

Sunday 18th September 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #3 ‘The Trust’ (Luke 16:1-14)

‘A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.’ Winston Churchill’s famous phrase to describe Russia might well be used about our parable for today. It is certainly one of the most difficult passages in gospels, and I’m being quite ambitious trying to tackle it in a short talk! But I’ll do my best, and hopefully make some sort of sense of it.

There are all sorts of questions people scratch their heads over: one which gives people particular heartache is this: is this one of those parables where the master – in this case described as a ‘rich man’ – an image for God? A second difficult question would be: there are lots of applications added to the parable – do they all relate to the passage? But **the million dollar question is: why does the rich man commend the manager?** Is Jesus really praising something dishonest and therefore morally wrong? And, if not, what on earth does it mean?

I might as well admit at the start that this is one of those deep stories of Jesus that does remain something of an enigma this side of glory. I can’t give you a definite, cast-iron, 100% interpretation. But I’ll take you briefly through the various options, and hopefully give you what I think is the best steer, which also means that, even if the parable remains mysterious, the application to our lives is pretty clear and simple. (CHURCH – BIBLE OPEN)

Let’s start by clarifying one important thing. Some scholars have decided that the reason Jesus’ analysis of his own parable appears to add too much interpretation to the story is because Luke has spliced together several sayings of Jesus and shoe-horned them into the text. So the bit about being trusted with little or much and the bit about not being able to love God and money are added to the original parable. The problem with this view is that the story is written as one encounter: Jesus shares this story with the disciples (v1), and we learn at the end that the Pharisees were listening in and commenting on it (v14). So I think wants us to read this as one story of Jesus – if we’re struggling to piece it all together, that’s not Jesus’ problem, that’s our limited human understanding!

So if we take this as one story, **there are basically three views of how to interpret it:**

The first is that the manager incompetent not dishonest – and when he gets the sack, he rescues the situation with ingenious solution. So the master commends his ingenuity, after which Jesus makes a series of teachings about money loosely based around general principles. I think this is a weak analysis: the story is not internally consistent (and it’s hard to believe the gospel writers would choose to record a story of Jesus that didn’t make any real sense); and, more importantly, Jesus appears to be commending wrong behaviour. It also tends to go with the view that Jesus’ analysis isn’t directly based on the story, but rather is Luke throwing in a few morsels of Jesus’ other teaching. I think Jesus is the best storyteller in history, so this view doesn’t really stack up.

The second interpretation is that manager is dishonest from the start (which makes the story consistent), but, when he scales down the bills, what he is doing is sacrificing his own commission. Thus he rescues his reputation with the master and his debtors by his generosity.

This is definitely a better analysis: at least Jesus is now commending something praiseworthy. But the problem is that there’s no reference to the manager getting any commission, either in the story or in Jesus’ interpretation. So it’s a bit of a leap.

The third interpretation starts from the premise that the master in this case is *not* a metaphor for God. 'The people of this world' that Jesus describes as being the context of this story includes both the manager *and* the master. The story then is all about sharp practice, there's no hidden detail like incompetence or commissions. The manager is simply dishonest throughout, and, having been caught, his solution to his problem is a supreme act of dishonesty: this showcases his character but in a way which implicates others (and therefore protects him – it's very clever).

Having seen the actions of the manager, the master – who is probably an absentee landlord (hence hiring a manager) and something of a rascal himself, someone who is happy to let his debtors accrue huge debts – sees a kindred spirit and praises him.

This interpretation sees v8 as key verse, the punchline which unlocks the parable: **'the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.'** This gets round the problem of why Jesus seems to commend it: he's basically saying: look at how worldly people devote themselves to *their* lifestyle – if only followers of God did the same, if only they paid as much attention to being real followers. If only we had that dedication, focus and above all consistency. The manager acted entirely in character: do we people of faith have that same consistency of character, worshipping God consistently in *our* behaviour?

This links the parable better to what comes next. Jesus uses the issue of money to make this point about consistency of behaviour because in Luke money is the biggest litmus test of our worship. How we use money says a lot about who we worship; conversely, it's also what distracts us most often from worshipping God. So, taking the example of the manager in this story, what does a godly attitude to money look like?

The answer, thankfully is very simple: v9 'Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.' In other words, **be generous with your money.** This has two enormous benefits: as Jesus says, we become friends with others in this world, and friends with God in the next. Generosity is the best way to break the grip of money on our lives. If greedy people can be generous to benefit themselves, how much more should followers of Jesus!

To back up his point, Jesus adds two other foundational principles, ones he mentions elsewhere: **firstly, in vv10-11, what we do in this life is a good indicator of what we can be trusted with in eternity.** If we get our attitude to money right *here*, then we've got the sort of heavenly perspective that God can use. Then, secondly, the biggest principle of all: it comes down to who we worship. Money desires to master us, so **we cannot serve both God and money.** Jesus deliberately uses the word 'mammon' in v9, which in that culture was the personification of material wealth – 'use mammon', he says, to win friends. Mammon desires to be worshipped: but if we give it away, we break its power, it is put back in its proper place.

Why did the Pharisees react as they did? Well, they didn't have that consistency that the dishonest manager had. They might have been religious zealots, but as Luke says (v14), they loved money. Their hearts were divided. That's why Jesus aims this teaching at them – but it's just as powerful for us today. If we are the people of the light, we've got to wise up. We've got to recognise what pulls us away from God in every area of our lives and deal with it. We've got to walk the talk. We often bemoan how the good bad people are at being bad. **Well, Jesus says, it's time for the people of God to be really good at being good!** Will we hear that message again today? And may God empower us to live consistently as people of the light. Amen.