable in the Bible. And as if to demonstrate the point, each of the three commentaries went on to offer entirely different interpretations which were quite contradictory to one another!

And it seems even Luke was struggling with it, in the way that it fits very awkwardly. More about this shortly. But the fact it’s so difficult and awkward is probably as good a proof as any that Jesus *actually* said it. Otherwise, why does Luke feel compelled to include it and try to make sense of it? He would just be making a rod for his own back.

All that to say, the chances of me getting it right are pretty slim if even Luke was struggling with it. So that’s my disclosure. Jesus probably said it. And I’m probably understanding it wrong. I’ve chosen to more or less follow the interpretation of Robert Farrar Capon. And if you have other interpretations I’d love to hear them! And at the end of the day, as with much of scripture, we seek to interpret faithfully together with the help of the Spirit and we resign ourselves to the fact that for now we see only in part, like looking in a mirror dimly. This faith into which we wade is a deep mystery. And there comes a point where we need to say we don’t know. And we probably *won’t* know this side of the grave.

II.

So the hardest parable... the proper part of the parable is verses 1-8, which we just heard. It tells of a ruthless landowner – an unlikable chap – who fires his business manager based on an unverified accusation that the manager has been wasting his wealth. In response, the manager decides to cheat his master by writing off a lot of the debts owed to his master in order to make friends and try to secure his own future. He acts shrewdly, dishonestly, and selfishly.

So far, there’s nothing particularly complex about the parable. There’s nothing strange in our world about two men with power acting unfairly and dishonestly for their own benefit!

But then a peculiar turn. The ruthless master finds out that his manager has been cheating him and, what does he do? He *praises* the manager’s dishonesty and shrewdness. The climax of parable is summed up with the explanatory phrase that:

The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are children of the light... therefore make friends for yourself by dishonest means.

Huh? Hardly an enlightened moral vision. And yet it’s pretty hard to get around the fact that the parable seems to genuinely praise the dishonest and shrewd behaviour of the manager.

Now as if this parable alone isn't confusing enough, the passage goes on with a few explanatory verses which simply don't line up at all with the parable and in fact seem to be directly contradictory, condemning the behaviour of the manager and finishing with the well known maxim that no slave can serve two masters: you can't serve both God and money. So now hopefully you see why this is the hardest parable. It's directly contradicting itself.

Now the reason I left these later verses out is because I'm choosing to follow Farrar Capon's interpretation. You can read them if you want in your pew Bible or Bible app. He sees these explanatory verses as a later addition to the parable, possibly by Luke, to try and soften Jesus' original words. And certainly for Luke, God's solidarity with the poor and criticism of the rich is a common theme ... so it is something Luke might do.

But the problem is, it just doesn't fit... either with the parable or with where Luke has placed it in gospel on Jesus' road to Jerusalem and to his death. You might expect Jesus' moral advice about money to come earlier in his ministry when he was teaching and healing around Galilee.

Which is precisely what Matthew does. The maxim that you can't serve both God and money is found right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Instead, Farrar Capon argues it is better to interpret the parable in light of Jesus' impending death. What does he mean by that?

III.

Well, he finds a clue in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most well-known and well-loved parables and it takes place immediately before our parable today about the Dishonest Manager.

Capon argues this is no accident. In fact, we might notice some similarities. Just as the Prodigal Son *wastes* his father's wealth so too the Manager is accused of *wasting* his master's possessions. The same word is used. Both parables begin with prodigality – wastefulness.

And right away the result of the wastefulness is loss and poverty. The prodigal son ends up in squalor, working as a hired hand feeding pigs and begging. For the manager, the master, in one fell-swoop, takes everything away, firing him from his position of privilege. The manager knows that he could end up like the prodigal son begging for a morsel of bread. It's precisely that fear that stirs him to action.

A final connection is that, faced with poverty, both the prodigal son and the manager come up with a plan to save their skins. The prodigal son thinks, *I'll offer to work for my father as a hired hand*. He makes the familial relationship of unconditional love a contractual one.

Meanwhile, the manager decides to cheat his boss. Neither are particularly admirable.

At this point, the parables part ways. But I think there's a reasonably compelling case that the two are related and that the one helps us to interpret the other.

With Jesus' suffering and death just around the corner, there is an invitation to see Christ in the prodigal son. Christ: the one who loses everything, who bears the cost of our wastefulness, who goes into the far country, who enters into our poverty, and takes it all upon himself – so that through him we may be lifted once more into the loving embrace of the weeping Father, so that through we may become reconciled children of God, robed in glory.

I'm reminded of the famous painting of the parable by Rembrandt (*show painting*). There is much to notice about Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. For today, however, I want to point out the shaved head of the prodigal son. Here Rembrandt depicts the son as a convict, a crook, stripped of status and individuality – a reminder of the Christ who was crucified as a lowly criminal between two criminals...

...if it is possible to see Christ in the prodigal son, Farrar Capon asks, is it too much of a stretch of logic to see Christ in the Dishonest Manager as well? It sounds almost blasphemous to think of Christ as a dishonest and shrewd businessman looking out for his own skin.

But perhaps that's exactly the point. Just as Christ becomes the prodigal for us, so too he becomes the shrewd and dishonest crook for us. He enters into our unjust and corrupt systems that perpetuate violence and poverty. The dog-eat-dog world of high-interest debts and gross wealth inequality. A system in which bookkeeping is used to hoard wealth in the hands of a few while the poor are stripped of the little they have. A system where the shrewd and the dishonest are rewarded for taking advantage while the innocent are taken advantage of. And here in this ruthless bookkeeping world in which the numbers are held against your name until the last penny is paid –

– the manager comes along and plays fast and loose with the rules, slashing debts here, writing off deficits there. The manager throws caution to the wind making a mockery of a ruthless economic system based on credit and debt.

And so it is with the death of Christ on the cross, in which we see a God who refuses to play bookkeeper. Who refuses to hold our violence and our sin against us. Who refuses to abide by the rules of our world, keeping a ledger of all the good and bad we've done. The greatest betrayal of the Christian gospel is to turn God into a moralistic God. A bookkeeping God.

On the cross, the account books are shredded. Xero and Thankyou Payroll crash. In love, Christ takes upon himself the debts of the world, wiping the slate clean – like a computer virus, he crashes the system.

The parable of the Dishonest Manager points us to the cross – to the Christ who will die as a lowlife crook, condemned by the world, paying for our violence. And yet the injustice of the cross is precisely the means by which God's love is most fully poured out, disrupting the way things are, forgiving our debts, and opening up a new way of life together.

It strikes me that God's love is not just for children of the light, the ones who live in the light and seek to live God's way. Yes, God loves the children of the light. God loves the religious types and the obedient ones. The older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The Pharisees and the Churchgoers. But in the words of the Father to the older son:

My Son, all I have is yours already! But come celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours – this child of the world – was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

God cares too much about all the children of the world to be satisfied with religious moralistic bookkeeping. As Farrar Capon muses, let us be thankful that Christ is not a meticulous bookkeeper! Let us be thankful that he does not just deal with the children of the light but deals shrewdly and dishonestly with all children for the salvation of the world.

So that's my take. There's more that could be said but, your criticism is welcome as we discern together the Spirit's guidance!

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