

I DON'T GET IT

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

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September 21, 2025

Pentecost 15

1st Timothy 2:1-7

First of all, I urge that prayers be offered for everyone – petitions, intercessions and thanksgivings – and especially for rulers and those in authority, so that we may be able to live godly and reverent lives in peace and quiet. To do this is right, and will please God our Saviour, who wants everyone to be saved and to reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humankind - Christ Jesus, who was one of us, and who at the proper time sacrificed himself as a ransom and a testimony for all. Because of this I have been appointed to be a preacher, and apostle, and – this is the truth, now, I'm not lying – a faithful and honest teacher to the Gentiles.

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a wealthy landowner who, having received reports of a steward mismanaging the property, summoned the steward and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Give me an account of your service, for it’s about to come to an end.’ The steward thought, ‘What will I do next? My employer is going to fire me. I can’t dig ditches. I’m ashamed to go begging. I have it! Here’s a way to make sure that people will take me into their homes when I’m let go.’ “So the steward called in each of the landowner’s debtors. The steward said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my employer?’ The debtor replied, ‘A hundred jars of oil.’ The steward said, ‘Take your invoice, sit down quickly and make it fifty.’ To another the steward said, ‘How much do you owe?’ The answer came, ‘A hundred measures of wheat,’ and the steward said, ‘Take your invoice and make it eighty.’ “Upon hearing this, the owner gave this devious worker credit for being enterprising! Why? Because the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light. So I tell you: make friends for yourselves through your use of this world’s goods, so that when they fail you, you’ll be welcomed into an eternal home. If you can trust others in little things, you can also trust them in greater, and anyone unjust in a slight matter will also be unjust in greater. If you can’t be trusted with filthy lucre, who will trust you with true riches? And if you haven’t been trustworthy with someone else’s money, who will give you your own? “Subordinates can’t have two superiors. Either they’ll hate the one and love the other, or be attentive to the one and despise the other. You can’t worship both God and Money.”



New Testament scholar Marcus Borg defined who Jesus was with three simple phrases.

- Jesus was a mystic healer.
- Jesus was an enlightened wisdom teacher.
- Jesus was a social prophet.

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Biblical scholars pretty much agree that Matthew and Luke (as gospel writers) shared a common source that we don't have independently. It is thought to have been maybe an oral source, an oral gospel, or maybe one that was written but is no longer in written form other than what we can put together by what is common between Matthew and Luke that isn't in Mark. And if we do take a look at those parallel passages between Matthew and Luke, we'll see that it's almost always Jesus talking. So this source (known in the biblical scholarship world as Q from the German word *Quelle* for source). Q is a collection of sayings of Jesus. And so Matthew and Luke have a lot more of Jesus' sayings than Mark does. In fact, Mark has eight what we might call parables, teaching stories. Matthew has 23 and Luke has 24. Parables are those stories where the message is often in the metaphor. Sometimes that message is easy to see, sometimes it's not. Parables always have those two levels. There's the story level of what the actual story is and then there's the meaning level that Jesus is really wanting the crowds to be thinking about.

Last week we heard two of the three parables in Luke 15. Similar stories of rejoicing when something that was lost was found. Actually pretty easy to interpret. In fact, the gospel writer gives us the interpretation. You know, if we'd have just heard the story, I lost a sheep. I found it. We had a party. I lost a coin. I found it. We had a party. My son who was estranged came home and we had a party. That'd be the story. But Luke even inserts what the moral is. There's more rejoicing over a sinner who repents than 99 who don't need it.

Today, the next section in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 16, is not quite as easy for me to figure out. In fact, you know, I don't really get it. There's actually three different teaching parts in what we heard today in verses 1 to 13.

- The first nine verses is the parable of the dishonest manager where the message in the literal part of the story seems to be it's smart to use illgotten gains (*lucra* as the translation in the our reading said. I didn't even know what the word *lucre* meant. I had to look it up because I thought it was a typo. It just means illgotten gains basically). It's smart to use illgotten gains to get people to owe you favors. That seems to be the literal message in that first nine verses.
- Then there's a couple verses that are statements about trustworthiness. Watch what someone does in a small situation and that'll give you a pretty good idea of what they're going to do in a bigger situation. If they cheat in small things, they're probably going to cheat in big things. If they're faithful in small things, they're probably going to be faithful in big things.
- And then the last verse, again, a separate piece. It's basically a proverb that Jesus shares that you can't serve both God and wealth.

It's that parable (those first nine verses) that confuse me and I just don't get the parable of the unjust steward, the dishonest manager.

Now, before the story even starts, we learn that the manager has been caught in their embezzlement. And the boss says, "Bring me the books. I need to make sure that you can account for every denarius. And then, I'm going to fire you. I just want to know what the numbers are before you go." Now, some nonprofits have had this sad experience; nonprofits are often rely on volunteer treasurers. You need checks and balances with nonprofits and volunteer treasures. You know, you need two signatures on cheques. You need that second signature to actually look and see what the cheque is

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for. Just earlier this year it was in the news that there was a youth soccer team that was getting ready to go to a tournament in Las Vegas and found out that \$40,000 was missing from their tournament fund and the coach was nowhere to be found. By the time the problem is noticed, the money is gone.

I think that's what's happened in this parable. By the time the boss figures out that there's a problem, the money's gone. I kind of wonder if Jesus is saying that what that coach did was okay. It's okay to be the unjust manager, especially if you use some of that money to gain favors and spend it on stuff that'll help you have a better life afterwards.

Now, the parable begins. The manager knows that they're caught and they know they need to avoid the worst of their post employment life. So they earn favors by (before losing control of the books) calling the various people who owe money to the boss and offer them discounts if you pay today. And these people say, well, you know, it's a good deal. I'll pay a little bit and then I'm off the books. I don't owe the rest. Then there's the part that I just don't get. This boss, who is presumably the metaphor for God in the story, approves of this plan to give all these people discounts. "That it's a good plan to shrewdly cost me (as the boss) more money to set yourself up for the future. I'm so impressed by your dishonest scheme that I would say you're heavenbound.

And here's how I know that verse 9 and verses 10 to 13 are not part of that original teaching is because they immediately contradict what was just said. Right? Verses 1 to 9: cheating and dishonesty is wise. Verses 10 to 12 if you cheat a little bit it's going to make you untrustworthy with anything big. And 13... if wealth is your master, God is not.

Now, I get Timothy. I get praying to live in peace. Even in the context of a first century world where there is no such thing as accountable leaders to the populace. The rulers are people who are there by their extreme wealth or their military might or some claim to divine monarchy. There's no choice. All the people had was prayer. They couldn't oust them at the next election. They couldn't get a petition together. They couldn't gather signatures to change policy. All they had was prayer; or revolution, but that was pretty rare. And so, the letter of Timothy is saying, let's do what we can.

This Timothy passage is very popular at community prayer breakfasts, where we pray for our leaders because that's what it says. Pray for all those who are rulers and those in high positions. But what we miss is that it actually starts by saying, "Pray for everyone. Pray for everyone." A peaceable life begins with good and caring and supportive on the ground face-to-face connections, not just something that's top down. Even in the most authoritarian, oppressive context, we could live peaceful lives amongst each other.

Now I get that we can't really serve God and wealth: that this divine connection is relational and if all of our efforts are on the accumulation and the gathering of wealth (inherently a selfish activity) and selfishness and greed are not spirit motivated. I get that.

And I get the other one too. I get that you can't be righteous. If you can't be righteous and virtuous in small ways, then you probably won't be able to fake it during the big ways. It's not like virtuosity and righteousness and faithfulness and trustworthiness is a switch. You can just turn off and on. Authenticity counts for something.

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But I don't get why the wealthy boss is so impressed with the conniving and cheating manager. Why does Jesus tell this parable? What is the message that Jesus is trying to send?

I pay attention to a lot of Jesus' teaching stories. And I've done that long enough that I know that the message is seldom in the literal facts of the story. The lesson is beyond the literal. Usually we have to look behind those literal details and find the spiritual details that are implied. Sometimes like with the lost stories, the gospel writer includes in the text what they think the interpretation is. There seems to be a little of attempt at that in this one, but I still don't quite make the connection.

The literal facts. We don't know really for sure what this wealthy person does to earn their living. Very likely it's agrarian-based. Most first century wealth came from controlling the use of land. But we can assume that the operation is large enough that the boss doesn't have to look after the day-to-day details. They don't have to be on the ground. There's a management level that looks after that kind of stuff. And we can assume that the wealthy boss's goal is to just get wealthier, right? To turn what we have now into more.

And that's true today for any for-profit business. You maximize your revenues, you minimize your expenses. The goal is the bottom line. Whatever excess you have can go to dividends or it can go to executive salaries or it can go to investments to make money from money. Sometimes you might invest in an expansion to create even a bigger operation that can presumably make more and it's really only held in check by whatever laws and regulations can be enforced a little bit. There's public opinion that can help if your company is unethical enough in enough people's minds. They might say, "We're not going to do business with them." And so they'll do what they need to do to earn people's trust beyond what simply the product is. Nonprofits are different. Nonprofits try to maximize revenue and maximize their expenses. In fact, it's the other way around. They want to spend as much as they can. They want to do as much as they can and they try and get the revenue to be able to do that. With nonprofits if they have a surplus it's simply for a cash flow purpose or it's for some future project that will need some startup money.

So why is the boss happy with accepting the lower cash flow from the accounts payables than was due?

Here's the best I can do to try and understand Jesus' motives for telling the story. Even the most selfish of us will likely come to the realization that we can't live this life completely alone. That fostering some kind of back and forth mutually reliant relationship can make our futures better. Loneliness is a horrible thing to be left with. Now, how the characters in this particular story go about that can legitimately be viewed as problematic, even unethical. But they wind up in mutually beneficial relationships that make the next steps of their life easier. Even the boss is forward thinking enough to realize that sacrificing some revenue in the short term is better than losing his clients for future business.

Is that what you're saying, Jesus? Are we to be thinking outside the box to find good and life-giving relationships? That in the end, however we get there, recognizing that we need each other in some way or another is valuable.

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I'll be honest, Jesus, it's not one of your best ones.

In fact, I think the author of Luke had the exact same concerns that I do with the parable because like I said earlier, left on its own, it might sound like Jesus is giving the church, the followers, the people of Jesus' way, giving us permission to cheat to get ahead: ends justifying the means. See, I think that's why Luke put those other two teachings right below this parable because those ones aren't ambiguous.

- Be trustworthy in small things and you can be trusted in big things. Don't try to get away with minor unjust behavior because people then won't trust you in the major stuff. It's actually kind of saying, "I've just shared a story about this dishonest manager, but don't be like the dishonest manager in the above story."
- And then Luke adds the third part of the story, part of the section, serve God, not your own greedy self-interest.

So, we can see between the lines and between the problematic parts that in the end, we need each other if we're going to find our way into a better future. And Luke is reminding us not to get too stuck on the literal details and see that message underneath.

If that's what that all means, then maybe I get it... a bit.

Let's pray.

Thank you God for challenging scripture. Amen.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg