

Disciples Resist Greed

Part 3 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Luke 16:1-13

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Once again, we hear a – if not troubling then – confusing comment coming from Jesus. Warning us about the danger of – the impossibility of – serving two masters – plainly saying that one cannot serve mammon (i.e. wealth, money) and God, Jesus leads with a parable in which the “hero” is praised for his greedy manipulation. Does that confuse anyone else?

I tried to make sense out of it thinking that maybe that Jesus is making the point that the dishonest manager will get his comeuppance when the people who he helped turn on him the way that he double-crossed his master. But that’s not it. That wouldn’t have been shrewd.

Biblical scholar R. Alan Culpepper suggests that there are three possibilities to what the manager did: Was he cheating his master to gain favor with the debtors? Was he acting righteously; and merely excluding the interest that had accumulated (Interest that would have been prohibited by Scripture [see Deut. 23:19-20])? Or did he reduce the debt by the amount of his own commission?¹ Let’s look at these options.

Did he merely do away with interest? Probably not and here’s why. In the case of the jugs of oil, he has the debtor reduce it by half. That would have meant one hundred percent interest. That would have been an unheard amount of interest in the Middle East at that time, even among the most despicable lenders. Then there’s the mismatch with only a twenty-five percent reduction on the wheat. So he wasn’t helping folks out by removing the interest they owed.

Did he reduce the debt by the amount of his own commission? Why do that? Cut out his own share, so that he might trust in charity? He’s too ashamed to beg (v. 3). That doesn’t make sense.

So obviously – he’s cheating his master. So why does the master commend him?

See the master in Jesus’ parable was caught in a dilemma by his servant. He couldn’t renege on the debt reductions. If he did, he’d be exposed as incompetent by allowing his servant to take advantage of him. He’d be seen as a fool or greedy. Meanwhile, if he honored the what had been done, he would be celebrated for his own generosity. He praised his servant not for his treachery but his skill in recognizing the circumstances and taking them to his best advantage.

But how long will that last? The servant may have made friends among those debtors, but when will they have enough of him? Now he has to keep the façade going, when it all could have been avoided by doing the right thing from the beginning.

Lest we pick on that servant, consider this story from the rabbis of old:

A man who was caught stealing was on his way to the gallows to be hung on order of the king. On his way he tells the governor that he has a wonderful secret that would shamefully be lost if he were to die, and that he’d like to share that secret with the king. The secret would allow one to plant a pomegranate seed and to have a full-grown, fruit bearing tree grow overnight. So they take him to the king whose now waiting to hear this wonderful secret. He then digs a hole, and holding up a seed says, “The seed must only be put in the ground by a man who has never taken anything that didn’t belong to him. I being a thief cannot do it.” The first official admitted that he couldn’t do it either, because in his youth he had taken something that wasn’t his to take. The king’s treasurer said that because he dealt with such large sums he couldn’t be sure that he had never taken something that belonged to him. Even the king owned up to having kept a necklace that belonged to his father. Then says the thief, “You are all mighty and powerful and want nothing and yet you cannot plant the seed, while I who have stolen a little because I was starving am to be hanged.” The king praised that thief and pardoned him.²

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Proverbs 30:7-9:

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Vol. 9: The Gospel of Luke ; The Gospel of John*, Nachdr. (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 1998) 308.

² Ibid. 310.

“Two things I ask of you;
do not deny them to me before I die:

“Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,

“or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, “Who is the Lord?”
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.”

Life and death desperation – isn’t an expression of greed. Let’s be clear about that. Greed is about a desire to accumulate as if that defines who one is. The servant – and probably the master – in that parable were greedy. The servant had already squandered the master’s property and the master appreciated the skill of the servant in his pursuit of money.

There is nothing wrong with earning money, or earning as much as you can honestly. John Wesley himself urged the early Methodist saying: Earn all you can, and save all you can. He made clear that earning all you can meant by honest means and by working hard. By saving, he didn’t mean stockpiling, but only buying what one needs, so that you’d be free to follow the third admonition, to give all you can.

It’s tempting to think that we are above greed. I like to think so. But then again, it’s hard. We live in a culture that says – as Gordon Gecko did in the movie “Wall Street,” “Greed is good.” It’s not even easy to distinguish what we need from what we want.

An old Indian (India Indian) parable speaks about a guru who had a star disciple. He was so pleased with his pupil’s progress that he moved on and left the disciple behind to serve as the spiritual leader for the community.

The disciple lived simply, in a small mud hut. His only clothing was a small loin cloth. He begged each day for that day’s food. Each day, he washed his loin cloth and hung it to dry. But rat’s would chew at the loin cloth, compelling him to beg for a new loin cloth, as well. So, he begged the townsfolk for a cat. That took care of the rats. But then he needed milk for the cat, which he begged for. But he disliked having to beg for milk for the cat, so he asked for a cow to provide milk for the cat. Of course then he needed hay and feed for the cow. So he planted a field. Time in the field kept him from his spiritual duties to the village, so he hired servants to take care of the farm. Managing the servants took time away too, so he married a wife to manage the servants. She in turn bore him children.

When the old guru returned years later he discovered that his disciple was now the richest man in town; and he was not pleased. “What happened?” he demanded, “What is the meaning of this?” To which his disciple replied, “Would you believe this is the only way that I can keep my loincloth?”³

Proverbs 1:19 says, “Such is the end of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.” That’s what happened to the guru’s disciple. He lost himself.

Greed, like so much sin, creeps in. As disciples who are called to resist greed and all sin. As disciples we claim our identity not in what we have, but in who we are as those who have been made in the image of God Almighty and redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ on that cross. Rejecting greed – rejecting any sin – means paying attention. He calls us as children of light to trust him.

³ Amy K. Butler, *A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016) 240-241.

The people we admire most are not usually the rich and powerful. We might envy them, but the people we admire most tend to be the ones who make the world better. Aren't they? We know what the true treasure is. Deep down, I think even those who deny it know what the true treasure is. That treasure is claiming the goodness of God's creation for one another and ourselves – a treasure that we discover when we choose serving God rather than accumulation. AMEN