

This parable is notorious among preachers as being especially difficult to explain. But I wasn't worried. As I usually do when I start researching a sermon, I opened my favorite study bible, and looked at the notes on the passage. And it had a note I did not expect: "The parable defies any fully satisfactory explanation."* You had one job! Which sounds like something the rich man might have said to his manager. But what Jesus actually has him saying is much more interesting.

The Greek of the first verse can be taken two different ways, either that the manager was "shown clearly" to have been squandering his master's property — or, that the manager was falsely accused of doing this. Interestingly, "the manager does not defend himself or admit guilt."** If the second meaning is correct, then the parable makes a bit more sense. By releasing the debtors, the manager shows he is not greedy or self-serving, although he is still, in theory, costing his boss a lot of money. So while I'm glad I kept researching, since I felt like I owed you more than "who knows," that's still a lot of supposition, and little fact.

We do know some facts about the context of the parable. While the individuals are hypothetical, the practices Jesus describes were all too real. The owner sounds like one of the absentee landlords that ordinary people would have known, and despised, people who had no ties to the community and saw their relationship with them as strictly extractive. And the talk about bills refers to a sort of arrangement that would have been well-known. While Jewish law forbade charging interest, unscrupulous individuals could get around that by "giving" someone a certain quantity of goods together with a bill for a larger quantity, due at a future date. And it's sad but true that just as today's payday lenders have more than enough "customers" to keep them in business, there have always been people so desperate that they would accept wildly unfair and exploitative terms to satisfy an urgent need. Just because they enter into such a deal willingly doesn't mean the lender isn't taking advantage of them.

The more I think about it, the more I suspect most preachers and commentators might be overthinking this parable. So let me tell you a few things about its context in Luke's Gospel that shed more light on it. Jesus teaches this parable immediately after the parable of the prodigal son, which in turn comes after the parables of the lost coin and lost sheep that we heard last week. The story of the prodigal son develops the theme of the lost being found, and introduces the theme of forgiveness, for the loving father in that story forgives the son not only for his rudeness and his foolishness, but also for squandering half his property. Now Jesus tells a parable of a different kind of relationship, owner and manager rather than father and son, seemingly pivoting away from the theme of loss and recovery in order to explore more deeply the theme of forgiveness.

And for all the talk of shrewdness, there is much forgiveness on display in this parable. First, the manager forgives substantial parts of the debts he oversees. "Some commentators... suggest the manager was removing the interest charge."* Second, the

rich man forgives the manager for reducing the debts. And third, it doesn't take much imagination for us to picture the debtors forgiving the rich man and the manager for the exploitative business practices they engaged in. Evidently, both of them realized in the end that being right with their neighbors was more important than extracting every last denarius they could. No matter how much skill someone might have in making money, the truly shrewd realize that money itself is less important than people and our relationships with them. So Jesus shows that shrewdness and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin. So to speak.

By embracing this theme, Jesus is tapping into a rich Biblical tradition of economic justice in general and restrictions on debt and interest in particular. Just as we know in modern times, the ancients understood only too well that even fair and just debts can get people into terrible trouble, and that lending is ripe for abuse and exploitation. So the Bible has a lot to say about finances, since in the end financial practices affect people and relationships, often profoundly. Charles Dickens illustrated this dramatically in the character of Ebenezer Scrooge, who embodied the prioritization of money over relationships; the whole point of "A Christmas Carol" is the character coming to understand that people matter more than money.

Closer to home, we might remember how matters of debt and forgiveness are not arcane, but vital, especially if we know the gnawing fear of being deep in debt, or maybe the relief and freedom of having a debt forgiven, and how those feelings can distract us from other concerns. Closer still, we might think of relationships between spouses, siblings, parents and children, the relationships we might say are the most important in our lives, but then remember how all kinds of score-keeping, but especially disputes over money, can damage, or even destroy, those relationships. And as Jesus points out, money can even jeopardize our relationship with God. For while it's true what St. Paul said, that nothing can separate us from the love of God, we also know it's true that we can turn ourselves away from God through the love of money. It's not for nothing that the language of the Lord's Prayer may be translated, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

I think this parable, somewhat plainly, shows the solution to a problem that has vexed humanity as long as we've been able to count. We can protect our relationships, and our souls, when we subordinate money to relationships, to force money to serve relationships. Although our natural fear of scarcity and the resultant instinct to hoard our resources means that putting relationships ahead of money takes purpose and determination.

The manager had to face losing his position before he was willing to invest in relationships, but even at that late date, and with that impure motive, his decision turns out to work even better than he'd hoped, not only winning him friends among the rich man's clients, but even winning the rich man's own commendation. Hopefully we might learn from this story so we don't have to risk losing everything that really matters before

we make the same choice. We might decide to sacrifice money for relationships to glorify God, rather than to save our skins; we might act out of love and hope rather than fear and desperation.

Our relationships with people always prove to be more important than our relationships with money, and our relationship with God is more important still. In October, we'll hold our stewardship drive, which will be about much more than raising money. This effort will be an opportunity to reflect on our personal and collective blessings, to rethink how we use our gifts, and to celebrate the opportunity God has given us to navigate our future. For now though, it's enough to reflect on how graciously God deals with us. When we do, we can't help but thank God for sharing divine wisdom with us, and better yet, for setting the ultimate example of his wisdom, canceling the debt of our sins by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Note in The Jewish Annotated New Testament, Oxford University Press, 2011

**<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-accused-economist.html>