

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Psalm 79:1-9, 1 Timothy 2:1-7, [Luke 16:1-13](#)

The parable of Jesus that we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke is one that has troubled many readers down through the centuries. How many people have read this parable, put it down and said, “Why on earth is Jesus praising the manager in this story who starts out being merely incompetent at his job and then goes on to apparently swindle his master on behalf of his master’s clients by forgiving their debts to him?”

Not only is it strange to think that Jesus would have praised a man for doing such a thing, he even says that the master himself, the man who was swindled, praised him too. **“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”** Who praises a robber for robbing them shrewdly?

Luke is Struggling too

And it seems as if the author of this gospel has about as much trouble with the parable as we do. He tries, as he often does, to sum up the parable with a kind of moralistic lesson. He just throws out a bunch of morals for this strange story that may sound pious but don’t make much sense. He finally ends up by saying this: **“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”** I mean, what does that even mean?

So, what I think has happened is this. Luke received this parable. It was handed down to him by Christian tradition and he felt certain that Jesus had told it. So, he felt he had to include it in his gospel. But he didn’t really get it, possibly because he didn’t adequately understand the cultural context in which Jesus told the parable.

Making Sense of it

But, if that is what happened, we are even further removed from that context than the author. So, what hope could we possibly have of making sense of this very disturbing parable? Well, perhaps some recent events have brought us a little bit closer to that ancient cultural context. So, maybe, if we just play around with Jesus’ story a little bit, we might find that it makes more sense than we originally thought. Would it make more sense if Jesus told the parable with *these* modern characters that we can relate to?

The Chief Executive

Once upon a time there was a very powerful and rich country that decided to hire somebody to be the manager of all their affairs. He was the chief executive, the president if you like. Now, they didn’t choose this man because they loved absolutely everything about his policies and his past work history. There were some issues. But he just seemed like the better option when compared to the man who had held the office before him, so they decided to give him a chance.

A Rocky Start

But this president’s time in office was pretty rocky almost from the start. And a year or maybe a year and a half into his tenure, many in the country were



beginning to feel as if their affairs were being mismanaged. I won't go into all of the things that were going wrong, but let's just say that inflation was out of control, businesses were unable to get workers, a terrible virus continued to cause death and sickness, forest fires raged and hurricanes threatened.

And so, the polls put the president on notice that he was bound to lose power. The people would overwhelmingly vote for his opponents in the upcoming midterm elections and things were definitely not looking good for his own re-election down the road.

A Plan

And so, the president said to himself, "What will I do now that my country is taking the position away from me? I am getting a little bit old, Jack. I am no longer strong enough to dig ditches, and my voice and elocution is not good enough to make money narrating documentaries on Netflix.

"So, I have decided to do something that will make people love me and maybe even welcome me back into their homes and hearts again."

And so, this is what he began to do. He called in one by one the people in the country who had gone to school and who had large debts that they owed as a result.

\$30k to \$120k

One woman¹ came in and she said, "I went to school to get a professional degree. To do that, I needed to borrow about \$30,000. But I now owe almost \$120,000 due to compounding high interest and income-based repayment programs that only drove my principal higher and higher even when I never missed a payment. I've paid a fair amount over the years that has done nothing to decrease my balance.

"I have been a hard-working professional all my adult life. The government has collected far more in taxes (which I've paid cheerfully) than the cost of my education, yet still, I owe four times what I borrowed.

"I was 17 years old when I entered the student loan program as a college freshman," she continued. "I had no experience with lending. I thought I was doing the right thing by attending college and trying to lift myself out of generational poverty. Instead, I wound up further in debt, with death or permanent disability being the only way I'll ever get out of it."

\$25k to \$35k

Another student came in and told the president a story in terms of very simple and succinct numbers. "My original debt, when I first graduated, was \$25,170.50. In the 21 years since I have graduated, I have repaid \$45,650.19. Today, thanks to the wonders of compound interest, I still owe \$34,713.11 on that same loan."

Writing Down Less

The stories went on and on. The numbers varied, of course. Some were large, some were relatively small, but in so many cases the debts that these people still carried had had a huge negative impact on their lives. And so, the president went to the first person and said, "Here, take your account and where it says that you owe 120,000, write down 60,000 instead." And to the second he said, "Where it says that you owe 35,000, write down 25."

And so, he went from one debtor to the next providing relief that was maybe not huge and maybe not

¹ These are based on real stories found at studentdebtcrisis.org

sufficient in every case, but at least it made some difference in each person's life.

The Reaction

And what was the reaction when the president did these things? Well, there is no doubt that the reactions were mixed. There were certainly some who said that it was not enough. That it was too little to really help some who needed it most. Others complained that to offer such forgiveness was completely unfair and unjust to those who, in previous times, had managed to pay off their own debts with hard work.

But there were certainly some for whom this began to change their perspective on what had seemed to them to be a failed presidency. Some even began to praise the president, or, at the very least, they had to admit that he was a much more shrewd politician than they had perhaps given him credit for.

A Story to Stir Our Thoughts

I assume that many of you have followed the discussion about the forgiveness of student debt in the United States. It has been all over the news and connects to some similar issues in Canada. But I wanted to tell this story of recent developments around the issue in the United States for a very particular reason this morning.

It is not because I want to make a political point or endorse a political position. I do have my own political beliefs about the forgiveness of student debt, but I'm not here to push them. I just wanted to bring it up because it seems to be an issue that everybody has opinions on.

Varied Opinions

And there are wildly different opinions. Some will declare the forgiveness of such debts to be terrible and unjust while others will say the same thing about the debts themselves. This is actually not very surprising because we are talking about a load of debt that, collectively, is so large that it affects the entire economy. Student debt is totally connected to the inflation crisis, the housing crisis and the employment crisis. These are things that affect us all.

And so, if you hear me tell a story about a president forgiving debts to students in our present context, everyone immediately knows exactly what I'm talking about. Not only that, they also immediately have strong opinions about it.

The Reaction Jesus was Looking for

And I wanted you to understand that, when Jesus told the story about a manager who was forgiving debts that were owed to his master, the reaction would have been almost exactly the same. They all would have known immediately exactly what he was talking about. And they all would have had their strong but various opinions about it as well because Jesus told this story in a very similar situation.

A Debt Crisis

Galilee at that time had a debt crisis. It wasn't a student debt crisis; it was spread throughout society. People everywhere were being crushed by their debts. They were losing their family homesteads, being pushed into homelessness, begging, marginal labour and even slavery.

This was also complicated because, according to the ancient laws of Israel, debt was actually illegal. The laws of Moses were quite clear, lending at interest was simply not permitted. And yet, in Palestine in Roman times, it was found everywhere. How could that be? Well, when money is involved, it seems that people are infinitely creative. So here is what they did.

How Things Worked

When someone was in a desperate state and needed to borrow, say, eighty bushels of wheat, they would go to rich people and beg for their help. And the wealthy would help, but, as is often typical, they also wanted to know what was in it for them. They wanted interest, but they couldn't legally demand it.

So here was what would happen. When the manager wrote down the debt, he wouldn't write, "I owe you eighty bushels plus 25% interest." No, that would be illegal! No, instead the manager would write down, "I owe you 100 bushels," even though the poor person only received eighty. There would be no mention of interest, no paper trail so nobody broke the law, right? Only the manager, the master and the debtor knew what had really happened.

Vulnerable Rich People

Except, of course, that everyone knew exactly what was going on. They just couldn't prove it because there was no paperwork. But Jesus told this parable to illustrate the vulnerabilities of rich people in this system. Basically, their managers had all the dirt they needed to bring them down. So, when a manager falls out with his master, all he has to do is go around to all of the people who owe his master and rewrite the records of what they owe.

The Shrewdness of the Manager

Everyone who heard this parable would have understood that this was what was going on. The manager wasn't robbing the master of anything but the illegal interest that he had charged. And the best part, of course, was that the master couldn't do a thing about it. To punish his crooked manager, he would have to admit that he was charging interest which was illegal. So, he really had no choice. He actually had to praise him.

And I can just imagine the press conference. "Uh, I would just like to thank my blessed manager for, um, uncovering the egregious and totally unintentional errors in my financial records and restating the correct amounts that these people owe me. I will be eternally grateful to him."

So, really, everyone who was listening to Jesus tell this parable would have understood exactly what it was about. They would have understood that it was about forgiving interest on debts. They would have understood exactly how the shrewd manager managed to get away with it.

What Jesus was Doing

So, why did Jesus tell them this story? Was he trying to press them to take a certain position on the forgiveness of debts and what it could do? Possibly. But he may have also just been trying to tap into all of the conflicting thoughts and ideas and opinions that were swirling around at that time. Jesus told his parables, above all, to be provocative, to make people think about the things that they had been trying to avoid thinking about.

That's why I think that, maybe, what Jesus is looking for us to do right now is not necessarily to embrace any particular party's policy on the issue of debt, but he is asking us to think and think carefully about what we do with the debts we make people carry. He wants us to think creatively about what we can do about the burdens and the harm that they can cause. He is pushing us to at least think about what we can do to address a huge problem that affects us all.