

If I were to create a top ten list of the most difficult parables in the Bible, today's parable from Luke would undoubtedly live at the top. This story feels like it belongs in the *National Inquirer*, not in the Holy Bible.

Jesus tells us to “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” Now that's a headline you don't expect to see in your Bible. I'll go ahead and make a note to include this one in the next installment of our “Jesus Said What?!” series.

Before we dig in, it helps to remember that parables don't all work the same way. Some convey a clear moral lesson. Others are mysterious, leaving us with more questions than answers.

Knowing what kind of parable we're dealing with is key—and while none fit neatly into any one category, this one feels especially difficult to diagnose.

To recap, a wealthy landowner employs a manager to oversee his property. Word gets out that this manager has been squandering the master's resources. He's about to be fired.

Facing unemployment, he decides to get smart. Before the pink slip arrives, he calls in his master's debtors and reduces their bills. Someone owes a hundred measures of oil, he makes it fifty. Why?

Because when he loses his job, he wants those debtors to feel indebted to him. They'll welcome him into their homes. He's securing his future by making friends through dishonest wealth.

And here's the kicker: instead of being furious, the master commends him. He praises the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. He makes him employee of the year!

And then Jesus says to his disciples, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Wait—what?
Two wrongs make a right? Wrong!

So what kind of parable is this?
It doesn't read like a simple moral lesson.
It doesn't sound like a kingdom parable, either—surely God doesn't encourage dishonesty. Nor does it feel like judgment, since the cheating goes unchecked. Some have read it as grace, or even as an allegory, but neither fits cleanly.

Maybe the best name is paradoxical parable—one that doesn't resolve neatly, but provokes us to wrestle, to think critically, to live in the tension.
Paradoxical parables challenge our tightly held beliefs

They invite us deeper into the mystery of faith.
And maybe that's good news—because if faith always gave us easy answers, I'm not sure that faith could carry us through the hardest parts of life.

We Episcopalians are well-equipped to live in the gray area,
to hold multiple interpretations in tension.
As a church born out of a compromise between Protestants and Catholics, we value a both/and approach—not an either/or.
But our scriptures—and our faith—invites us to hold to competing truths in tension.

The Bible itself models this tension.
Genesis doesn't give us one creation account but two.
In one, humanity is said to be very good.
In the other, humanity is formed from dust, vulnerable to temptation.

Each tells us something true about God and about ourselves.
The difference perspectives aren't meant to compete with one another.
They are meant to provide a more comprehensive understanding of divine and human nature.

God calls us very good.
And we are sinners in God's sight.
Both are true.
Both are needed to tell the whole story.

Even the New Testament embraces holding multiple truths in tension.
Why else would we have four gospels?
Each tells the story of Jesus differently, sometimes with details that don't line up.

But instead of choosing one version, the church preserved four.
For you skeptics, the church didn't willy nilly pick these four.
They excluded at least twice as many from the canon.
They had standards.

Even then, having four versions of the gospel feels messy.

Shouldn't there be one version of the truth?
If there are contradictions, how can we take the Bible seriously?

But maybe that's the point.

Our lives are messy too—full of contradictions—and yet God takes us seriously.
God loves us in all our complexity.

Just as scripture preserves multiple voices, the church today must also make space for multiple voices within Christianity.

In a world where many of us believe that one news source has a monopoly on the truth, embracing more than one voice is more important than ever.

I was struck by a recent piece in *Relevant Magazine* pointing out how quickly people say, “If the sermon doesn't hit my issue this week, I'll just find another church.”

That way of thinking reduces the church to a product we consume rather than a community we belong to.

It assumes that one sermon—or one perspective—can capture the whole gospel.

The truth is, the gospel is always bigger than a single voice,
which means sometimes we'll be challenged or unsettled.

And that's actually the gift of the church—not one perspective has to get right.

As in scripture, God sends forth his Word with voices that comfort us and voices that stretch us, and in that tension the fullness of God's Word is revealed.

The Church is not immune for the polarization our culture is currently experiencing.

Even within the Church, there is a pressure of choosing this type of Christianity or that type.

To make matters more complicated, we've attached political labels to the various types of Christianity.

Generally speaking, we are being asked to choose between a Christianity that focuses on personal righteousness and one that focuses on social justice.

From a place of fear, we resort to either/or.

From a place of trust, we can embrace both/and.

A Christianity focused on personal righteousness looks like focusing on morality, holiness, repentance, evangelism, orthodoxy.

Its strength is a deep relationship with God.

Its danger, when taken to extremes, breeds judgment or indifference to toward the other especially toward the “least of these.”

The other leans toward social justice and looks like confronting poverty, racism, climate change, inequality.

Its strength is compassion and solidarity.

Its danger, when taken to the extreme, reduces faith to activism or neglecting personal transformation.

Both can distort the gospel message if they stand alone.

And maybe the parable of the dishonest manager has something to teach us here.
The parable refuses to give us a neat answer.
The parable forces us to live in tension.

But that's what discipleship is supposed to look like.
Jesus isn't calling us to choose between righteousness and justice.
He is calling us to live at their intersection—
to love God and neighbor,
to proclaim truth and practice compassion.

Just as the Bible holds multiple perspectives, the church is called to do the same.
And as Episcopalians, we are uniquely equipped to live in this space,
to trust that God's truth is being worked out even and especially when it seems
contradictory.
In a world that forces us to pick sides, that's a gift the world desperately needs.

The richness of the gospel cannot be contained in one voice, one version, one
denomination, one emphasis.
And maybe that's why Jesus commends the manager—not for dishonesty, but for
shrewdness.
He took what he had—relationships, resources, influence—and used them to secure a
future.

What if Jesus is challenging us to do the same?
To use our money, our time, our connections, our compassion—
not to serve ourselves,
but to prepare for God's kingdom?

Preparing for the kingdom won't always look neat and tidy.
Sometimes it will feel messy.
But that's where our faith lies.

The Word made Flesh, our Lord and Savior, was, after all,
born in a manger to lowly parents in the little town of Bethlehem.
God can work with messy. Why?
Because messy is all there is.

When the parables don't resolve neatly, we are invited to trust God more deeply.
When the Bible preserves multiple versions of the same story, it teaches us to seek truth in

the tension.

When the church holds righteousness and justice together, it shows us the gospel is bigger than any one agenda.

And the good news is this: we don't have to hold that tension on our own.

Jesus Christ holds us together in it—righteousness and justice,
holiness and compassion—
until the day God's kingdom comes in full.

That is the news this world is hungry to know.

News we are equipped to share.

News that heals instead of divides.

News that is summed up in the life, death, and resurrection of
The One who is fully human and fully divine.

The One who sounds like a lion but looks like a lamb.

The One whose kingship is defined by servanthood.

The One who opened the gate to life through his own death.

Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Amen.