

## **25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**Luke 16:1-13**

### **The Parable of the Dishonest Steward**

Parts of the Bible are puzzling, even confusing, and the parable of the Dishonest Manager certainly fits into this category. Not surprisingly, scholars interpret it in various ways. Here's one way of understanding it.

There are two key characters. First, the manager who is caught out being dishonest. He's paid to look after the properties and is entitled to take a commission for each contract. It's in this that he's probably been dishonest – taking more than his share. Then there's the rich owner who is upright, good, compassionate, and merciful.

The owner, learning that the manager has been misusing his position of trust for his own financial gain, summons the manager and demands an explanation, telling him he's fired and to get the accounts into order.

Being a cunning character, the manager decides to risk everything, putting all his hopes on his understanding that the owner is merciful and good. If he gets this right, he'll be saved. If he gets it wrong, he'll go to jail. So, the manager goes off and calls in the owner's debtors and heavily discounts their debts.

The manager is playing on the knowledge of the rich man's generosity and mercifulness. We can imagine the manager saying to the debtors: "I talked the boss into giving you this special discount. You know how kind and generous he is. He's heard about your hardships, and as you would expect, he's acting in this way." The debtors would be delighted, and there would be celebrations. But then, when they think about it, it's not really that surprising, because this is the sort of treatment they've come to expect from the rich man. Nevertheless, nothing quite like this had happened before. It's generosity of an ilk they've never experienced before.

The manager goes back to the owner. Imagine the consternation on the rich man's face when he looks at the accounts brought to him. He's dismissed the manager for dishonesty, and now finds that his accounts have been drastically altered. He would've also heard by now of the community celebrations being held in his honour. He can go back to the debtors and explain that the manager was dismissed. The joy would then turn into anger, and he would be cursed for his meanness. Or, he could keep quiet and allow the praise of his generosity to continue. So, he turns to his manager and says, "You're a crafty one. You recognise my character for what it is, but I've got to say, you've judged right." Or, as Luke puts it, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

So, what might this story be about? As in many of the parables this one is based on the idea of the lesser to the greater. In other words, if the rich man is like this, how much more will God show these same qualities. If a human can act in such a generous and merciful way, how much more will God act in this way towards us.

The manager knows what the owner is really like and pins all his hopes on that understanding. It's a simple but vital point. We are to act in life as this man did – not unscrupulously! – but knowing God's true character. We're to live our lives knowing what God is like. We may think that the manager is playing on the master's kind nature, but the fact is, that's exactly what Jesus wants us to do. We're to rely on God's mercy, goodness, faithfulness, and forgiveness.

We've been given a picture of how God treats us – with amazing generosity. It's what we see on the cross – a love that's so amazing – that knows no bounds. God's kindness, mercy and forgiveness have no limits. It's unexpected and undeserved – and we're being invited to base our lives on this knowledge.

The comment is made at the end of the story, “...for the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” The manager is the child of this age who acted shrewdly or wisely. The religious people in the audience are the children of light, but they acted unwisely as if they were in darkness. In other words, they failed to recognise and act upon the master’s character. They didn’t get what God is really like.

There’s judgement in God, and like the rich man, we’re called to give an account of our lives, and yes, we fail – our excuses will never stand up before God. We’ve only got one option, and that’s to rely on God’s unfailing mercy – on God’s generosity, goodness, forgiveness, and love. So, I wonder, to what extent do we live our lives on the basis that God is like that: generous, good, merciful, and forgiving? And if we see God like that, then it becomes a pattern for us to follow as we seek, though God’s grace, to show such generosity and love to others.

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