

What's It About?

It has been said that the parable in today's Gospel reading is impossible to understand - which has not stopped people from trying to explain it. What makes it so difficult is that Jesus uses unscrupulous characters to try to explain something about God and how we should relate to God. An often-used method to interpret a parable is to use the allegorical method, figuring out who each character in the parable represents. While this works many times, the drawback of this method is that it limits the possibilities of interpretation to one understanding of the parable. We know that Jesus often wove different layers throughout the parable so that we can have many understandings of the parable. Additionally, when Jesus uses unscrupulous characters in the parable sometimes it sounds like He is using double negatives, thus making the parable even harder to understand. I think the best way to approach this parable of the dishonest manager is to embrace the idea that there are at least two ways to understand it. When we accept this approach, then we do not have to force-fit the details of the parable into real-life. So, the approach that I am going to take today is to look at two possible understandings of the parable and hopefully, by doing so the one will enhance the other interpretation, or maybe even give you a different perspective from which to understand it.

The first way that I am going to approach this parable is by telling an updated version:

Vinnie worked for the local loan shark. His job was to collect the money that people owed his boss. His boss would loan the money at exorbitant interest rates. The only reasons people borrowed the money was because there were no credit checks, no applications to fill out, no saying what they wanted the money for and they could get the money quickly.

What they did not realize was that with the “easy” money came some “hard” conditions. The interest was high; the bill collectors would come to get the money and they did not accept excuses for not having the money. It didn't matter if there wasn't a payday since the last time they collected, it didn't even matter if it wasn't a full month, when the collectors came, you had to pay. Many times, the collectors would grant a few more days to get the payment together, but this was rare. Once the patience of the collectors wore thin, then things could get ugly, using physical methods to reinforce the need to pay on time. This was the part of the job that Vinnie liked the least. While he was a big man who cast a formidable shadow, he did not like using these strong-arm tactics to get the boss's money. He figured that with the interest rates they were being charged, the boss made many times the amount of the loan so he could give them a little more time.

Needless to say, the boss did not like this. He gave Vinnie one last chance to collect the money. He would have liked to have left Vinnie laying in a dark alley somewhere to show the other collectors not to slack off, but Vinnie was his nephew, the son of his brother who was killed and he promised to look after him. If Vinnie wouldn't collect the money this time, the boss would have to find him another job. When Vinnie went to collect the money, he listened to the stories the people told him - the business hadn't grown like they thought it would; their child needed a life-saving prescription, their car needed repairs; and on and on. Vinnie collected what he could and cancelled a large part of the remaining debt.

When the boss found out, he was livid. He started chewing Vinnie out for being too soft and for playing around with money that wasn't his. Just then, the accountant came in and told the boss that the business had suddenly picked up. It seems that word got out that the boss was a gracious

man and forgave parts of the debts, the debts that Vinnie was supposed to collect. The boss saw the benefits of what Vinnie did and commended his nephew on his resourcefulness.

From this retelling of the parable, we could easily see Jesus as the manager and that the method of forgiving part of the debt was acceptable to the rich man. If we accept this interpretation, then we still need to remember that the debt was not totally eliminated, the debtors still needed to take responsibility for their debt and pay it back. Seeing God the Father as the rich man and Jesus as the dishonest manager shows us the grace that God has given us through forgiveness. In this interpretation, Jesus would be encouraging us to use the same forgiveness to 'store up treasure in heaven' for ourselves. This is an example of where the allegorical method can fall apart because all of the details do not necessarily parallel our understanding of life and what Jesus did for us. That is why we may need to use another allegory in conjunction with this one.

When Jesus tells His followers that they should be shrewd like the dishonest manager, that is when the second allegory to this parable would switch the dishonest manager to being us, the followers of Jesus. When we become the dishonest manager, we can easily see how God has blessed us and what we had done to squander those blessings. In a general way, some of these blessings and gifts of the Master are:

- Our abilities to do things - make things,
- Our ability to feel empathy for those who suffer & desire to alleviate it
- Our ability to be grateful to those who have helped us, who have made sacrifices on our behalf & to show that gratitude
- Our ability to plan for the future of beyond immediate needs

In what ways have we acted like the dishonest manager and squandered our Master's resources? These gifts are squandered when we act selfishly, only looking out for ourselves, intentionally hurting others, taking advantage of others; in short, when we turn in on ourselves. These gifts are squandered whenever we, either individually or collectively, look to build up what we perceive as ours and find ways to keep it for ourselves.

Jesus' talk about building things for the future then take on a little different meaning. Do we see a future that is short-term, a future that will end when we die, or we lose the earthly treasures that we build up for ourselves? Or do we see a future that goes beyond anything here on earth, a future that is based on God's eternal love for God's creation? This is the question that is ever before us, one that the Israelites faced before they entered the Promised Land, one that has been before any civilization. The answer to that question determines, as Moses put it life and death, prosperity and adversity. How do we want to answer that question? What future do we want for ourselves and our children who come after us?

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/3rfLzAIDpSE>

Service: <https://youtu.be/tp13xXv10Rc>