

¹Then 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. ²So 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.’ ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then 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.’ ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰“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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.”

I mentally place the gospel lessons we read into three broad categories, and there could be some overlap here. First, and the most numerous, are the stories that I would describe as “comfortable.” Perhaps they are comfortable because we are so familiar with them. Or they are comfortable because it doesn’t take a lot of effort to find some good news in them. The second category makes us – the readers of today – uncomfortable. The message in these stories is usually very clear, and that message makes us squirm a little bit in our seats. Finally there is the third and least numerous category, which I like to define as the

“What is going on here?” stories. Does anyone care to guess which category today’s lesson fits into?

I would place this story of the rich master and the shrewd manager in that last category. Not only does the story showcase the cleverness of the manager – no matter the moral questions it raises – but Jesus time and again reiterates that his disciples should be like this character. I mean, have you ever seen one of those social media images with a bible verse – or even a cross-stitch in someone’s house – that read, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”? I actually made an image of that verse and posted it on social media this week. Only a couple of pastors liked it. So we are left wondering, “What do we do with this passage?” To be honest, I’m still not certain what you are supposed to do with the passage, but what I am supposed to do with it is craft a sermon around it.

Let me start by saying that no scholar or saint has ever been able to clearly articulate the nuances of this story, definitively shared how this story should apply to our lives, and then tied a nice bow on top. That said, the rest of my sermon is based on an understanding of the story that makes the most sense to me. I hope you get something out of it as well.

Jesus tells this story to his disciples to make a point – much like a fable – so it is commonly understood that this scenario never played out like Jesus details it. There are some details of the story that are left out. Was the manager a slave to the master, or was the manager a free-person? How did the master acquire this wealth? Why were all these other people indebted to the master? None of that is known, but we’d be able to make some more sense of the story if we did know those things.

Then there are the cultural assumptions that we insert into the story. For instance, you likely never thought that slavery might be a factor in this story until I mentioned it a moment ago. However, slavery likely would have been one of the first things the disciples thought of when they heard Jesus tell this story. Another example of our cultural

assumptions is how we perceive the class divisions in the story. In our society, we are accustomed to the numerical dominance of a large middle class. We know there is also a wealthy class and poor class, and we know that all three of these have subcategories as well.

That is not how it worked in that 1st Century Judea. In that place and time, the middle-class was virtually non-existent. There were only two classes: the rich and the poor. There were the subcategories to these as well. We would likely think that wealth was the main distinction between the rich and the poor, but it wasn't the main distinction. The distinction was work: the rich didn't have to do it. The rich might have had some responsibilities to perform, but for the most part they had other people do work for them. In addition, it was very uncommon for someone to climb their way from the poor class into the rich class. What was more common was that you were born into your class, and that is where you stayed your whole life. It is hard for us today to fully grasp how their society functioned that way, because things in our world function differently. For instance, when we hear mention of a "rich person" in the gospels, your first thought should not be, "Well, they must have worked hard to earn it." We shouldn't think that because the main reason why they are described as rich is to imply that they didn't work hard for it. That inherited wealth without work is the reason why the gospels are often critical of the rich class. Elsewhere, in his 2nd letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is critical of people's "idleness" and their unwillingness to work. Many Christians use that passage today to criticize poor people when they require assistance. It wasn't the poor that Paul was being critical of, his criticism was directed at the rich people who didn't want to work. See now why having a grasp of the original context is important?

So today we overheard Jesus telling a story to his disciples about this manager, and you and I might have thought about what if we had done something like this to our boss. We would likely be fired, sued, or jailed for such an action. But you and I have to forget all that as best as we can, and we have to think about being one of the disciples – someone from the

1st Century poor class – trying to hear Jesus’ greater point. Jesus tells us about how a poor manager somehow mismanaged the property of his rich master, someone who likely never worked a day in his life. The poor manager has very few options at this point. He definitely will be fired from this position. In addition, if he is already a slave, his mismanagement likely has guaranteed additional years to his slavery, and if this manager was a free-person at the beginning of the story, it is within the realm of possibility that he is now entering into slavery. So what should this poor manager do? He has very few options, and the outlook for his future is bleak. Should he shake down the other working people who are indebted to his master, in the hope that doing so will lessen his own punishment? He very well could have done that, but instead he said, “This whole system is a messed up,” and he chooses to rage against the machine. He is not going to stick it to his fellow poor people, he is going to stick it to the master who hasn’t done any of the work. When he does that, he simultaneously helps the other working class people.

The most surprising thing in this whole story is that the master commends the manager for his thinking. Although our translation labels him as “shrewd,” which subtly implies deviousness, other words could translate the adjective in Greek; “wise” and “prudent” are among them. It isn’t clear why the master commends the manager. Maybe you and I aren’t supposed to concern ourselves with it, though, because we are supposed to concern ourselves with the storyteller. Jesus commends the actions of the manager, and that is all that should matter. But why does Jesus commend the manager? The manager helped the poor by his actions. That help came at the manager’s own expense, likely adding years of servitude to his own life. Yet the result is that the manager gained friends by doing this.

Aren’t those the common themes we hear when Jesus discusses discipleship in Luke’s gospel? Does he not say that those who seek to live out the reign of God in this life will care for the poor? Does he not say that discipleship will come at a personal cost? Does he not say that we may lose some relationships, but we will gain others? I believe that is why Jesus

commends the manager. The manager was in a tight situation, and none of his options were great. Yet, instead of seeking ways to personally benefit himself, he took a bad situation and made the most of it to help others. Despite the cost to himself, he trusted that down the line others would help him.

This story that Jesus tells will always be odd, and it will always have questions left unanswered. However, there is still good news in it. It reassured the earliest followers that, yes, discipleship comes at a personal cost, but there are benefits found in the community that is built. Life can be messy, and sometimes there is never a perfect way out of a bad situation. Yet, even in the mess of life, there are opportunities to do the disciple-thing; to allow the reign of God to spread in the world. The manager basically threw up his hands and said, “Okay, I might as well help some others out, and maybe they will help me out some time.” That isn’t the most altruistic mentality, but it did help others, ...and Jesus commends the manager for it. So let us make the most out of any situation to help others in need. Let us find ways to build community, even in creative ways. Caring for the poor, taking up our cross, building community: Jesus commends us for it. Amen.