

Wait...What?: Understanding the Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Many of you probably know JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. He also wrote many, many stories about the world he had created, Middle Earth, many of which his son published later as the book *The Silmarillion*. That book tells of the creation of Tolkien's universe—about how God created angels, who were meant to shepherd the planet until people were born. One of those angels rebelled against God and tried to take control, so that he could be a god over all the creatures that lived there. When confronted by the other angels, though, he was defeated, so he repented and pretended to be their friends. Because they were good people, the angels believed him and gave him a second chance. So he bided his time, sowing discord among them and, when the people of the world were born, he sowed discord between them and the angels.

As readers, we watch what happens in that book and wonder why the good angels didn't stop him earlier. Why were they fooled by him at all? Couldn't they see what we see—that this guy just cannot be trusted? Tolkien answers our questions by saying, simply, that the good angels were so good and kind, that they wanted what was right and believed so much in mercy, that they couldn't even fathom the kind of betrayal that was coming. Their goodness made it impossible for them to see the bad angel's evil.

Tolkien's story has a similar message to today's parable, except our parable is on a much smaller scale with much smaller stakes. In this parable, we have an unjust manager. Depending on how you translate the Greek, he has somehow been squandering or misusing his master's money—maybe he's lining his own pockets, maybe he's just mismanaging, but he's probably using his master's wealth to his own benefit (like taking his master's private jet for his personal vacation). When the master finds out and fires him, the manager is desperate. The economy of the time is different from ours. He can't just get a new job. He is about to be homeless with

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no income. His only option for a job is to start doing the kind of hard labor that usually is a death sentence or to beg on the streets.

So he comes up with a sneaky plan. He still has access to his master's records and, apparently, the people who owe his master debts haven't been told yet that he has been fired. So, in order to make those people like him, he works with them to change the receipts. He tells one guy to reduce what he owes the master by half and another to reduce it by about 20%. They both sign off on it and now the master is defrauded. The manager gets his revenge against the boss who fired him, while also gaining the thanks, loyalty, and friendship of the people whose financial debts he lowered. Pretty sneaky, right!?

But here's what might seem like a twist to us: When the master finds out, he praises the manager! Our Message translation explains that he appreciated the way the manager could look after himself. Other translations indicate that the master appreciated the manager's cleverness or shrewdness. In any case, we can see that the manager's tactics have worked to preserve him on all levels. He might even end up getting his job back for impressing the master with his cleverness.

And if that's not challenging enough, the lesson that Jesus teaches is even more confusing. You see, the original Greek of this parable is rather different than the translation I chose for today's bulletin. What the Greek actually says is this: "And his master commended the unjust 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 say to you, use the wealth of injustice to make friends for yourselves so that when it fails they may welcome you into the eternal dwellings." Wait...what? "Use the wealth of injustice to make friends for yourselves? Do this so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings?"

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This is an incredibly weird phrase and it seems to make no sense coming from Jesus. So what are we supposed to learn from it? Why would Jesus tell this story? Should we lie, cheat and steal if we don't like our leaders or if we think it will benefit us to do so? Are we supposed to use injustice to get what we want?

The short answer is absolutely not. We are asked to appreciate the cleverness of the manager so that we can understand how injustice in this world works and spot it for ourselves. We are supposed to figure out how to be clever for what is good, instead of for what is bad. How do I know this? Because of context—context has become a mantra throughout my sermon on the parables because, without context, we can make wildly inaccurate and even dangerous interpretations of scripture.

After making this super weird statement, Jesus goes on to tell his listeners (and here I'm using the NRSV translation):

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.”

In other words, right after telling this parable, Jesus immediately explains the importance of faithfulness, of avoiding dishonesty, and of putting God before wealth and materialism. Moreover, if we look at what Jesus says throughout all four Gospels, he absolutely encourages his followers to obey the laws of God, not only as expressed in the Ten Commandments that we heard today during Fresh Perspectives, but as expressed throughout all of scripture. He admonishes us to love God and neighbor as self. He encourages us

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to seek justice, to be kind and merciful. None of this behavior is consistent with lying and deceit. So it would seem that what he is praising here is the manager's cleverness.

That praise of cleverness, tempered with a love of God and God's call to justice is also consistent with the rest of scripture. We see that praise in the lesson from Proverbs that we heard this morning, for example, which encourages us to seek wisdom and understanding. In fact, that wisdom and understanding are necessary to help us from falling into injustice and unrighteousness:

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from God's mouth come knowledge and understanding;
God stores up sound wisdom for the upright
and is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path,
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
prudence will watch over you,
and understanding will guard you.

According to scripture, God values those who walk blamelessly. God values justice and righteousness. So, as our Message translation says, this parable is probably encouraging us to learn from the streetwise cleverness of those who are self-centered and unjust, not to become rogues and tricksters ourselves, but to use cleverness to work for righteousness.

That seems like a good message, right? But here's the caveat: Justice isn't achieved through unjust means, and learning from the trickster doesn't mean that we should use the tools of evil to defeat evil. Instead, we are being asked to be aware of what the unjust do

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and how they think, in order to counter it. This is an important lesson to remember in these times in which we live.

As we look around our country, we hear the voices of those who are sowing fear, hatred of minorities, and division in order to gain or maintain power. As students of history will tell us, it's a tactic that has been used throughout the centuries and usually to great effect. Since this is Labor Day weekend, I will use an example from the history of labor. Did you know that in the early days of this country back when it was still a British colony, black slaves, white indentured servants, and poor white laborers worked together to try to change their working conditions? In one example, the Bacon Rebellion, they rose up and worked together to "proclaim liberty to all servants and negroes." After the leader, Bacon, died, a truce was made. Then, the elite landowning class changed the laws. They pardoned the poor and indentured white people involved in the rebellion, but beat all black people. They then created militias out of those same white people, giving them the responsibility to oversee and capture any black slaves who rebelled or tried to escape. Thus, they created a divide between the black slaves of the United States and poorer white people, a divide between black and white that persists in many communities to this day. Thus, the wealthy and the powerful were able to keep their power and land, while perpetuating a system of injustice against all of the workers in our nation. Clever, right? Diabolically clever.

Likewise, our history shows us that when the righteous have been able to use their own cleverness and insight to identify and name what the unrighteous are doing, they have been able to counter it and work for the good of God's people. Understanding that the unrighteous succeeded through division, the Labor Movement in the United States originally unified many in the working class and ended up bringing us the 40-hour work week, the 8-hour work day, and the minimum wage so that everyone

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could have time with their families and a time of Sabbath rest. They put in place safety measures to protect workers and drastically reduced child labor. Likewise, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s united peoples of all colors to end Jim Crow laws and bring more equity to our siblings of color and a better nation for all of us. In short, when the followers of Jesus are able to see and understand the schemes of the unrighteous, we are able to overcome them.

The point is that as we make decisions, especially about political candidates in this election year or about leaders in general, we are asked to use our God-given cleverness and wisdom to cut through sneaky tactics and really discern and understand what is happening. We are asked, as the book of Proverbs tells us, to compare what the candidates say and how they act with what Jesus teaches us about how people should behave. And one way that we do that is by asking questions of ourselves: Is this candidate promoting policies that actively harm any of God's children, or do their policies support and uplift those who are most in need? How are the policies they promote alleviating suffering and injustice in this world? Do their policies show us that they love their neighbor as themselves or do their policies show them to be like the unjust manager—clever, but working only to stay in power?

The use of division and fear to sow distrust is a tool of the unrighteous. Jesus, though, was clever. He saw what the unjust were doing and openly named it, calling them vipers and hypocrites so that his followers wouldn't be fooled by them. Then he also constantly worked to unite those who the powerful took advantage of, to teach people to care for the oppressed, the outcasts, and the vulnerable. And, in parables like this one, he warned his listeners to be on the look-out for unjust cleverness and manipulation. It's not a message we often hear when we think about Jesus, but it's a

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practical one that we can be thankful for all the same. Thanks be to
God.