

A Terrible Story **Sep 18, 2022**

The Bible passages that we hear every week come from a selection called the Lectionary. Lectionary readings run on a 3-year cycle. So over the course of 3 years, we read a good chunk of the Bible, and then the cycle resets and we go back to the first reading we had.

Every three years, we come across this gem of a Gospel story. I have been a priest for 7 years now, and this is the 3rd time I've preached on this passage. And every time this passage comes up, I think, "Ugh... not again!" This has got to be one of my least favorite readings in the New Testament (up there with Paul telling woman that they have to be silent and obey their husbands). If only I had timed it better and had the bishop come visit this week. I would've gladly dodged this reading.

But here we are, so let's take a look at the story. We start off reasonably enough, even if it is a little confusing with all the characters and archaic terms for them.

At the top of the hierarchy is a rich man. He is a property owner, a landlord, and he is powerful, it seems. This rich man has hired an administrator, a bookkeeper to manage his affairs. The administrator is called a manager in this story; in some versions, he's called a steward. He's in charge of the day-to-day operations of the rich man's affairs.

It becomes apparent that the administrator is not doing a good job. Maybe he's kind of inept and is just bad at his job, or maybe he is deceitful. We don't know. In either case, the rich man finds out and says to him, "You're fired. Give me the ledger books so that I can find someone else to be my administrator."

The administrator hands over the books and leaves, and he is distraught. Now that he is unemployed, he considers his options.

-He could become a manual laborer, but he's not exactly fit.

-He could become a beggar, but he's too proud for that.

So he thinks and thinks, and he comes up with an idea.

He calls to him everyone who owes money to his master (former master now). The key here is that all these people don't know that the administrator has been fired. They think he's still working for the rich man.

So the administrator calls forward the first man who owes money. He doesn't have his books anymore, so he asks, "How much do you owe my master?"

"One hundred jugs of olive oil," he says. Side note: that is a huge debt. We'll come back to that.

The administrator says, "Tell you what. I should be collecting that debt, but I'll do you a favor. I will forgive some of that debt... half of it, in fact." The unspoken message there is, "You owe me one. If I ever need a favor, remember this kind act I offered you today."

The next person who owes money to the rich man steps up. He owes 100 containers of wheat, another huge debt. Again, the administrator buddies up to him and forgives a chunk of that debt. And so on with the other debtors, until at the end of the day, the administrator has 50 new best friends, and he has cheated his former master out of a good chunk of money. All in a day's work.

Before long, the rich man finds out about all this. And he's in a sticky place now. He can't call up the men who owe his flour and olive oil and tell them "Hey, my administrator bamboozled me; you still owe your full debt." That would have himself look terrible! And besides, once a debt is forgiven, you can't call it back into existence.

So the rich man realizes that he's been had. Then here's the kicker. The rich man calls up his former administrator, and instead of punishing him, he says, "That was pretty good. You got me there. That was a wise move on your part." What??

And then, just in case we're not thrown off balance completely, Jesus inserts his own voice, telling his disciples, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, because when that wealth is gone, you'll gain an eternal reward."

It sounds like Jesus is saying, "Just cheat the socks off everyone. Don't worry about conscience or doing what's right. The ends justify the means." What gives, Jesus?

Let me modify the story a little bit, and we'll see if this makes it a bit more sensical. Imagine the story takes place in, say, 1820 in Alabama. A plantation owner fires his bookkeeper. The bookkeeper calls up his former master's debtors. He says to the first one, "How much do you owe my master?" The man says, "I owe him 10 slaves."

Now it gets real. It gets uncomfortable. The administrator says, "Make your debt five slaves."

Now the administrator doesn't look so evil. He's still dishonest, but he is challenging an oppressive system by forgiving a debt. Now, because of his wiliness, 5 people won't end up in slavery, and his rich slaveowner is worse off to boot.

You see, Jesus is preaching against the dangers of dishonest wealth. The rich man in his story isn't just an innocent, hardworking businessman. He is a predatory loan shark. Remember those debts. 100 jugs of olive oil? 100 containers of wheat? That's not a debt you accumulate by borrowing from an honest person. What we know from Biblical history is that, although it's expressly forbidden by the laws in the Old Testament, lenders practiced usury, or charged extremely high interest rates for loans, to take advantage of people who were desperate.

And, if you took out a loan and couldn't repay it, you (and possibly your family) were sold into slavery. So that man who owed 100 jugs of olive oil? His future was not bright. The dishonest administrator (again, for his own purposes), forgave a lot of that and gave that man another chance at life. An act of forgiveness and hope.

Meanwhile, when the rich man found out, it's really no skin off his back. He lent the guy, say, 10 jugs of olive oil a year ago. It doesn't really make a difference to him whether he'll get 100 or 50 jugs now; it's all profit to him. So he can laugh and say to this former employee, "That was pretty tricky of you. Well played."

Jesus is making a comment on the unjust system of wealth, lending, and slavery that is going on all around him... and how the thing that throws a wrench into that system is forgiveness. Kindness, grace does not compute in this predatory practice of lending with huge interest rates.

But Jesus says, "Go ahead and mess with that dishonest wealth, that dirty money. And use for good. Make the lives of the people around you better, and if you throw a wrench into the current economic system, all the better! Because ultimately, we're here to serve God, not money." You might remember, Jesus had some pretty strong feelings about moneylenders in the Temple. Tables were flipped that day.

(There is also, of course, the pervasive idea in Jesus' teachings that sins are like debts, and we are always called to forgive. So there are some implications here of the reminder to forgive sin, because that throws a wrench in the system of retributive justice and punishment.)

So that's the Gospel story and a little bit about the economics of Jesus' day. I do think that it is a pretty timely message as student loan forgiveness is in the news right now. And the parallels of this story are pretty interesting.

For one, predatory debts are forgiven by a third party without a conversation with the lenders.

For another, the motives of the forgiving party are not exactly righteous. There's a deeper motive of increasing support, a message of "Hey, remember this for the future."

Another similarity is that there is a sense of freedom for people who had been struggling to get out from under a staggering debt. A new life with new opportunities.

And finally, there is the reality that this throws a wrench into the normal way of operating. There is the concern of how this will affect our economic system and future lending practices.

Ultimately, though, Jesus calls us to challenge the systems of wealth in our society and to forgive debts, even if it is a subversive act. Because when we hold money lightly, we remember that there are things more important than money – relationships, life, hope, freedom. You cannot serve God and wealth, so choose God.

That's a pretty good lesson to learn from a conniving manager.

Amen.