

If I'm being completely honest, I'm not sure I have a good answer to the question you have running through your heads right now. If you were paying careful attention to this parable, you probably got to the climax of the story and thought, "what the heck is Jesus' point?" I can't tell you the number of times I've asked myself that question this week. I can't tell you the number of times I've re-read verses 8-9 to try to figure out exactly what this story is supposed to mean for us.

At one point I started to wonder if we need the "sarcasm font." For those of you who spend time on social media, or use text a lot to communicate, you may have experienced those moments of wanting to be very careful in typing words to share your thoughts. You write something in the hope that the person reading it will recognize that you're saying something sarcastically or ironically. At times I've put "sarcastic font" in parentheses to make sure people don't misunderstand what I'm saying.

The more I read this parable and the commentary that follows it, the more I really wanted to know if Jesus was being sarcastic when he told his audience, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Really. Even as I say it now, I'm not convinced that he could possibly be serious in suggesting we get ahead by acting dishonestly – by engaging in the world like the manager in this story.

And I really can't tell you that I figured it out. But I'm going to share where my mind is going as we work our way through this.

As I know I've mentioned previously, I always turn to Robert Farrar Capon when I'm reading a parable. He wrote this excellent commentary on all the stories Jesus used to teach. Every three years, when this parable comes up, I am reminded that it's chapter title is, "The Hardest Parable." No matter where I looked to learn more, the opinion is basically unanimous, this story that Jesus tells is really hard to understand. And lots of scholars and theologians don't agree on what we're supposed to do with it.

They can't even agree on where the story ends and Jesus' commentary begins, but what is universally true is that we can't pretend it doesn't exist and there is probably **something** we can learn from this story.

A little bit about the setting, so that we at least recognize what's happening in Luke's construction of the story: prior to telling this parable, Jesus had just finished the parable of the lost son – the one about the father who offers unmerited forgiveness and

extravagant grace...one might even call the father prodigal/wasteful with his forgiveness. Guess what word is translated as “squandering” in the first verse of this parable? Yep, prodigal/wasteful/squandering. We have to assume that this story is at least partly connected to the story Jesus just told. The accusation made against the manager is the same accusation made against the lost son.

That’s a literary setting for this story. It’s certainly connected to the parables that came before, but I want us to also pay attention to the setting within a first century worldview. I’ve mentioned the honor/shame system before and that all of society was structured around the accumulation of status – which sometimes was directly related to wealth and sometimes was simply about collecting favors and establishing useful relationships.

I think you get a glimpse of that reality in this story. The manager, who has lost favor with the master (the rich man), has to find favor somewhere else if he hopes to survive the dishonor he’s facing. So, he works the system to his advantage. He creates goodwill from those who are in debt...which has some very real economic consequences but also plays a large role in the power system of the day. He rewrites the obligations of the debtors so that they will think better of him – in the hopes they will treat him well when he loses his job. One can only assume this is a successful strategy because by the end of his revisions, the master commends him for his cleverness.

But if that’s the point of the story, if that’s really what Jesus wanted us to hear then for the life of me, I can’t figure out how that tells us anything about the kingdom of God. I can’t imagine how God’s kingdom could ever be compared to this pattern of dishonesty and number-fixing.

Unless...what if the manager of this story isn’t simply acting to save himself from a life of hard labor or begging? What if the point of the story is that the manager isn’t buying into the system at all, but trying to undo it?

What if, as Robert Capon puts it, “the unjust steward is the Christ-figure because he is a crook, like Jesus. The unique contribution of this parable to our understanding of Jesus is its insistence that grace cannot come to the world through respectability...”

What if Jesus **really is** being sarcastic with the disciples when he tells them to use “dishonest wealth”? What if Jesus is saying that the whole system has to go if we’re going to understand God’s grace and God’s kingdom? He’s already made it very clear that the path to the kingdom has nothing to do with money.

I had the opportunity to hear a lecture this week from a Cuban-American, Christian Ethicist named Miguel De La Torre. He spoke about what it means to be ethical in a time that doesn't feel particularly centered in ethics. A couple of months ago, I mentioned the MLK quote, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." De La Torre suggested that the moral arc of the universe is broken and if we want it to bend to justice, then we have to bend it. He spoke of a "trickster" mentality that is necessary in today's world if we want to find justice.

By "trickster" he was referring to the subversion of the system for the sake of justice – the work to overturn the status quo so that there is an inbreaking of the kingdom into the brokenness of the world. I'm really intrigued with his line of thought. I'm not sure I agree with all that he said about how the world works, but I see his point that we have to work against the system that fights for the status quo if we want to reimagine the world according to the rules of God's Kingdom.

What if the manager is using the expectations of the system to subvert it, to create something new...a place where debt isn't the definition of relationship anymore, a place where it's not about who you know or how much money you accumulate? A place where acts of forgiveness are the currency that creates honor? This world finds no respectability in forgiveness. The system is based on earning your keep and paying your debts.

I might be reading far too much into this story without knowing if it was actually written with the sarcasm font. But then again, maybe when we think about God's Kingdom here....now, we can trick the world into being a place where money isn't the foundation of relationship, where grace creates honor, where power doesn't come through dishonesty.

I believe that to be true. And I think it's our job to push back against a system that says it's not. We can't serve God and wealth. We can't earn our way into the kingdom. But we can forgive. We can be graceful. We can love. Amen.