

Giving an Account to God
Luke 16: 1-13
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Among the little things that come with moving to a new state is that unless you bank with a national bank, it's best to open up an account with a local bank. We walked into a bank branch close to our house a few weeks ago and opened up a new checking and a new savings account. The bank manager said, "I'll take care of ordering your checks, no problem. They will be at your house in 10 business days." I wasn't thinking much about the checks, as I don't write many these days. So much banking, including our church giving, is mostly electronic now.

So in the moment, I didn't think to ask for that kind of checkbook that makes duplicate copies of each check as you write them. Four checks in now to my check writing, I sure am missing those duplicates. I'm keeping a check ledger again for the first time in decades.

Which got me thinking about a Sunday School class that an elder once proposed in my company. In talking about a powerful saying of Jesus earlier, in, Luke 12, verse 34, when he tells His disciples and any who would listen, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." This elder proposed that, as a follow up to a Financial Peace class that was wildly successful at the church, that we create a whole Sunday School series where each of the participants brings in their checkbook ledgers, or their bank statements, or their credit card statements, or all three. Then, we would use those as a jumping off point to talk about where our treasure is going, where our hearts might be oriented, and what changes may be needed toward greater faithfulness to God. After a brief, well, not so brief pause, another elder suggested a different class idea. Whatever it was, it was immediately more popular.

This incident came to mind as I thought about this parable, this parable about dishonest wealth and true riches, a shrewd manager and a surprising master. This parable is what theologian Rudolf Bultmann calls "The Problem Child of Parable Exegesis." What he meant by that is that this parable, unlike most of Jesus' parables which have a few fairly beautiful and clear lessons for us, this one does not, really. In reading what biblical scholars and theologians have had to say about this story, there are many theories, and no consensus, except that it is confusing.

Jesus' parable is about a mid-level manager who hasn't been doing a good job. He knows that he is going to be sacked, and so he starts making really reckless deals with clients that owe his boss money, in the hopes that after he is fired, he will have made friends with them, and they will help him out. When his boss finds out what he's been

doing, giving insanely good deals to debtors, his boss pats him on the back and commends him.

Then, Jesus seems to say, “Go and do likewise.” Is he kidding? Is Jesus being sarcastic about His call to be like this dishonest, or at least, shrewd, money manager? A lot is lost in only having words on a page—just like trying to discern tone in a text message or email.

Even Luke has Jesus concluding this parable with several possible morals to the story, not all of which fit the story.

Here is his listing of lessons:

If you're honest in small things, you'll be honest in big things.
If you're a crook in small things, you'll be a crook in big things.
If you're not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the store?
No worker can serve two bosses.
You can't serve God and money both.¹

Ok. Those are all good lessons, and a lot of lessons, not all of which are easily derived from said story of the crooked manager. And not all of which we can fully explore today.

So here is a proposal for a couple of gems of meaning from all those other conclusions:

God knows we have a hard time with our money and how we handle it.

and

God is recklessly merciful and calls us to consider the same.

Where do you practice reckless mercy? Those acts of generosity with your money, your bank account, your time, your caring, your forgiveness, your acceptance, where it is not earned or expected. The shrewd manager handed out mercy to his boss's clients recklessly, and of course his motives were about saving his own skin. Of course, our motives in showing mercy are not always pure and undefiled by our own needs and wants, either.

And the master of the parable, the one who calls the manager to account, this master is so surprisingly merciful. This boss gives great mercy to the less-than-honest, bad track record manager. In the end, it turns out that this master is not looking for fearful obedience, but creative engagement, bold action for the good, and perseverance in spite of great odds.

¹ Paraphrases from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

Right now, we are living in this world with some great odds, some daunting debts to settle. At the end of last year Americans owed collectively \$1.75 trillion in student debt. Then there's the recent report about deficits in our children's learning after two years of uneven education for most, the poorest children having suffered the most. Then the planet, and the frustration that carbon offsets alone will not pay the debt we have incurred on the health of our soil and air and atmosphere. We know we are not pure actors: most of us still burn fossil fuels in our cars, most of us are wearing at least one piece of clothing made in a place with conditions in which we would never want our children to work. We deal in debt and dishonest wealth every day.

But do they master us? We threaten to be ruled by our money and our fears and our longing for security so often. God wants us to have a different approach. When in doubt, practice reckless mercy. Mercy that has compassion, or maybe even more – respect and admiration – for those whom some call dishonest, unworthy, dirty. Jesus told this parable as He was being criticized for eating with sinners and tax collectors, those who bore the burden of blame for the systems in which many participated, including the Pharisees. Jesus asks them to entertain the possibility that when they give an accounting to God, mercy ranks high. Mercy opens doors. Mercy remakes our accounts. Mercy allows us to give our money away, not in a calculated fashion, but sacrificially, with a joyful heart. Forgiveness, spiritually and economically, can open our lives to God's vision for us, of encouraging a beloved community where all are honored and given voice and their debts are not held against them forever. Mercy helps us to be truly children of the light, not naïve about the markets and debts that want to master and control us, but ready to practice the same reckless mercy, amazing grace, that Jesus shows us.

Rival masters abound and money is a big one. Jesus is very clear on that. While this parable is far from clear, it is clear who we are called to serve, and who is our source of hope and salvation. May our hearts, our bank accounts, all that we have, all that we are, be in service to the One who saves us, and does not count our debts against us.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.