

A problem, I think, is that often when we listen to these parables in our Gospels our first reaction is to assign parts. Doing that is no better than equating the snake in the story of Adam and Eve with the devil. The snake is not the devil. The snake is a snake. And by the way, until it messes with God, it is a snake with legs!

When we try to interpret the parables by assigning parts, we usually pick for ourselves the role of one of the good people and from that, we hope to learn something about how we might better live our lives. So we know who the good guys are in the story (us, of course) and who the bad guys are (always someone else). But Jesus' parables are never that simple. They are meant to cause dissonance; to make us think on deeper and deeper levels. If we simply say, in the case of this story, that the rich man is God and we are the manager and the debtors are those who got in too deep with payday lenders, we immediately get in trouble. Still, let's see how this would play out in the story we're faced with this morning, which begins with a rich man bringing charges against his manager. Most of us are not going to identify with the rich man. Someone once said that no matter how much money we have, being rich means having more money than our neighbour.

So we're not the rich guy. And who would want to be with all the corporate scandals. Imagine if Jesus had begun his story, "There once was an executive who worked for HIH." So, no ... we're not going to identify with the rich man. He probably did something dishonest to get where he is anyway.

Perhaps we'll have more luck with the manager. Most of us grew up with the stories of Robin Hood. He was always stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. We love stories where the rich and powerful go down in a blaze of glory and the little guy winds up on top.

Well, we love them until *we're* the rich guy. We don't mind kicking them when they're down unless the foot is smacking *us* on our behind. So it's decided, we'll identify with the manager. But immediately another problem arises: the manager is lazy - not even strong enough to dig ditches, and he's proud - he's ashamed to beg. However, he *is* clever and before he's dismissed, he discovers that he's not too lazy to cook the books. He calls in the people who owe his master money - lots of money; one owes 900 gallons of olive oil and another somewhere in the vicinity of 1,000 bushels of wheat. He discounts the bill for olive oil by 50% and the wheat by 20% thus insuring that they will treat him well when he's kicked out into the street. There's no question that he's dishonest. Oh well, so much for barracking for and identifying with the little guy. We like him and all, and we're all for the boss getting his comeuppance, but this is just plain wrong. So ... if we can't use the rich guy as a role model and the manager falls far short, what are we to do?

And wait! This story gets more complicated by the commendation of the rich man. He praises the manager because he acted shrewdly. Now if the story was just sitting in a book somewhere we might not have so much trouble with this. But Jesus told this story. Somewhere in here there's got to be good news. Somewhere in this strange story is a glimpse of how we're to act in the kingdom of God. But where is it? What in the world, or better,

what in God's kingdom does he mean?

Two places we might focus our attention are on the last half of verse 8: "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." And the final verse: "You cannot serve God and Mammon".

Firstly, this may not be a parable so much about rich and poor people as it is a story that should wake us up to the realities of a post-Christian world, that is of course, a world very much like the pre-Christian world of Jesus' time.

Sometimes the children of light are **not** very shrewd in dealing with the rest of the world, with the children of this age. I have often thought about how Christians are so gullible at times. Have you noticed how in some circles the word "Christian" has been commandeered by particular groups as some sort of guarantee of non denominational upright "purity"? Here's my problem, if I believe that just because a person puts a fish symbol on the back of his car or in their ad calls themselves a Christian book keeper, or they are a Collingwood supporter that they will be good or better or more honest than someone else, I might find myself sadly surprised someday. Likewise, if I believe everything I hear and see on so-called Christian TV I might begin to think that the fact that I'm not rich means I'm not as faithful as I should be, or at the least, I haven't "sowed a seed" into some particular televangelist's Mercedes ... oh, I'm sorry, I meant ministry.

Secondly, Jesus tells the story of the shrewd steward who "cooked the account books" not because the man is a good moral example, but because he wants to tell us about real values in the kingdom of God compared to the false values of this world. What do we do, with the steward who is a rascal, making deals with shady debtors and a master who commends the shrewdness of his steward for the deals he makes? What's the sharp point Jesus is trying to make?

The sharp point of this parable is that the master commends the use of money for people, instead of for pride, power, position, and possessions. In other words, the value of money and possessions comes to a dead end when we die. The sharp point of this parable is that money and possessions will do us no good. The parable of the bad man's good example is about a steward who is a rascal in many respects, but does one thing right. He is a servant who is left in charge of the estate of the absentee landlord. Guilty of embezzlement, he is hardly a hero. Yet, he did one thing right. He used money for people. Jesus is not urging us to be like this bad man, but to be wise in this one way. For using our money and possessions for people can make an eternal difference.

This parable about judgment day is a warning and an invitation. The warning is you can get into big trouble if you are really fond of the wrong things. The warning is that whether or not we acknowledge Jesus as Lord in this life, we will have to face the fact of judgment in the next life. The warning is that whether or not we see Jesus' lordship extending to the use of all things in this life - including money - we will have to face the facts on judgment day.

The invitation is to come into the wide-open arms of Jesus and place our faith in him as Lord

and Saviour. The invitation is to connect faith and life, to make faith active in love. The invitation is by the power of the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus' example of selfless service to people. "That you cannot serve God and mammon." If we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and put our faith into action in all areas, including the use of money, on judgment day we may hear his greeting, "I'm very fond of you. I died rather than give you up. Enter into the joy of your Master." Amen.

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