

Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels

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

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Jesus loves to shock people out of their complacency with a great story. It's hard to listen to the story of the dishonest manager in Luke, to really listen to it, and not find yourself shocked at the words of approval this guy gets at the end.

What had this guy done? First off, he was a thief. He had mismanaged his boss' accounts and word had gotten back. Audit time! Now it was all going to come out.

Now this guy is more of an indoor worker, a white collar office guy, rather than an outdoor kind of guy. Knowing that he will never have a place in business again once his dishonesty comes out, and figuring that his life will be spent either digging ditches for the state or begging for food on the roadside, neither of which, oddly, sounds appealing to him, he concocts a scheme.

Now, it seems to our dishonest manager that ordinary people, people without powerful and rich friends, end up in jail. Rich people end up in rehab and get released. No matter how much cocaine Paris Hilton gets caught with, no matter how many times she gets caught, it's never three strikes and out for her. Somehow the umpire always calls it a ball, even though it was right down the middle.

It was the same in the ancient world. Our manager knows this, so he figures it's time to get connections in high places, time to make some rich friends.

He calls in his master's debtors, in our world we would call them customers, and he asks, "How much do you owe?"

Well, first off, we can see what a horrible manager this guy is. He doesn't even know what the debtors are supposed to owe! And he's the accountant! His books are so crooked, even he can't keep them straight.

So, probably, seeing this, the customer says his debt is less than it is. You don't get rich by missing opportunities like this, and someone who could order 800 gallons of oil wasn't begging on the street corner. So he says, "800 gallons of oil." And then the dishonest manager says, "Well, here's the bill, sit down, rewrite it as four hundred gallons."

Do you see what he's doing? He's clever all right. He's including the customers in his crime. Even if the customer told the truth about what he owed, he is now writing down a fraudulent figure in his own hand. The manager can say, "Hey, I never changed that bill. That's not even my handwriting. The customer must have changed it!"

He's creating plausible deniability, and he's implicating the olive oil customer in his crime. Now this customer has to support our friend the manager after he loses his job because he's guilty, too.

Our manager does the same thing with the man who owes grain. "What do you owe, write down less here. Now we're in this together."

Both discounts amount to about 500 denarii, or 500 days' wages for a laborer, a large sum of money.

Now the manager has friends who owe him, both financially because of the money he's saved them, but also morally because he holds the evidence of their fraud in his account book. Now they will have to help him when he is fired because he's got something to hold over them.

This guy is clever! But he's even better. In that society, a society obsessed, not with virtue and vice, as our society is, but rather with honor and shame, being deceived by one's manager would be a great shame to the boss.

The boss could never admit to being defrauded like that. The best he could do, when he found out, was to pretend that he had authorized it all as a sign of his great generosity. That would bring him great honor and he could escape the shame of having such a crooked manager working for him.

Jesus ends the story with the boss coming to his dishonest manager and in effect admitting defeat at the hands of a clever man: the boss praises the scoundrel because he has acted so shrewdly.

And that's where the parable ends. This wretch ends up getting praised by his master for all his double dealing with the other dirty, rotten scoundrels who were all too happy to collude with him to defraud their business partner.

Whoa! You mean Jesus *likes* this guy? He's setting him up as an example for us? What on earth is going on here? Is Jesus himself going to be the "patron saint" of shyster business people?

Jesus' parable is certainly true to life: criminals are often extremely shrewd in concocting their schemes. Just do a Google search for clever criminals and you will find lots of examples.

There is the story of the brilliant French anarchist Marius Jacob at the turn of the 20th century, who put his mind to crime to try to bring about his anarchist dreams. He figured out a scheme for telling whether people were at home or not so he could rob their apartments. He would place a piece of paper in the crack of the door of the apartment, and when he noticed after a day or two that the paper was still in place, he knew that the apartment owner was away. This clever ruse has appeared in several spy movies, where the spy knows the assassin is waiting for him inside because the slip of paper he left between the door and the jamb is gone.

In more modern times, a criminal in Monroe, WA put an ad on Craigslist offering to hire some landscapers for big bucks — as long as they showed up on time to a specific spot, wearing a long sleeve blue shirt, a safety vest, safety glasses, and a ventilator mask. The spot he told them to show up to was near the bank he was going to rob, wearing a long sleeve blue shirt, a safety vest, safety glasses, and a ventilator mask! He then escaped into the crowd, and the police arrived to find dozens of people matching the description of the bank robber. A similar scheme to this one was part of the plot on the wonderful TV show, *The Mentalist*.

Even more famous is the story of Enron. Top executives there made big bucks based on their performance. When things weren't going well, they decided to get their bonuses anyway. They created some dummy corporations offshore that Enron could own. Then they had those dummy corporations buy from Enron.

They funneled money through those corporations so that Enron would look like it was making huge sales and huge profits. But the money they used was Enron's money in the first place!

There were no real sales and no real profits any more than I'm getting rich by taking money out of my left pocket and putting it in my right. It's just moving money around. When the accounts were finally audited properly, the whole thing fell apart. Just like in our parable, accountants and their books leave lots of places for theft.

A huge amount of human brainpower went into devising these schemes and a huge amount of effort went into carrying them out.

When we hear about them, we have to wonder, what if that brain power and that effort had been put into accomplishing something good instead of something evil, what if Marius Jacob had used his brain to try to fix government instead of trying to bring it down, or if the criminal in Monroe, WA had concocted a scheme to make money by actually starting a landscaping firm, or if the executives at Enron had spent as much time and energy trying to make Enron truly successful and getting rich that way, instead of trying to make it just look successful to line their own pockets at everyone else's expense?

What would have happened then? What good could have been brought into the world?

And this is Jesus' point. The people of this world, the schemers and swindlers, they know how to get things done. They put in maximum effort to get what they want, which is money, money, and more mammon-y, money.

They are clever. They are shrewd. They use all the resources at their disposal. They plan and they plot and they scheme and they connive. They do whatever it takes to get the job done.

It's this attitude that Jesus is commending to his disciples with this shocking story and its equally shocking praise of the criminal mastermind at the end.

They do it for money, Jesus says, I'm asking you to do it for God. They do it for riches that won't last past the grave; I'm telling you to do it for riches in heaven. They do it to serve their master, Mammon, that is, money and wealth; you do it to serve your master, God.

Is Jesus saying, "Be dishonest for God?" No, no, no.

But he is saying, do what it takes to get the job done. Make the maximum effort for the sake of God, at least the same effort as criminals make for money.

Well, that's great but as far as I can see, the job that needs to be done is huge! Does Jesus mean that I have to convert the world to him, feed all the hungry, right every injustice in society, and bring about the kingdom of God? That's the Christian dream, right? But even with maximum effort, that's just not doable. Are we responsible for making all that happen?

No, of course not. I don't think he quite means that.

But then, before we move on, two other things have to be said. The first is, doing all that should be our goal. If the schemers put forth their best effort, so should the dreamers. We shouldn't be prepared to settle for just giving up, saying the job is too big, the problems too intractable, the difficulties simply insurmountable.

The schemers don't.

One of my favorite sayings comes from Star Trek: The Next Generation, an old TV show from the '90's. Captain Picard, the captain of the starship Enterprise, asks one of his crewmen, Commander Data, to do something. Data tells him the something can't be done, that it's impossible. And Picard says, "Mr. Data, it's only impossible until it's not."

Things are only impossible until they're not. Immigrants calling home to the other side of the world with a phone the size of a pack of gum, surgeons routinely fixing people's hearts with mechanical pacemakers, babies conceived in test tubes, tourists flying in million pound machines across the ocean in a couple of hours, humans walking on the moon. It's only impossible until it's not.

That should be our attitude, that with enough devotion of energy and brainpower and concentration, we can accomplish the impossible for God, too.

And the second point is, we can start with something small. "Whoever can be trusted with little," Jesus says, "can be trusted with a lot." We can start small.

As the great preacher, Fred Craddock, has said, "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake for our faith. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a country commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."

We can't do everything, but we can do something, which is better than nothing.

Jesus' parable tells us to bring all of our smarts, all of our ambition, all of our focus and motivation and devote them to God.

Criminals do all that and a lot more for a far less worthy goal, in their single-minded devotion to their master, Money. They aren't worried that they can't get

all the money in the world, that there might be a few dollars they won't be able to get their hands on! They are quite content to get as much of the money as they can, more than they might have thought possible at first.

Christians ought to do at least as much in our devotion to the God who sent his Son to die on a cross to save us. We can start small, with petty crimes like visiting the sick or writing a kind note, and move on to major heists, like working for justice and reconciliation between the races, or for true marriage equality, or for making sure that every child born into the world has a fair chance in life.

All God asks is that we devote as much effort to doing good as the dirty rotten scoundrels devote to doing bad. We have brains, friends, and resources. Let's use them shrewdly, and gain God's praise.

I can't tell you what the next great Christian scheme will be any more than I can tell you what the next great criminal scheme will be. The criminals just look around at where they are and at what they might be able to do, and they're off.

That's the same thing we can do: look around at where we are, and at what we might be able to do, and we're off. Start small. Work up to big. Bring all of your creativity, imagination, and chutzpah to bear on the problem, then go for it, even if at first it seems like you won't accomplish much, like it's impossible.

Why, just this week we saw two pictures of Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist. Last year, she was sitting outside her school on climate strike. She was all alone.

This year, hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren around the world took part in a climate strike, protesting adults' failure to protect the future of the planet the kids will inherit.

One teenager, with drive, imagination, and courage, made that happen. What will we be able to do if we put our minds to it.

After all, with God, even more than on TV, it's only impossible until it's not.

Amen