

The Dishonest Manager



Luke 16:8 "And his master commended the dishonest manager,"
(Jesus said,) "because he had acted shrewdly."

Perhaps aware of our own human frailties, there is in most of us a certain innate human sympathy for the underdog, as best exemplified by our cultural appropriation and meme of the story of David and Goliath. There are, in fact, numerous biblical stories where weaker, cunning individuals are often celebrated over their more commanding opponents; where the underdog wins not by strength or military power, but by cleverness or shrewdness. For example, the great Patriarch Abraham twice saves his own life by passing off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister, even though she temporarily ends up in the Pharaoh's harem on one occasion. The Patriarch Jacob famously tricks his

brother Esau out of his inheritance and then out of his paternal blessing. Joseph tricks his brothers when he is Prime Minister of Egypt and saves the family from a famine. Miriam deceives the Pharaoh himself and saves Moses from the bulrushes. Tamar dresses as a prostitute to trick Judah into having sex with her, thus preserving the future Davidic line. Delilah repeatedly tricks Samson. And the left-handed Ehud tricks the King of Moab by being left-handed and kills him. And finally, Jael seduces the Canaanite King into her bed to rest, only then to drive a tent peg through his temple.

Such tricksters and con-artists remain popular protagonists even today, as clearly seen in contemporary film, literature, and theatre. We all seem to enjoy unwinding the intricacies of a good scam and analyzing the human foibles that make them work. Unlike most criminals, we seem naturally disposed to like confidence men --- even to admire them.

Whatever the reason for our present-day admiration of con artists, it is not something new. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about just such a con-man who is squandering his master's riches. In this simple parable, a certain rich man had a dishonest steward. Perhaps the manager was skimming some of the profit off the top, we do not know for sure. What we do know is that charges were brought against him and the rich man fired him and told the dishonest manager to turn in his accounts. But the dishonest manager was a clever fellow, and he worried about

what he would do now with his life and how he would earn his keep? He was not strong enough to dig and make an honest living, and he was too ashamed to beg. So, in his cleverness the dishonest manager came up with the perfect scheme. He called in his master's debtors one by one to rewrite their accounts, "Tell me, my friend, how much you owe my master? Sit down quickly and write something less instead." In this way the debtors decreased their debt to his master, but thus in turn increased their debt to him, the dishonest manager. Presumably therefore, the dishonest manager could count upon their assistance later when he was out of work and needed help. These former debtors would welcome him into their homes, he thought. It also seems that the master became aware of this ploy, yet there was apparently nothing he could do about it. He did, however, commend the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.

What sense can we make of this basic human tendency to admire con-artists and tricksters, admired sometimes even by those who get cheated by them? It is not an easy thing to understand. The Gospel writer Luke struggles so much to make sense of this parable that he attaches no fewer than four different morals to the end of this story. And it is the preponderance of these morals that sometimes makes this simple tale seem more complex and confusing than it really is.

1) For instance, immediately after the master commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, Luke notes that "the

children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Luke's explanation here seems to be that if only Christians were as shrewd in their attempts to be good, as the dishonest manager in the parable was in his attempt to attain money and comfort, then Christians would be better at being Christians. If only we would give as much attention to the things which concern our souls as we do to the things which concern our business and our domestic life, then we would all be much better persons. This explains why the rich man admired his dishonest manager, for his cleverness.

2) In the next verse the moral seems to change a bit though. Here Luke suggests that material possessions should be used to cement friendships, whatever the cost. "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." The manager is commended here for establishing close friendships with his master's debtors, even though it was by unworthy means.

3) Next Luke provides the moral that a person's fitness or unfitness to be entrusted with a bigger task depends upon how he handles smaller ones. "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?" The manager in the

story was unfaithful and dishonest with the little he was given and thus ends up with nothing.

4) Finally, the last moral is the one most often remembered from this story; a moral that is quoted more often than the parable itself; namely, "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 this moral the dishonest manager, though admired for some things, is finally discredited, for in the end he served himself, not his master. This is the crucial point of the story, and the other morals at the end of the reading only get in the way of it, I think. One cannot serve one's own interests while at the same time serving someone else's. Those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will save them. We cannot serve two masters.

But we often think that we can, and that we are different from others. Indeed, we sometimes con ourselves into believing it. We rationalize our little dishonest acts in life, as being something other than self-serving. And I think that is why we admire the dishonest manager and other such con-artists as much as we do, because we see a bit of ourselves in them. For at times, we are all con-artists. In little ways and sometimes in bigger ones, we deceive, delude, exaggerate, and cheat the truth about ourselves, all so that we are justified in the sight of others. In little ways and sometimes in bigger ones, we tell

little 'white' lies, we obfuscate a bit on our taxes, we break the law in little ways and sometimes bigger, we exaggerate our importance and position to our friends, we mislead our spouses and family about what's happening in our lives, we refuse to honor our church or charities in the manner we know that we should, and we just generally misrepresent ourselves, just so that we are perceived by others as clever or earnest or nice or generous or religious or something other than what we really are. But we do so at what price?

We become like the dishonest manager, accruing for ourselves the things admired by our friends, like cleverness, or earnestness, or friendship, like money, and power, and prestige, we go about acquiring all these things but then are lacking in the things that really matter, lacking in the things of the heart; like honesty, integrity, devotion, compassion, and love. And we convince ourselves that it's alright as long as no one knows what con-artists we really are. We sell ourselves short.

I am reminded of a scene in the movie "The Family Man," starring Nicholas Cage, a kind of modern remake of "It's A Wonderful Life." There is a scene where Nicholas Cage, the angel, is serving as a cashier at a local bodega. Here he deliberately gives a young woman change for \$10, when she had given him only \$1, watching to see how she responds, and saddened that she was so willing to sell her integrity for just \$9.

Similarly, in the critically acclaimed movie, "The Grifters," the real ugliness of dishonesty and distrust in con-artists is clearly seen as ultimately destructive, even between a loving mother and her child. In the end, we cannot serve two masters.

I remember the Old Catechism's response as to why lying was a sin. Lying was a sin, it said, because it means that we care more about the judgments of others than of God. We lie and cheat and steal in all sorts of small ways, and we think its okay, because we are clever and earnest and admired in the eyes of our friends. We are justified in the sight of others.

Real honesty is difficult and painful, as evidenced in the Reading Club's current selection of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter." Real honesty there is healing for one, and fatal for the other, for the one who hides the truth about himself. We do not want to be truly honest about ourselves to others, or at times even to ourselves. We do not have the courage to be truthful, so we just pretend that we are honest. We become con-artists instead. But this is not the way of God. And so, we become more like the dishonest manager, who justifies himself before his friends --- but alas God knows our hearts, however shrewd we may be. The dishonest manager, in the end, is dishonest. It is simply a question of integrity. How much then is our integrity worth to us? If we had to choose between honesty and shrewdness, which would we pick? For the one is

admired by other people, and the other is admired by God. Whom
then do we seek to serve, for we know, that in the end we cannot
serve two masters. AMEN