

Ordinary C 25 September 20/21, 2025 Greenwich

Is Jesus really praising a thief who cooks the books to save his own skin?

To make sense of the parable, let me tell you another story.

It's not a fairy tale, so it does not begin, "Once upon a time." It's about a cocaine kingpin, Harry "The Horse" Henderson and his major distributor, "Fat Philly" Phillips, who was also Harry's enforcer, confidant and friend---though in the world of drug dealing, friendship might only be a relative term.

Harry found out that Fat Philly was skimming some of the product and the cash. So, Harry summoned out-of-town help to engage Philly in a "persuasive conversation" about the virtues of "repentance" and the return of the stolen property.

Well, Fat Philly had good sources of information----the only way to survive in his business.

These sources informed Philly that Big Vinny and Leroy were on their way from Chicago, and they knew where Fat Philly lived.

This got Fat Philly's attention. Always a careful planner, he sat down and wrote out a balance sheet, with his pluses and minuses.

Now, his minuses were rather obvious: Big Vinny and Leroy, as well as one ticked off Harry "The Horse."

And given the nature of his job as Harry's collector and enforcer, Philly also had to mark down on the minus side all the customers whose arms he had twisted, quite literally, in extracting payment for the cocaine over the years.

What could he put down on the plus side?

Well, the one sure asset was his stash of cocaine. Fat Philly took the last shipment of coke and the product he had skimmed off previous deals., and he sold it all to his usual customers and middlemen at cost, far below street value. One last rip-off of Harry “The Horse.”

When Henry found out that Philly’s plan, he didn't call off Leroy and Big Vinny.

And Philly didn't turn himself into the authorities and testify against Harry---I told you, this isn't a fairy tale----but Harry ruefully had to admire Philly's ingenuity and his brass----well, his brass.

Those who hated and feared Fat Philly, the former enforcer and collector, now loved Philly, and they helped him keep two steps ahead of Big Vinny and Leroy.

And of course, they all had a great laugh, and more than a few tokens, at the expense of Harry “The Horse.”

The end.

In his parable, Jesus is not praising the manager's dishonesty, and he wouldn't praise the slimeballs in my melodrama.

Rather, Jesus is drawing a startling picture of someone caught in a crisis. That manager, and my character Philly, act decisively. They aren't paralyzed by self-pity or fear.

Each one had the foresight to store up resources in the good times, so that he had something to draw on in the time of crisis.

And Jesus lays down a disturbing challenge: “Why are drug dealers and dishonest managers better equipped to deal with their crises, than those who hear and claim to follow Jesus?”

Why are we so halfhearted and diffident about making God's reign and God's values the center and touchstone of our lives?

Why do we, who are drawn into the company of Christ the Liberator and Healer, why do we get paralyzed by fear and self-pity?

Why aren't we wise enough to store up the resources in good times that we will need for the crisis?

Krisis---the word means crossroads, the point where we have to make a choice----that crisis comes upon all of us, in big ways and small.

Sometimes it involves a moral choice: Will I cheat on my taxes? On my spouse? Will I make peace with my neighbor? With a family member?

Those kind of crises are somewhat predictable, and we can arm ourselves with resources needed to face them successfully.

We can budget responsibly; we can work at our marriages; we can apologize and forgive.

Those disciplines and skills equip us to live faithfully, because we all know that if we get into a financial hole, it's harder not to cheat; if we take our spouse for granted, it's easier to stray. And if we can't say "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you," the rift grows deeper, the wall higher.

Other crises are existential: a loved one dies; loneliness overwhelms you; you lose your job; an old enemy reaches out a hand of reconciliation; you don't get anything out of church any more, yet feel a new, deeper yearning for God, or for the Transcendent, or for something you can't quite name.

Those kinds of crises will overtake each of us, And Jesus invites us to be prepared, by joining ourselves to him, and to the Christian community, ever more fully, now, in the times when he is near and easier to glimpse.

He invites us to get into the habit of choosing for him and for God's reign, on a daily basis, on a small scale, so that we will be better able to choose for God when the crisis is sharper and the stakes are higher.

If you begin to recognize here and now that God counts riches and poverty in a radically different way than our culture does, and you align yourself with God's way, you are less likely to be taken in by the false promises you might face in career choices and business decisions.

If you are generous in small ways now, with your time, talent and treasure, you will resist being skimpy and miserly as a spouse and a parent, when family life makes enormous demands upon your pocketbook and your patience.

If you get to know the Lord Jesus, and his values, and his way of seeing reality, now, on a daily basis, in prayer, Scripture and the sacraments, faith sharing and the Ignatian Examen, you will more easily see him when your eyes are brimming with tears, as you mourn the loss of love, or the loss of a loved one, or your own approaching death.

God's daily gifts of Word and Sacrament can supply the wisdom and the courage we need in the time of crisis, so that we can see through Christ's eyes and choose with Christ's heart, and thus become his face and hands in the world.

When we feast on his Word and Eucharist, we become what we receive: we become The Body of Christ.

And when he returns, Jesus will find us ready for that final crisis, that decisive choice for God's eternal reign. Amen.