

# A Hard Lesson to Learn

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- Psalm 91:9-16 (Good News Translation)  
<sup>9</sup> You have made the Lord your defender, the Most High your protector,  
<sup>10</sup> and so no disaster will strike you, no violence will come near your home.  
<sup>11</sup> God will put his angels in charge of you to protect you wherever you go.  
<sup>12</sup> They will hold you up with their hands to keep you from hurting your feet on the stones.  
<sup>13</sup> You will trample down lions and snakes, fierce lions and poisonous snakes.  
<sup>14</sup> God says, "I will save those who love me and will protect those who acknowledge me as Lord.  
<sup>15</sup> When they call to me, I will answer them; when they are in trouble, I will be with them.  
I will rescue them and honor them. <sup>16</sup> I will reward them with long life; I will save them."
- Luke 16:1-8 (Good News Translation) <sup>1</sup> Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a servant who managed his property. The rich man was told that the manager was wasting his master's money, <sup>2</sup>so he called him in and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Turn in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' <sup>3</sup>The servant said to himself, 'My master is going to dismiss me from my job. What shall I do? I am not strong enough to dig ditches, and I am ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup>Now I know what I will do! Then when my job is gone, I shall have friends who will welcome me in their homes.' <sup>5</sup>So he called in all the people who were in debt to his master. He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe my master?' <sup>6</sup>'One hundred barrels of olive oil,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'sit down and write fifty.' <sup>7</sup>Then he asked another one, 'And you – how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'write eight hundred.' <sup>8</sup>As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: As believers and churches we should be prepared to act decisively to provide for the future.

If you're sitting there thinking something like, "Okay, I *heard* that parable... but I don't get it," trust me, you're not alone. I've read it many times, but I don't think I've ever preached on this text because, well, it is hard to make sense of.

On the surface, the story is simple, if not unusual. A master – a wealthy businessperson – called in the man who managed his vast holdings and operations. He told the manager, "I'm hearing surprising, disturbing things about you – that you're squandering my money. I simply can't have that. I'm going to audit my accounts, so get ready; I'll have to let you go."

Sometimes you see it coming; you know your position is going to be downsized or relocated. Other times, it comes out of the blue and for a while you don't know what hit you. As he left the master's office the manager's mind was racing. "*This has been the best job I could have imagined. What can I do? I don't have the muscles and calluses to work in the fields. And there's no way I can be seen in town begging for handouts.*"

Then an idea came to the manager. He had just left the master's office, so there's no way that anyone could have heard yet that he was going to be let go. So he quickly sent messages to all the people who owed rent money or crops or other debts to his master, asking them to come quickly.

"You owe my master 100 barrels of olive oil?" he said to one fellow. "Here, give me your statement." And with a stroke of his quill he crossed out "100," wrote "50" and initialed it. The next fellow pulled out his statement. The manager took his pen, X-ed out "1,000 bushels of wheat," jotted down "800 bushels" and added his signature. Those are the two examples Jesus included in the parable; we presume

the soon-to-be-unemployed manager did something like that with all the people who owed payments of crops or rent to the master.

The parable doesn't end with the master getting wind of the scheme and having the manager arrested, or the manager taking off for Tahiti never to be heard from again. Jesus ended the parable noting that the master actually praised his manager "for doing such a shrewd thing."

It doesn't make sense.

One way I can try to get into a passage like this is to ask myself, "*Why did Jesus tell this story? When he was trying to make a point, why did he think of – of all things! – a businessman commending his manager for being shrewd, clever, maybe even dishonest?*" Other parables Jesus told are fantastic: the Good Samaritan... the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep in order to locate and rescue the one lost sheep... the Prodigal Son and his Jealous Older Brother... the points of those parables are clear and powerful. But as he told this story about a shrewd manager being praised for unilaterally reducing debts owed to his master, I'm trying to imagine what Jesus was thinking. And when I think about that, the answer is clear: I don't know why Jesus chose to tell that story. Let's say it: compared to other parables Jesus told, this is not one of his best.

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I started working on this sermon Wednesday afternoon. That evening I had a ministerial conference with a pastor friend from the east side. Okay, you may have seen it on Facebook: we were at the Indians game against the Tigers. He's one of the ministers at Forest Hill Church, a Presbyterian congregation in Cleveland Heights. Eating our nachos as we watched the game, I mentioned that I had decided to tackle this gospel passage. So we started talking about it. We multi-tasked: while we talked we also watch as:

*Frankie Lindor grounded out to the 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman.*

*Oscar Mercado hit a tapper back to the mound and was thrown out at first.*

*Carlos Santana hit a dribbler down the line that almost made it to 3<sup>rd</sup> base, but because the Tigers were in the shift, he beat it out for an infield single.*

*Yasiel Puig singled through the right side, moving Santana to second base.*

*Mike Freeman swung through strike three. Inning over.*

While all that happened, we talked about this parable in Luke about the Shrewd Manager. My friend said, "I've looked at that story for thirty years, and I still don't know what it means." That made me feel better because he's one of the most intelligent people I know... but I felt only a *little* better because I still had to figure out what to say about the parable today.

My friend continued. "Okay, Jon, say you write forty or fifty sermons a year. One of them is bound to be a clunker. I think this parable of the Shrewd Manager is Jesus' 'clunker.' He tried, but this parable just wasn't as good as the others."

I said, "About the only thing that I can make sense of in this parable is that the manager was willing to take some risks in order to prepare for a very different future coming his way. There are details about the arrangements he made that would be helpful for us to know, but Jesus didn't go into that detail. To me the point is that the shrewd manager took the initiative to act in order to adapt to how his world was going to be changing."

My friend responded, "It makes me think of that place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus is sending out his disciples on their first mission trip. He knows it's not going to be a 'walk in the park' for them; they're going to face disinterest or skepticism from the people, and outright opposition from the religious establishment. They're going to need to be wise to the ways of the world. So Jesus cautions them. He says something like, 'Listen! I am sending you out just like sheep to a pack of wolves. You must be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves.'"<sup>1</sup>

"Okay," I said, "so the shrewd manager was wise to the ways of the world, cultivating friendships that would be very helpful to him in the future."

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:16 Good News Translation

Bible scholars have analyzed and dissected this story in great detail. They propose three different understandings of just what the manager (or steward) was doing when he reduced the amount of all those debts:

- (1) The steward was cheating the master by reducing the size of the debts;
- (2) the steward was acting righteously by excluding the interest that had been figured into the debt, interest prohibited by Deuteronomy 23:19-20; or
- (3) the steward reduced the debt due by the amount of his own commission, which had been included in the debt.<sup>2</sup>

The first two options cost the master; the third one costs the steward. But the steward or manager would gain something of lasting, immeasurable value — something that we rarely think about as we listen this parable with “twenty-first century ears.” That shrewd steward would gain favor from all the people whose debts he reduced, and in that culture they would be indebted to show him endless hospitality. The manager wouldn’t have to worry about where he’d live or what he’d eat once he was evicted from the master’s compound: those whose debts had been reduced would welcome that manager into their homes and families. Understanding the cultural importance of honoring obligations of hospitality, the master’s praise would be for the manager’s cleverness at making arrangements so others would happily take care of him in the future.

And there’s another explanation for the master’s praise. In that ancient culture a person’s and family’s reputation or honor was of immeasurable importance. The master’s reputation would be enhanced considerably by what appeared to be his gracious decision to reduce the debts owed to him. Today it would be like getting a huge boost of positive publicity. And despite the monetary cost to the master of all those reduced debts, in that culture there simply was no way the master could ever reverse that action; doing so would cause enormous, permanent damage to the master’s honor and reputation, and reversing his manager’s debt reductions simply was not an option.

So the master commends the practicality of the shrewd or crooked or dishonest or clever manager who “acted decisively to provide for his future.”<sup>3</sup> He did what he was able to do in order to adjust to the new reality that was coming his way.

And maybe that’s a thought that a staid, established institutional church like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or a comfortable, content congregation like this one might take away from this difficult parable. Are there ways we need to act decisively to provide for the witness of the PC(USA) in the world? Are there ways we need to act decisively so that Rocky River Presbyterian Church continues to grow in our ability to share with our community the gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ?

Tradition is part of the fabric of the Christian faith. Tradition results in familiarity and familiarity is always more comfortable than newness and change. And yet the world we live in never stops changing. As an institution and as a local faith community we will grow increasingly irrelevant if we’re not open to adapting to changing circumstances in our world. Let me share four examples.

- For instance, I know that “the Presbyterian way of doing things” expects people who serve as elected elders and deacons to commit to terms that are three years long. That’s what our Book of Order states. But what can we do to accommodate people who are able to commit only to two years, or even one? There are possibilities, and as a local congregation we have the ability to “act decisively to provide for the future” of church governance.
- Or how will we educate people in the Christian faith? The model of Sunday school classes happening at the same time as a worship service — that’s been the predominant model of Christian education in this country only since about the 1950s. Christian educators all over are seeing that new models for faith development are needed today — already there are churches trying models that don’t depend on a school format restricted to Sunday mornings. How will we “act decisively to provide for the future” of religious education?
- Today we take in information visually more than ever before, and yet churches have depended so much upon the spoken and written word — in worship, in print communications, even in electronic

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<sup>2</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX Luke-John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 308a

<sup>3</sup> *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX Luke-John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 310

communications. How will we adjust in order to be more engaging visually without abandoning public speaking or print communications? How will we act decisively to provide information in the future?

- Offering plates with cash and checks were once the primary means people used to invest in the ministry and mission of their church each week. Today fewer and fewer people are carrying cash, those who write checks rarely do it on a weekly basis, and more and more, people are transmitting money electronically when they want to make it happen. Are we going to allow it to become ever-more difficult for people to support their church financially, or are we going to act decisively to provide for a variety of giving modalities in the future?

Those are just four examples of how the Christian Church might adapt to changing circumstances we find ourselves in.

How about for us individually? How might we be challenged to adapt to changing circumstances in our world?

- Here's a very Presbyterian challenge – remembering the sovereignty of God. That's one of the essential tenets of the Reformed faith: that God has the absolute right and ability to shape our attitudes and guide our actions so we will contribute to fulfilling God's plan for the world.
- Second, finding the discipline to set aside self-interest sometimes. Our culture promotes individualism and we easily buy into the idea that "Yes, I am so important." But there are urgent needs for more compassion, more respect, more understanding that would benefit from less "me-first" attitudes and more focus on finding what is the fairest option for everyone.
- Third, for some of us, adapting to changing circumstances might involve opting to disconnect occasionally from the distraction of electronic devices, devoting some of that time instead to striving to enrich relationships with neighbors, friends, children, parents, partners, spouses.
- Remembering the value of community and making gathering with others a priority (whether in the lobby of your condo, on the sidewalk meeting neighbors, at the recreation center or senior center, in the carpool or yes, in worship).

For most of us individually, and for all of us a church we aren't under the pressure that the shrewd manager faced with his impending unemployment and homelessness. We enjoy the benefit of time to discern where we need to adapt. What can we do in order to continue to be relevant as a community striving to present God's love in Jesus Christ. In our own lives we have time to consider how well we're conforming to the model Jesus presented of loving unconditionally, embracing justice but offering mercy, seeking to serve others rather than looking out only for our own interests. We have time, but we shouldn't take forever. For each of us, and for all of us, there will be times when we need to "act decisively to provide for the future" that God intends.

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