



Words matter. We call the parable “the Dishonest Steward” or “The Shrewd Manager” or perhaps “What was Jesus Thinking?” No, really, the words we use to describe and to understand this parable matter in terms of the meaning we take from this passage.

We are used to thinking of Jesus more as divine and less so as human, assuming we think of him as human at all. Some scholars suggest that Jesus was being sarcastic in this parable. Usually we can hear sarcasm when hearing someone speak. It’s often less easy to pick it up in written words. So, was Jesus being sarcastic? I really don’t know. This is one of those Sundays when the temptation is to pick another passage to preach on. But it’s important to struggle with the passages that just don’t seem to make much sense to us. And this can be one for many of us.

It’s also a passage that lends itself to our inserting lots of facts or suppositions into the text in order for it to make some sense to us in today’s world. Or maybe we skip the nuances and skip to a simple tag line: be thoughtful and intentional about what you care most about. Jesus has told us this before: where your treasure is, there your heart is also. If your concern is with wealth, with money, then that’s where your heart is. That’s where your focus is - not on the kingdom of God. Ho hum. We’ve heard that before, so what’s new from this passage?

What seems to be new is that the dishonest steward is found out, loses his job, and how has to acknowledge that he is not strong enough to dig and is too proud to beg. That’s good self awareness and an acknowledgment that the steward needs to do something before he is completely thrown out on the street with nothing. Too bad the manager didn’t have this self-awareness before he cheated customers. Now his wrong actions have consequences that will impact the rest of his life. We shake our heads when we hear of someone formerly we respected or admired or at least knew of as a mover-and-shaker who has a fall from grace over some actions that contradict the position of prestige the person held. Think about all the pastors you’ve read about in the news who misbehaved and as a result no longer serve their church. “What were

they thinking” is usually what goes through my head. “How sad to throw away a life of promise” is another. Actions have consequences and sometimes those consequences are ones that impact the rest of your life.

In the parable, the shrewd steward figures out that one thing he can do that might pay some dividends after he is thrown out as steward is to rewrite usurious contracts to be contracts representing a fair price for the goods bought or sold. The steward presumably (and this is part of the guessing game because the text doesn't explicitly say this) writes off his commission which was excessive so that the person on the other end of the contract won't think so badly of the steward and might even offer the steward some kind of job. Probably a bit farfetched but that's one reading of the steward's actions.

A question to ponder is whether you have ever faced a decision where money was more important than relationship. For the dishonest steward, it seems that losing his job and the threat of being on the streets with nowhere to turn and nowhere to stay was the catalyst that prompted him to reconsider his priorities. What do you do when what you counted on to keep you afloat financially disappears?

Too often for my peace of mind it seems that too many when faced with negative life-changing situations “blame others.” They lack the willingness to ask “what was my part in this situation.” For those who insist on blaming others and ignoring their own desire to have more than they could reasonably afford, healing has come slowly if at all. Some are still mired in blaming others for trying to keep up with the Joneses, for failing to be proactive and become financially literate and make responsible financial decisions. If we stay mired in the blame game, we can't move forward.

This is true whether the issue is financial, family challenges, our current political environment or any other relationship. When we remain mired in blame, we can't look forward.

Is there ever a case where money is more important than relationship? I can't think of any even as I acknowledge that money and how it is handled can be the topic of great drama in families. Talk to any family and marriage counselor and they will tell you that money is one of the top issues leading to divorce. But it seems to me that money in these cases is about power in the relationship and it indeed a topic that can cause great angst. It's not limited to spouses but also includes disputes or different approaches to money between parent and child. In those cases, though, I argue that fundamentally, the disagreement is about the relationship while the presenting issue is money and how money is viewed.

Jesus talks more about money in the Gospels than any other topic. He knows what hold money has on us and what it can symbolize. But Jesus wants us to look forward. Jesus wants us to be self aware. Jesus wants us to be honest about what drives us. We have to know the rules. We have to know the rules of our everyday life and we have to know the rules of God's kingdom. God's rules are pretty simple to state. Not so easy to live. Love God. Love neighbor. All the rest is commentary.

Jesus asks us if we are trustworthy. Will we live by God's rules so that we can be part of God's kingdom? Will we love God and will we love our neighbor. This means treating our neighbor fairly in business and in our personal relationships. It really doesn't matter why we are dishonest.

Yes, like the shrewd steward we may have situations where we can rectify the wrong we have done but better yet never to have over-charged or dismissed someone as unworthy because their opinions were different than ours or passed someone by because they didn't look like us. God calls us to love everyone – this doesn't mean we have to like everyone or agree with everyone's opinion. It does mean we need to treat everyone else with dignity and respect for being created by God and worthy of God's love.

God's love is the balm of Gilead referenced by the prophet Jeremiah. An ointment that soothes the sin sick soul. Jesus is the physician who can treat our ailments whether physical or psychological or spiritual. Jesus is the one we can turn to as we consider our relationship with money.

Jesus tells us how to live. Do not be like the dishonest steward who has to rewrite the contracts because the steward overcharged others. Do not reduce amounts owed in hopes of establishing relationships with others who might take you in when times are tough. Rather, treat everyone from the beginning with respect and see every other person as created by God and worthy of right dealing.

Rest easy. Jesus is the balm in Gilead who heals the sin sick soul. Turn aside from love of money to serve God. Turn to Jesus as the one in whom we can rest and who provides the primary relationship that drives all our other relationships. When we are right with God, we will be right with the world. Amen.