

*Grace to you and peace from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Three contractors were touring the White House the same day, one from New York, another from Missouri and a third from Florida. At the end of the tour, the guide asked them if they would like to bid on a project at the White House. “Of course,” they replied in unison.

“We need one of the rear fences redone,” said the guide. “Why don’t the three of you each look at it and give me a bid.”

The contractor from Florida got out his tape measure, pad and pencil, and after examining the project said he could do it for \$900. “That’s \$400 in materials, \$400 for my crew, and \$100 profit for me.”

The contractor from Missouri took the tape measure, pulled out his smartphone (with all the latest “apps”) and came up with a \$700 bid. “That’s \$300 in materials, \$300 for my crew, and a \$100 profit for me.”

Without hesitation, the New York contractor told the guide, “I’ll do the job for \$2,700.” “\$2,700!” exclaimed the guide. “You hardly even looked at the fence. How did you come up with that figure?”

“It’s easy,” the New York contractor said, “\$1,000 for me, \$1,000 for you, and we hire the guy from Missouri to do the work.”<sup>i</sup>

At first glance it seems this New York contractor and the dishonest manager in our gospel story today are cut out of the same cloth. Which is why Biblical scholars and folks like us have been consistently baffled, if not embarrassed, by this parable. It seems even Luke was a bit befuddled – He followed it up with not one but three other sayings of Jesus — none of which seem the right explanation for this difficult story. Consult Biblical scholars for some insight and you’ll get little agreement. They can’t even agree on whether the Greek word used to describe the manager should be translated as *unjust* or *dishonest* and whether he’s praised for being *prudent*, *wise* or *shrewd*. In any case, it is one strange parable.

After hearing that his manager was squandering his property, a rich man summons the manager to a meeting. “So what is this I hear about you?” The manager makes no move to defend, explain or offer excuses... which the listeners would have expected, along with negotiations on severance. Hearing admission of guilt in the silence, the rich man fires the manger and tells him to turn in the accounts and financial records. The good news for the manager is that the landowner is not seeking to have him thrown in jail. The bad news is that he’s out of a job, facing a drastic change in his social and financial status.

As the manager leaves the rich man, we hear him processing his options aloud. Now usually in Middle Eastern and Biblical stories, when a character begins to speak to himself, we are cued in that it is likely a rascally character coming up with a shady scheme. The manager quickly takes stock of his situation. He does not believe he is strong enough to do physical labor. He says he is ashamed to beg and, well, he does not fit the profile of someone the community would accept as a beggar since he is not blind, lame, or otherwise unable to work a job. Thus he comes up with a plan that will provide him some kind of stability, at least for a while. I’ve a plan “that will demonstrate my shrewdness and at the same time make me popular.”<sup>ii</sup> He calls for a meeting with the master’s debtors one at a time. Such a “summons” would make them think the manager is acting on behalf of the rich man and they would come. Individually he offers them a very deep reduction of their debt and puts himself in their good graces. He asks them to record the gift they have just gotten in their own hand. Unknowingly, the debtors have just become a partner in embezzlement and would not likely lodge a complaint against the manager in the future. When he’s out of a job, he will turn to these grateful clients for some hospitality and assistance. It’s very clever. Luckily that’s what the boss thought as well. “Now there’s one brilliant move. Set himself up for a new job or at least support and I can’t undo it without losing face. Got to admire that ingenuity.”

Like many of Jesus' other parables, there has been a reversal in the order of things — the peasant debtor got a break, the scoundrel has saved his skin and the rich man pays for it all but gets hailed as a generous hero in his town.

All the sayings Luke offers after the parable just don't match up with this bizarre little story. So we are left, once again, to try to brainstorm with the Holy Spirit to figure out what Jesus may have been getting at. Which will drive crazy those of us who like a story or teaching to be like a math problem .... this plus this equals this one and only conclusion. But Jesus did not teach modern math or science. He was a good teacher, bringing up challenging perspectives, world views and a way of living that would usher in God's kingdom. He needed those first disciples (and us) to stretch beyond the usual or expected, while staying within the basics that could not be compromised. The basic being, God's love of all people and all of creation with a love that was compassionate, accepting, peaceful, merciful, seeking the best and just for all people, not just a few people, groups or nations.

So what gems can we mine from this bizarre tale? First, we accept the basic understanding that Jesus would not tell his disciples to be dishonest, conniving, unrepentant or purely self-serving. That would be contrary to their Hebrew faith and his teachings. I will offer you one of the possible lessons you could read into this parable, but, once again, I ask you to keep pondering and digging for what God might want you to hear at this time in this strange little story.

Note that the manager is not praised for being dishonest but "shrewd." Jesus then wonders why those who care about themselves and the things of this world are more clever and decisive in dealing with the world than children of the light, his disciples. Is Jesus suggesting God's People should maneuver and manipulate like those who only care about themselves, disregarding what's ethical and right? No, that

would be contrary to everything else Jesus taught. Could it be that he is asking us this — Isn't it possible for disciples to be just as energetic, creative and decisive **with** integrity in their pursuit of Christ's cause as the manager was in his?

What is it that's admirable about the manager's actions? He's faced with adverse circumstances, a change in his life that may or not be deserved, a situation he did not anticipate and for which he is unprepared. (Sound familiar.) What does he do? He responds promptly. He doesn't deceive himself or move into victim mode. He goes right to realistic analysis. "I'm about to lose my position.... I'm not strong enough to dig.... too ashamed to beg." He examines resources and creatively considers the possibilities available to respond to the current situation. He then moves quickly and decisively. He is afire with determination to succeed.

This is not a "go and do likewise" parables, advising us how to act toward our employer or finances. Some scholars would say this is a "how much more" parable. If the likes of McDonald's, Cingular, Starbucks are zealous, imaginative and active in their secular pursuits, how much more should the children of the light and the church, be passionate, resourceful and creative in our commitment to be God's love at work in the world, to invite others to know our amazing Lord and join in Christ's world-changing campaign. Not dishonest. Not manipulative. Not exclusive. The Lord wants us to be ethical and honest but Jesus, who personally experienced our world of deception, abusive power and materialism, is also saying, "Don't just stand there. Do something!" Calling our selves Christians or a Christian church and doing nothing else is not enough. As followers of Jesus and a church of Christ we are called into action that aligns with God's kind of love and the ways of God's kindon.

Evangelist Dwight Moody was once on a ship crossing the Atlantic. The ship caught fire. The crew and passengers formed a bucket brigade to transport water to the

fire. One man in the line turned and said, “Mr. Moody, don’t you think you should retire from the line and go down and pray?” “You can go pray if you want to,” Moody replied, “but I’m going to pray while I pass the buckets.”<sup>iii</sup> Don’t just stand there yelling “Fire!” Don’t even just stand there praying it will change or get better when there is something to be done. Instead be on fire with purpose, jump into the bucket brigade line of saints-n-sinners throughout the ages and do what is needed to bring hope, healing and wholeness to the devouring, destructive powers of our hurting world.

There was a make-believe country where only ducks live. On Sunday morning all the ducks came to church, waddled down the aisle, waddled into their pew and squatted. Then the duck minister came in, took his place behind the pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read, “Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the skies. Ducks! You have wings!” All the ducks yelled, “Amen!” and then they all waddled home. No one flew. <sup>iv</sup> Maybe sometimes it takes some ducks to remind us there’s gifts to be used and a world that needs them. Maybe it can take a shady, shrewd rascal to remind us there’s no time to waste and we’re called to carry on Christ’s life-giving ways and mission, with creativity, decisiveness and energy. With imagination and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we’re out to change the world with a kind word or compassionate ear, with our contributions of food and resources, with caring for one another and ever seeking ways to bring alive peace, justice and mercy. Dreaming God’s dreams, keeping our eyes on Jesus, we stop our waddling and risk to soar in holy possibilities — trusting in God’s promise to be with us and fully expect something good and important to happen. What a great holy and meaningful way for a person and a church to live.

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## ENDNOTES

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i. Dan L. Flanagan, Creative Management as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)

ii. Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008 p. 337

iii. Stan Tole, God Has Never Failed me, But He Sure Has Sacred Me to Death a Few Times!" (Tulsa: Honor Books, 1995) repeated by King Duncan in his sermon, "Who Did He Praise?" [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com)

iv. Jim Burns, Radically Committed (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991) repeated by King Duncan in his sermon, "Who Did He Praise?" [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com)