

September 18th, 2022

Luke 16:1-13 “Lessons from Unlikely Characters”

Welcome to week four on our journey through Luke’s account of Jesus’ parables. Folks in the scholarly community label them “the difficult teachings of Jesus” or something along those lines. Most of the rest of us just call them the “Jesus said what!?” parables. Here’s what we’ve learned thus far - We started out with a cringe-worthy lesson about people who sit in the wrong seats at a banquet table and how awkward that can be for both the guest and the host. That parable wasn’t so bad. We can relate to that one because we’ve all had socially awkward and cringe-worthy moments like that. The following week we learned a much tougher lesson when Jesus said, “Unless you hate your family, you can’t be one of my disciples.” That’s when we learned that Jesus can be a bit of a shock-jockey when it comes to getting his point across. Now, to be fair all preachers do this to some degree. We use illustrations from our life experiences to grab people’s attention. But our stories tend to use self-deprecating humor like the old Appalachian storytellers. During this series, I shared stories of my own socially awkward moments. I confessed how I’m prone to losing things. But that’s what preachers do. We want you to find a point of recognition in the text. Then we can break it down and discover the takeaway lesson. But Jesus’ stories hit much harder and faster. They often use shocking examples that challenge social norms. He’ll say things that make people say, “That’s absurd! That’s offensive!” Then when Jesus has everyone’s attention, he’ll give his audience something to think about, and in most cases, he’s trying to show folks the radical difference between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the earth. He’s saying, “Your values are not always in line with God’s values.” Now, nobody wants to hear that. Especially those who think they’re the law abiding, righteous good guys of their own life-story. But with Jesus’ parables, they at least have a real-world example to work with. And these stories almost always present a question for people to consider. Like when Jesus said, “You can’t be my disciple unless you hate your family,” the question was really, “What is keeping you from following Jesus completely?”

This week, we have a parable that requires some foreknowledge in order to fully understand it. We need to talk about the economics and cultural hierarchies of the day. I'll try not to spend too much time on this, but it's important that we have an awareness about how things worked, otherwise we're not going to understand who or what this parable is all about. The backdrop for this parable is the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel and Palestine in the first century. When the Romans occupied a territory, they'd do two things: They would exploit the natural resources and they'd exploit the labor of the people. That's how they kept things in line. Do whatever you need to do to control your natural and human resources. They did this mostly by taxation of the poor. Now, I know it's hard to get our heads wrapped around a world in which rich people get off without paying a lot of taxes and the poor people had to pay a lot of taxes, but that's the way it was in Jesus' time. It also helps to know that the majority of the rich people in Judea lived in the southern region near the capital of Jerusalem. The majority of the poor people and small farmers lived up north in Galilee where Jesus and his disciples came from. What's happening here is that the Romans who are occupying this part of the world needed a lot of wine, wheat, and olive oil from the farmlands in Galilee. Now you'd think, "Wow! This sounds like a great opportunity for the small farmers!" They have the potential of getting rich if there's a big demand for what they're growing. But, as we know, it rarely works out this way. What happened is that the Romans would tax the heck out of the small farmers, and when the farmers couldn't afford to pay their taxes, the rich folks from down south would come up and say, "Listen, have we got a great deal for you! Get this - we will take care of your Roman tax bill!" Really? "Yes! In exchange for the deed to your property." Ooh, that doesn't sound very good. "Oh no ... don't worry, you can still live as tenant farmers on your ... excuse me, *our* property, and all for the low cost of giving us an annual percentage of your wheat, wine, and olive oil." Hmmm. Okay. But then what those rich guys would do is sell the wheat to the Romans for their bread, the wine for their banquets, and the olive oil for ... I dunno ... Caesar salad or whatever the Romans used it for. Now, these rich guys from the

south did *not* want to travel north to personally collect their portion of the wheat, wine, and olive oil. These farmers knew they were being exploited, so it was dangerous for the rich guys to go up north because they were hated so much. So they would send mid-level managers, also called “stewards” to go north and say, “Okay, time to pay up. We need your barrels of wheat, wine, and olive oil so you can pay your debt to the people who own the property that used to be yours.”

That’s the backdrop of this parable. It starts out with, “There was a rich man.” Okay, now you know who that is, right? Because now you have the background of what that means. You’ve got a rich guy from the south holding the deed to a piece of property that used to belong to a farmer. And this rich guy had a steward. Now you know what that means. The steward is a mid-level manager who makes sure the rich guy gets his money from these poor farmers. In this parable, the rich guy is mad at his manager because he’s squandering all his holdings. In other words, the rich guy is not getting enough return on his investment. The steward isn’t squeezing these farmers hard enough. And so he tells the steward, “Listen, I’ve had enough of your shenanigans. I want you to get all the books together because I’m going to fire you for not getting enough out of those lazy farmers up there.” Here’s this manager who’s caught in the middle between these farmers who are just trying to get by and this rich property owner who is trying to keep up with the Romans’ demand for resources. So this manager is thinking, “Man, I’ve worked for this rich guy for so long and now he’s ready to just throw me out and I have no idea where I’m going to go. I’ve got no security whatsoever. I don’t want to be a ditch digger. I don’t want to have to beg.” When he realized how expendable he was he came up with a plan. “I’m going to switch things around here. I’m going to arrange things so that I have some allies among the poor.” So he travels up north and says to the farmers, “Hey, how much olive oil did you owe my master? What ... 100 barrels? Listen, let’s make it 80. How much wine did you owe? A couple of metric tons? We’ll make it 1.2.” So, he gets some return for his boss, but he does it in a way that gives these poor farmers a break. That’s what’s going on here in this story. It’s not about a manager who

is evil or spiteful, it's about someone who saw through the injustice of this totally corrupt system and decided to switch sides and work for the poor. Jesus' takeaway message for his audience is, "You better learn that money is not the measure of all things. You would do much better using your money in service to relationships rather than to use relationships in the service of money." Jesus goes on to say, "You can't serve two masters." And Jesus uses strong language here ... and I'll be honest, I'm not sure I'd be brave enough to say this – but he says, "You will either hate God and love money, or you'll love God and hate money. There's no in-between." Okay. What's *our* lesson then? I think there's more than one lesson here. And like I said last week, lessons are often articulated best through questions –

Here's the first question to consider: "Is your money serving God or are you using God to make and serve money?" In older translations of the Bible, the Greek word "Mammon" is used instead of "wealth." The word "Mammon" is a name. It's the personification - or sometimes even *deification* - of wealth. Mammon is the name of an idol. Barbara Rossing, a New Testament professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago suggests that our modern Bible translations ought to retain this personified idol named Mammon, as a reminder of how a financial system itself can function as an idol or a "religion." This idea of naming Mammon as the opponent of God reveals the dangerous idolatry that can so easily seep into our relationship with money. Jesus makes it clear that wealth itself is not evil, but the *worship* of wealth is.

The second question gets into some tricky territory – "Did Jesus just *commend* this steward for repeatedly *cheating* his master?" Well, the guy *was* about to get fired for not squeezing the farmers enough. Why *wouldn't* he do this? Is the lesson here, "It's okay to cheat someone so long as it protects your livelihood?" People go to jail for this! It's called "embezzlement." I doubt that's the lesson. I believe the lesson is, "Relationships are more important than money." In the end, the steward wasn't just selfishly looking out for himself, he was looking out for the farmers too. And, oddly enough, the master actually *commended* the

steward for “acting shrewdly.” Remember, parables were meant to shock people with their absurdity.

Perhaps the level of confusion that this parable stirs in us is evidence of how remarkably important it is. This one blows our mind, because it seems to go against all our common understanding of fairness. But as we often see in Jesus’ parables, the Kingdom of God has very little to do with fairness. The Kingdom of God is about the importance of relationships. It’s about reconciliation. It’s about forgiving our debts, as we forgive our debtors. This is not an easy story to hear. It’s an even harder story to live. It doesn’t make good economic sense. But when you think about most of Jesus’ other parables, you realize that this is just the way Jesus rolls. It *doesn’t* make sense to plant a weed in a garden. It *doesn’t* make sense to ruin a whole vat of flour by putting yeast in it. It *doesn’t* make sense to turn the other cheek or throw a party for people that can’t invite you to theirs. It doesn’t make sense to leave behind an entire flock of sheep to bring back one. It doesn’t make sense for a father to throw a party for his good-for-nothing son who came back home after spending all of his inheritance. This doesn’t just relate to parables either.

It doesn’t make sense that God would come to earth and take on human flesh. It doesn’t make sense that God would claim us as God’s own or invite us to this table of grace and mercy. It doesn’t make sense that Jesus would do all he could for a people that responded to him by nailing him to a cross. It doesn’t make sense that the tomb was empty.

This parable we have today is a huge challenge. It’s a challenge to look at what canceling debt really looks like. It’s a challenge to take an honest look at how we often serve wealth over God. It’s a challenge to look at how we spend money, how we save money, and how we treat others. It’s a strange parable, for sure, but I believe that’s how God intended it.”