

Rev. Ali Donohue

Yale University

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If today's Gospel passage leaves you at all confused, know that you are not alone.

Scholars carry on quite a bit about this passage, complaining it poses "significant theological challenges." Commentators call it "difficult to read and difficult to preach." Others say, "None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like this story." Frequently called the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, it is said to have "stumped even the best and most creative interpreters of Scripture."

Why would Jesus tell us a morality tale where the main character is not honest, who is apparently neither good at his job nor hard working enough to want a different one, and who first squanders the estate and then squanders it some more by reducing what is owed the landowner?

Surely, we read the story and find ourselves horrified and embarrassed by his behavior, and we are eager for the landowner to punish him, which he doesn't do. So we wait for Jesus to call him out and he doesn't either! "For the children of this age," Jesus says, "are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Instead he commends him for being

shrewd and actually says the steward understands something important about people. It's the believers who don't.

And I took that personally.

In our defense, we weren't there to see Jesus' facial expression or his tone of voice, and the Bible titles this parable "The Dishonest Manager!" What else are we to conclude? But those around him didn't get it either, and they had the benefit of those things, so it's possible it really wouldn't have helped us. Still, of course we all want to get it. We want to at least be able to ask a follow-up question. Most of us don't like being told we don't understand something, especially when we are pretty aware that *we don't understand something*. It's uncomfortable.

Is it wrong to be embarrassed by the manager's behavior, to disapprove of his dishonesty? Is it wrong to want to see him punished? Should we not be shocked that neither the landowner nor Jesus do this? That somehow this story becomes a lesson *for us*? *What did we do?*

Well, it is possible that the common reaction itself convicts us. Our expectation that the manager will be dealt with swiftly itself proves Jesus' point, that we don't get it. Because it reveals a real blindness to something.

We know that back in Jesus' time — sadly, as it is now — the poor were always at the mercy of the rich, who took the best and the most of what the land produced. The gap between the rich and poor was a chasm — a chasm created, defended and per-

petuated by the rich who benefitted from it the most. And the manager, aware he is about to be fired, has (according to this parable) three options, all of them bad: dig for a living, become a street beggar, or be dependent on the mercy of others for his housing and therefore his survival. The story tells us: this person had nothing of his own. After working likely for years for this landowner, he still has nothing to show for it. He had no house and family to return to to “regroup,” edit his resume, and hope for the best. This system gave him nothing. There was no safety net.

This shouldn't sound unfamiliar. We read about Amazon founder Jeff Bezos - *a man whose net worth is estimated at \$150 billion* — has this belief that after three years good employees do two things: they expect a raise and they get complacent. So he set up an employment system built on this belief that intentionally creates high turnover so that most leave in three years. The United States just narrowly averted a railroad strike that was about to occur because railroad owners were, among other things, refusing to allow for paid sick days. They were penalized for taking a day off when their children were born. More examples abound. I am sure we've all read them.

And I would bet that many of us did not know the true labor conditions until the workers cried out about it, threatening to strike, threatening to literally derail our supply chain. Then we paid attention.

I don't know about you, but I am always surprised when I hear about these unjust employment situations, I truly am. And I can only be surprised if I *assume that they are already just*.

In today's Gospel, we have zero evidence that the landowning system was just, that this landlord was fair. In fact, we have evidence it isn't! Without this job, the manager is utterly destitute. Within a just economic system, with a fair boss, the manager's behavior was wrong. But within an unjust system, which is what it was, it was survival. And when a system is so stacked against you, it can be impossible to simultaneously play by its rules and live a good life.

The new ECY treasurer, Jim Seymour, works in emerging markets, and he was talking to me about a project he's working on where he helps young women in some African countries finance their education. "Half of them," he reported, "are paying for their education through prostitution." Because the economic system is so unjust, so exploitative, it leaves young women with an impossible choice: I will be condemned to a life of poverty if I am not educated. But to get educated I must turn to prostitution. When those are your choices, the problem is not the individual; the problem is the system.

And when he told me about this issue, I was surprised to hear about this one, too.

And in this way, Jesus is right: as a "child of the light" as Jesus calls it, as a person of faith — there is something I am not seeing.

How many times must I be surprised by a new example of the same pattern? And what makes people of faith more susceptible to this error? Why do we think the manager should have been disciplined? Do we want the world to be fundamentally good so much that we are blind to the bad? Do we like order and rules so much that we think we all have a duty to at least try to live within this rules, without ever reckoning with how just they are? That's for each of us to ponder.

Jesus was highly alert to injustice, to abuses of power, to the corrupting influence of money, and to the excessive burdens society displaces onto the poor. He never seemed surprised by them. And he spoke out against these practices to the people who benefitted from them the most. "You cannot serve God and money," he says to them. And he reached out to the people who suffer within them and because of them, offering them a healing, transformative encounter with God, an encounter that does not change the system but silences its message that the poor are the ones at fault somehow.

Today, Jesus is urging us to be shrewd. To see with clear eyes the injustice around us, and reach out in love — not judgment — to those whom it hurts.

Amen.