

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 16:1-15

Year C - Proper 20, Text: Luke 16:1-15
Year C - Proper 20, Text: Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the Unjust Manager is perhaps the most difficult parable in the first three Gospels. To understand it, we must understand the culture that informs it. A wealthy master (landed estate owner) employs a manager to run all business matters for him. The master is a good man who is respected in the community and who fires a dishonest employee.

The debtors are renters who owe the master a fixed amount of produce each year. In addition to receiving a salary, the manager likely receives a little something “under the table” from each renter. At harvest time, and various feasts, he will expect an additional gratuity from them. He will be criticized only if his demands are unreasonable.

The community is part of the cast. The Middle Eastern peasant thinks and acts as part of his community, not an isolated individual. The involvement of the public is implied in v. 1: “Charges were brought to him (the master).” Clearly, a wide circle of people is involved.

Verse 16:1: Jesus begins by saying, “There was a rich man who had a manager.” Charges are brought to the rich man that the manager is squandering his property.

Verse 16:2: The manager is called and questioned like this, “I have been hearing, and am still hearing, a steady stream of things about you.” The master then orders the manager to turn in the account books. He then tells the manager that he no longer has a job! His legal authority as an agent is immediately canceled. In a Middle Eastern village today, a manager is fired on the spot. The owner is afraid of what happens in this parable. If the rascal has time, he can embezzle more.

The manager may not know how much his master knows and may be frightened to divulge information that his master does not have. Hence, when the manager is asked a specific question by his master, he does not respond but remains silent. However, since word of his dismissal is not yet known in the village, he still has time to adjust the records until he turns them in.

The hearers of the parable expect the manager to be silent after the first question. But after the manager is fired, they expect a classic debate in which the manager protests his innocence. However, the manager remains silent. He takes leave of the master without defending himself. By his silence, the manager indirectly affirms the following: 1) I am guilty; 2) The master knows the truth; he knows that I am guilty; 3) This master expects obedience, for disobedience brings judgment, and 4) I cannot get my job back by offering a series of excuses.

Verse 16:3: The manager now speaks with himself on his way to get the records. He has discovered something significant about his master. Although the master could have tried and jailed him, he merely fired him. The master has been very merciful to him. Thus, in one scene, this manager has experienced two aspects of his master’s nature: righteousness and mercy.

The manager wrestles with his crisis. “When I am out of a job, what will I do to provide myself with housing and food? I must find a solution — another source of income!” Although he thinks briefly about working, he feels that he is not strong enough to dig. He also rejects begging. In the society of Jesus’ day, begging was seen as a legitimate but despised profession.

Verse 16:4: The manager realizes that he must act quickly, before anyone finds out that he has been fired and before he hands over the account books. After all, if the debtors find out what has been going on, they will not cooperate. But as long as they have no knowledge, they can and will cooperate. So, the manager makes a plan that exploits the generosity of his master.

The plan is to do the tenants a “favor,” so that they in turn will feel obligated to do him a favor by providing him with lodging and food, even if only on a short-term basis. And he must implement that plan before the master discovers it. If he fails, he will go to jail. If he succeeds, he will be a hero in the village.

Verse 16:5: The manager now summons each tenant to visit him quickly and promptly. When dealing with them, the manager acts as though he is not yet fired. If the manager had been still in office, he would have had the right to send out servants and summon these rich and important men to come and see him; their wealth is evident from the large rents owed. The assumption of such a summoning would be that the manager has an important message to relay to them from the master. This is what the manager wants them to assume. Their bills are set and outstanding, but not yet due.

The manager summons the debtors one by one to stop them from talking to one another and asking questions. When the tenants come in to see him, the manager gives each one his bill. He asks the first, “How much do you owe my master?” The tenant answers, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” The manager tells him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” He then asks a second, “And how much do you owe?” He replies, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.”

The debtors assume the bill-changing event is legitimate. They believe that the manager is still in authority. They assume that the master has authorized the bills and that the manager has talked him into it.

The manager asks the debtors to make the changes in their own writing. The debtors believe the master has approved the changes. If there is any doubt, they will not cooperate. If they know what is taking place and then cooperate, they will break faith with the master, and he will no longer rent to them — a significant cultural factor. The tenants are not partners-in-crime.

The manager takes credit for arranging the reductions. These reductions come, as it were, “out of the blue.” The manager may quietly let it be known, “I talked the old gentleman into it.” The manager is thus like a factory foreman who has arranged a generous Christmas bonus for the workers. The bonus itself is from the owner. But the foreman is praised for having talked the owner into it. The last part of this assumption is also inescapable. The manager will not carry out a plan that does not reflect to his credit.

Verses 16:8-9: After meeting with the tenants, the manager finishes his plan by gathering the accounts and delivering them to his master. The master looks at them, is shocked, and reflects on his alternatives. To complicate matters, there is a great celebration in the village. The villagers praise the master as the most

noble and generous man that ever rented land in their district! When the master goes out among them, they greet him warmly, bow to him, and sing his praises!

The master can do one of two things. First, he can go to the debtors, tell them that it is a hoax, that the manager has been fired, and that his actions are null and void. But if the master does this, the villagers’ joy will turn to anger and curse him for his stinginess. The master cannot afford to lose face in the community. He is trapped! Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise, and allow the manager to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm. He chooses the latter option!

To be generous is a primary quality of a nobleman in the East. The master reflects, turns to the manager, and says, “You are a smart fellow. You certainly know how to take care of yourself!” He did not jail the manager earlier, nor does he jail him now. He praises the manager for his skillfulness in self-preservation. He is sensitive to the hopelessness of his own situation.

Concluding Comments

The parable builds to a climax awaiting the owner’s final response. Many express concern that Jesus would use a dishonest man as an example. However, still today a Middle Eastern peasant at the bottom of the economic ladder finds such a parable to be pure delight. Nothing pleases him more than a story in which some little guy gets the better of a big guy.

Even so, there is an unusual feature to this story. The manager is criticized as “unrighteous” and looked on as a “son of darkness.” The average Middle Eastern storyteller would not feel any compulsion to add such a corrective to this type of story. Although Western listeners and readers are surprised at the use of a dishonest man as a hero, Eastern listeners and readers are surprised that such a hero would be criticized.

Jesus used unsavory characters in several of His parables: the unjust judge, the neighbor who does not want to be bothered in the night, and so forth. The present parable is only the most outstanding example.

Verse 8b reads, “The children of this generation are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.” This verse, which is part of the original telling of the parable, provides the necessary corrective to the approval of the unjust manager’s financial dealings. He is praised, not for his dishonesty, but for his wisdom in knowing where his salvation lay.