

The Godawful Gospel  
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I'm certain there were many people who followed Jesus, sat near him on mountaintops and lakeshores and dinner tables, or stood near him in the cities, who heard him speak—but didn't understand a thing he was telling them. The gospels are full of their questions and challenges and lack of understanding.

And for sure there have been theologians and biblical scholars throughout the two thousand-plus years of Christian history who have wrestled with his sayings, argued with one another about their meanings, prayed for insight, and still came up perplexed. The huge corpus of commentary accumulated through the centuries bears witness to this confusion.

But in all of the gospel record of Jesus' teaching by parable or example, by narrative or discourse, there is probably not a single passage as confusing as the one which Dorothee just read from the Gospel of Luke. (See below.) If you found it obtuse, confusing and perplexing, as I did, and if you wondered what purpose it served in the lectionary, as I did, I assure you we are not alone. Preachers seriously dislike this gospel reading about the rich man and the manager. It seems to fly in the face of everything else Jesus teaches.

One of the difficulties, I think, is that we don't know who to identify with in this story. The "rich man"? If so, that would be a biblical first! Rich men, and women, are criticized throughout the Bible. They are passionately condemned by the prophets—today's reading from Amos is one example—and they are chastised by Jesus for never doing enough to help those less favored. Throughout the Bible, riches imply the hoarding of goods that should be shared with the poor, and those who are rich are universally in need of conversion. Thus, we have no reason to believe that we should identify with the rich man.

How about the manager, or as he's called in older versions, the steward? We might sympathize with him initially when we read that he was fired and not trained or fit for any other work. We understand that problem. But then we read on to find that he then puts his energy into being even more dishonest than he was before, but this time, the profit of his dishonesty goes not to his boss, the rich man, but to those who owe money to the rich man. Perhaps, reasons the steward, if he is helpful to the debtors, he can curry their favor and they will, in turn, network for him or at least, invite him for a homecooked meal now and then.

But the scandal of this story goes even deeper than first appears. The Hebrew Bible, the moral law governing the rich man, the steward, and the debtors, prohibited usury. A Jew was not—ever—to charge interest on a loan to another Jew. The execution of the law was left to individual honor, and disobedience of the law was difficult to discover.

So for instance, if someone owed fifty jugs of olive oil, the contract would be written up as a debt of one hundred jugs. Who would know about the 100% interest except the debtor, the steward who wrote the unlawful contract, and the rich man? The profit, of course, would not go to the steward, but to his boss. The practice was common enough that Jesus could use it as the situation of a parable.

But... in *this* parable, the plot has shifted. The steward has been fired. He is no longer obliged to earn a single shekl for his master, and he seizes the opportunity to put others in debt to himself. So, he writes off the interest on the loans. His master still gets what is due him in the first place, and he, the steward, has a bunch of debtors now beholden to him—not for money this time, but for getting them off the hook for something they should not have been hooked for in the first place!

And here comes the confusing part. Neither the rich man nor the steward are worthy of praise, but the master commends the dishonest steward because he has acted shrewdly, and Jesus indicates that this is a good thing. “Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth.” And we come away shaking our heads, wishing for a nice straight-forward parable about Jesus healing the sick.

Perhaps what happens here is that we look for a reflection of ourselves somewhere in this parable, and we find only villains. We seek words to live by from Jesus, and we hear him praising villainy.

Or do we?

“For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation,” Jesus warns us, “than are the children of light.”

Could it be that he is holding up for us to see, and yes, to emulate, not the dishonesty, but the determination, the cleverness, and the single-mindedness of the steward? Are we to be as shrewd and imaginative and courageous with God’s work as was the steward with the work of his own survival?

In Jesus’ time, Judaism was struggling for survival under Roman oppression, struggling to uphold ancient truths and customs against the powerful and attractive influence of Greek and Roman secular culture. And as the French say, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Today, Christianity also struggles against the attractions of a secular culture of greed and power, and even boredom with tradition.

You must be spiritually strong, Jesus told his followers, strong and single-minded as you go about the work of bringing in the Kingdom of God. The children of light—the ones with a vision of heaven—must be every bit as shrewd as the children of the age. Dilute that energy and creativity by splitting your loyalties between heavenly things and earthly things, and you spoil it for both, he warned. “You cannot serve God and mammon,” reads the older translations. “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Look around. The Church is in crisis. Not just the Episcopal Church, but all the houses of Christianity. We are not spreading the gospel as we were commissioned to do and significantly, our Sunday Schools are shrinking or non-existent. And too many churches have sold their souls to unholy relationships with politics. The Anglican preacher and theologian, Herbert O’Driscoll, an eagle-eyed observer and reporter of the state of the Church, wrote that half-way through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an age ended for Western Christianity. Church buildings still stand, but many in disrepair. Church organs still play, but there are fewer voices to sing the hymns. The rituals continue, but how many people know what they really mean? What ended, according to O’Driscoll, was the “ancient coupling with Western society. . . The self-understanding of the Church, its theological systems, its liturgical forms, were at best challenged and at worst dismissed as barren and unsatisfying.” \*

In other words, where the Church had been—officially from the fourth century and informally before that—the standard-bearer for the cultural and moral decisions of the community of faith, it has now become an option, a social gathering as often as a spiritual one, a mere competitor for the time, loyalty and support of its members.

But the news is not all bad. While the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw more and more people rejecting religion that is reflective of a past which they did not espouse, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an increase of people identifying as “spiritual, not religious.” It’s one of the most used categories in hospital admission forms. Wholeness is seen as health in body, mind and *spirit!* And spirit is no longer associated only with religion.

O’Driscoll warned that we must be careful to nurture these seekers, not by indoctrinating them into the way we’ve always done things, but by offering them a place among the community that gathers around the life, death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ—who is as relevant and counter-cultural to our present day as he was to the past. O’Driscoll also said that the Church might be taking itself too seriously. “We need to be wary of institutions,” he wrote. “They build high walls. They become immobile and fearful and stale.”

But the Holy Spirit constantly blows freshness and crisis may indicate the birth of new ways. I had a clinical supervisor tell me once, as I was facing a difficult personal decision, that I wouldn’t move on until it became more uncomfortable to stay where I was than to face the unknown of a new way. He was right.

The Church, even this parish, will look very different ten years from now, and maybe as a result of these new spiritual seekers if we’re willing to *listen* to them. Or it might not, and that would be a tragedy because it would indicate stagnation and imminent extinction.

We need to be shrewd and clever and courageous and creative. Maybe the difficult parable in today’s gospel was a time bomb planted there by Christ for this time, this age. Perhaps we are actually in a better place to understand it than the people who heard it when it was first spoken.

Listen again to the Collect of the Day: Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things but to love things heavenly, and even now, when we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Be shrewd with your faith. Make it work not only for you, but for the Kingdom of God. *AMEN*

Readings: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; I Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

\*O’Driscoll, Herbert. *A Year of Our Lord*.

### **Luke 16:1-13**

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."