

An Unexpected Twist on Judgement

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Parables of judgement are cautionary tales which Jesus tells. Unlike the parables where we learn from the person doing something right, parables of judgement present us with someone doing something wrong and they serve as a warning, an example of what not to do. And this morning's gospel is a parable of judgement.

A manager employed by a rich man is accused of wasting his employer's money. And the manager doesn't bother to deny the charges because they are true. The rich man is upset with him and fires him so the manager starts to worry about his future. And he decides that he is too proud to beg and needs to do something.

So he brings in the people who are in debt to the rich man and starts reducing what they owe. You owe 100 jugs of oil? No, let's make that 50 instead. You owe 100 bushels of wheat? No, let's make that 80. The manager uses what the rich man has to make a future for himself by cutting other people's debts. And let's be clear the manager doesn't do this because he is noble or selfless, or is trying to correct some terrible wrong in society. The manager just wants to help himself. He cuts the debts of others to make them like him and maybe return the favor by helping him in the future.

And we can all imagine how angry the rich man will be when he discovers what the disgraced manager has done. After all the manager deliberately uses the rich man's money to make friends and help himself. But this is where the parable takes a sharp turn from what we expect. Because instead of condemning him, the rich man praises the manager for being wise.

Which doesn't make sense. The rich man should be angry. In a parable of judgement people are punished for doing something wrong. Now some parables of judgement have one person who does what is right and one person who does what is wrong but in this story we have only one person, the manager, who does wrong and then seems to do even more wrong. Except the rich man praises him. Which makes this story confusing. Until we back up and listen to it a bit more carefully.

The rich man hears accusations about the manager and calls him to account. But, and this is where we need to pay attention- the manager is not accused of stealing from the rich man. The manager hasn't been embezzling. No, the charges are that

the manager is lazy and not being careful with the rich man's money. He's wasting it, he's squandering it. The manager isn't evil he is incompetent.

The manager is not doing his job. The greek word for his actions is sometimes translated to scatter, to dissipate, to give to the wind. He is not doing what the rich man expects him to do which is to use his wealth responsibly. He's not a criminal because he isn't actively taking the rich man's money. He's useless at his job because he isn't doing his job. And that makes this a different story.

Because when he is going to be fired, the manager starts thinking about how he should use the money he has been given. The manager goes from being incompetent and not putting any thought into what he does with money to actually using money to help himself and other people. The manager goes from not paying attention to what the money can do to using it to change the world. The manager goes from being incompetent, lazy, and worthless to being smart, active, and shrewd.

Which means that the manager before he is called to account by the rich man and the manager after he realizes he needs to do something are like two different people in the parable. One who is condemned and the other who is praised. One who does what is wrong and the other who does what is right.

After all, the manager's lack of action is why the rich man is upset at the start of the parable. The manager is being fired by the rich man because he is not doing anything, not using the wealth, not being smart with the rich man's money. So when the manager starts cutting the debts of those who owe the rich man, he is actually doing something, he is making a difference, he is using the wealth he has to change the world. And that is why the rich man, whose money it is that the manager is spending, is pleased by what the manager does.

Because Jesus doesn't tell this parable to teach about money management any more than the story of the lost sheep is about shepherding. This is a parable about faith and how we are to live as disciples. The rich man praising the manager at the end doesn't make sense until we realize the point of the parable isn't about the money but that the manager is doing something, something he has thought about, with the money.

Now I realize that none of that changes the fact that the manager when he is cutting debt is only thinking of himself and is selfish. His motivation is awful, terrible, and not something we should follow. But let me ask you something. Do you think the help the manager gives to those burdened by debt is any less welcome because the manager's motives aren't pure? If you give money to the food bank for a tax receipt or if you do it wanting nothing in return does the food it provides taste any different to the people who are hungry? If you do the right thing for the wrong reason is there any less benefit to the people in need?

Jesus tells this parable to get us thinking about how we are using the money God has placed in our lives. The manager at the start is the example of what not to do. Don't be wasteful, don't be incompetent, don't squander the gifts of God. The manager after he starts cutting debt is the example of what to do. Use the money you have to make the lives of others better. Think about how the money in your life can make a difference in the world. Be wise and use the gifts God has given you.

So what are you doing with the money, the resources which God has placed in your hands? You may have it because you have used your God given physical or intellectual gifts to accumulate it. You may have it because of the family you are born into. You may have it for reasons you don't really understand. But let's be honest all of us have money and resources which we can use. And the parable reminds us the money isn't the point but rather what we do with our wealth- that is the thing we need to think about.

For we are all managers of what God has blessed us with. And God expects us to use our money, our resources, our abilities, to help others, to build a better life for ourselves and our community, and to enrich our world. For in this parable Jesus asks us to look at our lives and stop wasting and squandering our gifts and start using them wisely to make a difference. For God has given us many things. And what we do with those things is always a matter of faith.