



TOUCH POINT

## Commending the Dishonest Manager – Touchpoint for September 14, 2022

**Luke 16:1-13 (NRSVUE)** Then 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.’

<sup>3</sup> 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.’ <sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ <sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup> He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ <sup>7</sup> 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.’ <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> “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. <sup>11</sup> If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup> 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.”

### Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

*“And his master commended the dishonest manager...”*

*“You cannot serve both wealth and God.”*

I’ve got two primary reactions to this passage. Well, after the initial reaction of bewilderment, befuddlement, and confusion...

And apparently I’m not alone, as every commentary I read had no idea what to do with this passage either.

What I did find interesting was the number of people who wanted to tame this text – make it palatable, somehow show that Jesus wasn’t meaning what he said.

You know, make Jesus more acceptable to us.

But here’s what I’ve learned over the years. When you encounter a bible passage that bothers you, lean into it. Wrestle with it. Don’t run away from it. How else are you going to experience a death and resurrection?

How else is it going to be a bible PASSAGE – something that takes you from one place to another, rather than a bible binky – something that simply pacifies you?

I believe it was Fred Craddock who wrote, “If you can’t figure out what it is about the gospel passage that made people want to kill Jesus, you’re probably missing the point.”

Let’s face it. We didn’t crucify Jesus because he was too tame... “Hey Jesus, you’re just too tame and acceptable. You need to die.”

So let's lean into this passage, but not TOO far. Still gotta protect the homeland and our precious egos.

First reaction:

*"You cannot serve both wealth and God."*

It is an amazing statement. Jesus puts wealth right up there with God in terms of what has power over our lives. That is astounding. Do we hear the warning? Do we sense conflict?

Why is it that Jesus sees the two as diametrically opposed? This is not a "both/and" statement. This is an "either/or." Jesus doesn't seem to allow for any overlap.

"C'mon Jesus! Aren't you supposed to be inclusive?"

We think of wealth as being blessed. Jesus sees it as opposed to the Divine. What do we do with that?

How do we live within an economic society but not be consumed by it? If you're expecting me to have the answers, I don't.

But it seems to me that many in the church have told people they can worship both God and wealth. Some pastors will even tell you wealth is God's greatest desire for you. As long as you send them some money first. Or buy their latest, greatest book for \$29.99, plus \$99.99 for shipping and handling.

How does wealth reel you in? How does it seduce you?

If we're not asking these questions we're not hearing the text. If we're not asking these questions we're not looking for this to be a bible passage, but a bible security blanket.

Why is it we can't make our economic system serve the needs of everyone, instead of a system that makes everyone serve the system's need for competition and greed?

Let me ask you a simple question: Do you feel you are a slave to the economic system of this country, or do you feel the economic system is a servant to the needs of all?

You cannot serve both wealth and God. That isn't a question from Jesus. That is a statement.

Which brings me to the second issue I have with this passage. This dishonest steward guy... he actually gets commended:

*"And his master commended the dishonest manager..."*

Why would Jesus commend the steward who reduced people's debts or forgave them? The guy is being dishonest. He's not playing by the rules of credit and debt. Why, if you just go around forgiving people's debts, the whole economic system collapses.

And, after all, we highly religious folks would never ask our Father, who is in heaven, to "forgive us our debts."

OK, never mind. Maybe that's why we changed it to trespasses. I can forgive trespassing, as long as I can still yell, "GET OFF MY LAWN" from time to time.

We can forgive trespassing. But don't mess with our economic system. This country couldn't survive without it, or its people, going into debt. If you don't believe me, just start a discussion on student loan forgiveness and see where the conversation goes.

Why, if you forgive debts, how do you make money off of other people? That is their purpose in my life, isn't it? Certainly you wouldn't want me to use my wealth to make friends. I should simply make more money with it.

You know, and I'm afraid to say this, but this dishonest steward is kind of reminding me of Jesus. He's flipping everything upside down. He's forgiving debt and making friends with what he has.

And I know what you're thinking, "It isn't the steward's place to forgive the Master's debts." Funny thing though, that's what the religious leaders said about Jesus as he was dishing out forgiveness.

You know, now that I think about it, I'm beginning to wonder if Jesus isn't describing his relationship with the Father, *from the world's perspective*. After all, nobody considered Jesus to be an honest broker between God and humanity.

Anyway, this steward is flipping everything upside down. He's forgiving debt and making friends with what he has.

And why? So he can be welcomed into their homes. Temporal and eternal. Why, it's almost as if he is going to stand at their door and knock and see who lets him in.

Outsiders, and those on the bottom rung of the social and economic ladder, now become those he looks to, to welcome him. Why, you almost get the feeling this guy would be willing to hang out with tax collectors and eat with sinners after all this is over.

So why is Jesus commending him? What can Jesus see in him? He's so different from Jesus, right?

The parable catches us in the act. We are really transactional at heart. Our revulsion to this steward reveals our true character, not *his*.

Why, if we were the rich person, the master in this story, we would take this dishonest steward out and have him whipped. Punished. Oh heck, why don't we just take him out and crucify him and be done with it?

The parable catches us in the act. We are transactional at heart. Our revulsion to this steward reveals our true character, not his... and shines a light on where we stand on the economic ladder. Do you think those who were in debt are mad at the dishonest steward?

We want a transactional God. Because somehow we think we hold a position of privilege.

Do we really want a God who "forgives us our debts"? Do we really want to forgive people's debts as God forgive ours?

*"Our Father, who art in heaven... Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."*

... ..

And finally, what could this guy possibly teach us?

Or what could this guy possibly teach me?

Here is a guy who has enjoyed a position of power and privileged status, and now sees it crumbling all around him. His power and privilege is slipping away from him.

What could he possibly teach this 21<sup>st</sup> century, old white man who lives in the United States? What could he possibly teach me about making friends with those who are lower – for now – on the social ladder?

The dishonest steward isn't using money anymore to make more money. Wealth, even dishonest wealth, has been used to make friends, to be welcomed in to people's homes. Money hasn't become his primary objective. No wonder we can't stand him.

He isn't worshipping wealth anymore. But I'm not sure he is worshipping God, either.

But baby steps, right?

And finally, what kind of God commends people who don't have their act perfectly together? Doesn't that just encourage sin?

As if all our laws and religious dictums have contained sin over the centuries.

What kind of God commends people who don't have their act perfectly together?

What kind of God would... 'while we were yet sinners,' send Christ to 'die for the ungodly'?

And what kind of God turns to those who are about to betray, deny and run away from him and says, "*I think you're commendable enough to become my body and blood, and carry on my forgiveness of debts in the world.*"

What kind of God does that?

The one we meet in Jesus. The one Jesus called "Abba," "Father."

And the one we meet in this meal.

**Amen.**

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### **Be Still**

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

### **Calm Me Lord**

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

### **Healer of Our Every Ill**

(Marty Haugen)

Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow.

Give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

You who know our fears and sadness. Grace us with your peace and gladness.

Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain*

In the pain and joy beholding, how your grace is still unfolding

Give us all your vision God of love. *Refrain*

## **The Meal**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

## **Benediction**

### **Gaelic Blessing/Deep Peace**

(John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers)

Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the gentle night to you. Moon and stars pour their healing light on you.

Deep peace of Christ, of Christ the light of the world to you.

Deep peace of Christ to you.