

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Twenty Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 21, 2025
1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

"Scoundrels Like US"

I heard a story the other day about a fellow who walked into a doctor's office. The receptionist asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles." So she took down his name, address, medical insurance number and told him to have a seat. Fifteen minutes later a physician's assistant took him back to the examination room and asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles." So, she took down his height, weight, a complete medical history, and told him to wait for the doctor. Ten minutes later a nurse came in and asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles." So she gave him a blood test and a blood pressure test, told him to take off all his clothes and wait for the doctor. Fifteen minutes later the doctor came in and asked him what he had. He said, "Shingles." The doctor said, "Where?" The man said, "Outside in the truck. Where do you want them?"

Sometimes, we don't get the right answer because we don't ask the right question, or we don't ask enough questions. That would appear to be the case in dealing with today's parable which Luke records in chapter 16. This is without a doubt, the most difficult parable Jesus ever told because its conclusion is so surprising. But perhaps we have so much trouble with this parable because we haven't asked enough questions about it. Let's look at the parable first.

Here we've got a wealthy man who calls his manager in on his oriental carpet to accuse him of mismanagement. The manager's response is total silence - which we assume means that he is guilty. The rich man fires him on the spot, but doesn't throw him in prison, which he would have been entitled to do. As soon as the manager leaves his boss' office, he starts figuring out what to do. "I'm too weak to dig ditches and too proud to beg," he thought to himself. Then he hatched his plan. "I'll call my boss' debtors in one-by-one and forgive them the interest I was charging them before they hear that I have been fired. This will ingratiate me with the debtors, who will then feel obliged to help me during my unemployment."

When the rich man gets wind of this scheme, instead of chastising him, he praises the cleverness of the ex-manager. That's the part that gives most of us trouble - the boss (whom we all figure represents God) commends the dishonest manager. "How could God condone such behavior?" we ask. But if we stop asking questions there, we've stopped

short of other important questions: Is the boss praising the man's dishonesty or is he praising his cleverness? Why does it bother us that there is something praiseworthy in a scoundrel? Why does the boss praise the ex-manager?

As to the first question, there is nothing in the parable to suggest that the boss praises the ex-manager's dishonesty. What he praises is his cleverness - my translation uses "shrewdness." It's difficult for us to think of shrewdness as a positive trait because it has become commonly associated with unethical and even illegal activities. But the essence of shrewdness is someone who sizes up all the options and chooses the one that is best for him. What happened was that the dishonest manager put tremendous trust in his boss' capacity for mercy. He knew that his boss was merciful, otherwise he would have been thrown into prison, instead of just being fired. So, banking on that mercy, he devised a plan to lop off the interest rate he was charging the debtors, which would make both him and his master look good.

When his boss discovered what he was doing, he had two choices: go to each debtor, tell them that the manager had no right to forgive part of their debt, reinstate their debt in full, and look mean and vengeful; or accept the good will and the reputation for mercy that the dishonest manager had created for him. The boss, who was indeed merciful, chose the later and accepted this benefit to his image.

In the same way, our God is a merciful God, who seizes every opportunity to demonstrate his mercy to us (even when we act like scoundrels) which is the nature of mercy - if we deserve what we get, then it's only justice. Mercy is getting more than we deserve.

That brings us to the second question: Why does it bother us that the boss praises the dishonest manager? Could it be because we want simple answers to complex questions? Here's what I mean. The unemployed manager was, by his own admission of silence, dishonest. But that doesn't make him 100% bad, any more than your sin or my sin makes us 100% bad. We are all a mixed bag of good and evil. Nothing I do is purely good. Neither is the bad that I do purely bad. Everything that you and I do is a bit of both - most often more of one than the other, but still a mix of motives. There are thousands of men and women in prison for the sinful things they have done who are also loving, generous and loyal to their families. There are thousands of decent citizens in the free world who, at times, do and say mean, hateful, and hurtful things. There are commendable qualities in the worst of us and shameful qualities in the best of us.

It becomes apparent that the reason the boss praises the dishonest manager is because the boss is generous and merciful. In a very real sense, he paid the full price for his

manager's life. And that is exactly what our God did and still does in Jesus Christ - pays for our salvation.

Like it or not, we are forced to admit that we have a lot more in common with the dishonest manager whose behavior is sometimes commendable and sometimes less than commendable, than with the merciful boss. Thank God that God continues to seek out that in us which is commendable and forgives the un-commendable. Lord knows we don't deserve it, but that's the nature of mercy.

We are a moral and ethical mess, which makes it even more incumbent to have a savior who will save us from ourselves and our own desires. It would be better still if we could have a savior who understands our mixed natures - someone who has gone through what we face in life and can pull us through whatever comes. That's just who we have in Jesus.

The world branded him a criminal. He consorted with folks whose natures, social and economic status were diverse. He died, a scoundrel in the eyes of the world, with a criminal on either side. He became one of us in order to save us. Another way of putting it is: He "doctors" the ledger of our account with God and forgives us.

You see, not only are we like the manager in the story, so is Jesus, in this respect. In all his dealings with sinners and tax collectors, every time he pronounced, "Go your sins are forgiven," Jesus "cooked the books" of divine judgement. Christ, as God's agent or manager, forgives our debts and offers us grace.

The parable, it turns out is made difficult only by our biases and preconceived notions about the way the kingdom of God works. We think it works like our world does, but thank God it doesn't! God's core principle is love and grace, but we're not used to that in our everyday lives. We keep trying to conceive of God as being like us rather than the other way around. We have a hard time accepting that God really does love all people; that God really does offer forgiveness to all people; that God's grace really does take precedence over everything else, at all times (Have you heard that somewhere before?).

But Jesus was telling us all the time in the way he interacted with others and in his teaching that God loves scoundrels like us. God knows us better than we know ourselves and still loves us. And don't worry about admitting to your own "scoundrel-ness." You're in good company here. East section – wave to those scoundrels in the West section. West section wave back at the scoundrels in the East section. East and West both wave at the scoundrels in the choir. And everyone wave at the chief scoundrel up front.

Do you see what I mean? We're all scoundrels seeking acceptance and love. Here is a place where scoundrels are not only accepted but also entrusted with leadership just like those first disciples. But the difference in this place is that even though we are accepted as scoundrels, we are challenged to be so much more.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen