

## **“Shrewd Mercy”**

I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 16:1-13 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know your love  
to the depths of our souls. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I love Luke, I do. But if I were a high school writing teacher, I would have given this essay an F. The conclusion is clear and solid, of course: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” But the storytelling that tries to get us there is a hot mess. I have so many questions! Our translations pretend to make it clearer by adding that prejudicial heading, “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager.” But was he really? It’s not clear if the boss gives him a chance to defend himself; he just comes in demanding an accounting, but in the same breath, firing him. Except then the story seems to imply the manager gets two weeks’ notice or something, because he seems to still have access to the accounts for a little while, long enough to carry out his plan to ingratiate himself to the boss’s debtors. Two weeks’ notice seems like a pretty anachronistic employment policy for the first century, but what do I know?

Whatever the timing is, what happens next reminds me of the story of Zacchaeus coming a few chapters later in Luke. When we teach the story of Zacchaeus, we usually remind ourselves that everybody hated tax collectors because they made their living overcharging people on their taxes. So when Zacchaeus agreed

to repay anyone he had defrauded, it was because he had taken way more money from them than he should have. It feels to me like something similar is happening here. Imagine this manager being the one who keeps track of a landowner's tenant farmers. The rent for this field is 45 jugs of olive oil, but the manager charges 100, because his daughter is getting married next spring. The rent for that field is 70 containers of wheat, but he demands 100, because then he can buy that new donkey he's been wanting. So if he knows he's getting fired, but he still has access to his computer, he can cut down everyone's debt by reducing his margins substantially, thus winning himself friends.

Are these friends who actually like him? Probably not. They're people who now owe him a favor. He's still a guy who's not willing to face a drastic change in his lifestyle, entering in a life where he would have to dig or beg, like many of those tenant farmers do on a regular basis. But the difference between 50 jugs of olive oil and 100 is a big deal, so he's hoping they'll be inclined to help him out later.

Is this overcharging the mismanagement he was accused of by those who charged him with "squandering" the owner's property? We really don't know. Like Zacchaeus, it may have been an accepted, if hated, practice. Maybe he just took it to an extreme. If he wasn't overcharging, then his actions during his final days of access to the accounts actually were dishonest, because those weren't his debts to reduce. As I said, the whole story is a hot mess. And by the time he gets to the end of it, Jesus is

saying things that don't quite make sense: "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." What?! Is that what this story was supposed to explain? We never really heard whether those people who had the debts reduced welcomed the manager into their homes. What we did learn is that the boss commended the manager for his shrewd actions. Which makes even less sense! First of all, how did he know about them? It hardly seems like the manager would carry out this debt-reduction plan in the main office. Secondly, either he was commending the manager for taking advantage of the way he was squandering the property beforehand, or he was commending him for squandering it on his way out. Neither of those things sound like something the landowner would appreciate. Honestly, the only thing that makes sense about this story is that the manager seems to understand that he's more likely to find hospitality among the poor than he is among his fellow managerial class. Yet, somehow, Jesus concludes the story with this very clear pronouncement: "You cannot serve God and wealth."

Let's set aside that hot mess for a moment, and look at the hot mess in our other scripture reading. The hot mess here is the Apostle Paul, of course, by his own admission. He was "the foremost" sinner, he says – "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." Now, even though Paul claims he was "the foremost" sinner, it's important to remember that his beginnings as a sinner were fairly humble. At the

stoning of Stephen, he neither threw rocks nor even selected them or carried them in for those who would be throwing them. Paul was the coat check boy: the first mention of him in the book of Acts, at the end of chapter 7, notes that it was at his feet that everyone laid their coats while they stoned Stephen. And then chapter 8 begins with the words “And Saul approved of their killing him.”

Had someone intervened at that point, Paul’s radicalization might have been halted. But he was an ambitious young man, and the church was ripe for persecuting. Within days, he had become a notorious persecutor of the church, a “man of violence,” as he later confessed. By the time Saul had his Damascus Road conversion experience, with his vision of Jesus asking why he was persecuting him, Ananias, the disciple who eventually healed him of his blindness, had to be strongly urged by the voice of God to believe that he had changed.

Paul was also a hot mess, but his story shows us another clear conclusion: You cannot follow Jesus and practice violence. The choice is as stark as the one Jesus presents in Luke 16: God or wealth; Jesus or violence. We’re not always as appreciative as we could be when the Bible is as clear as this. Ambiguity offers us wiggle room. We prefer the beatitude blessing the “poor in spirit” over the version that blesses “the poor.” Sometimes we like confusing parables because when Jesus says something like “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth,” it opens up all sorts of possibilities for justifying unscrupulous behavior.

The truth is there's a third hot mess in our story today, and it's our world. I'm using the phrase "hot mess" here advisedly. A normal mess can be picked up and dealt with, one thing at a time. It may not be fun, but it's not going to hurt you, and though it's tedious, it's not that challenging. But no one wants to touch a hot mess, because you're sure to get burned. Plus, when the messiness is hot, it's likely that things have melted together in such a way that it's a lot harder to sort out what's worth keeping and what needs to be tossed out. Does that sound about right for the way things are these days?

I am a big believer in mystery as a useful practice of faith, and I think it's important for us to work at increasing our tolerance for ambiguity for many reasons. But in times of chaos and turmoil, it's vital to bring the icy clarity of the gospel to bear on the hot messes we're dealing with. You cannot serve God and wealth. You cannot follow Jesus and practice violence – in action, in rhetoric, or in policy. The shrewdness Christ is commending to us is the capacity to see through the complexity of modern systems of propaganda and misinformation, so that we can uphold gospel standards of mercy, compassion, generosity, truthfulness, nonviolence, and hospitality. If the mercy of God can pull Paul from a life of violence into a ministry of humble evangelism, it can help us navigate our way through the hot messes we're dealing with today. The confusion is not an invitation to rationalize or prevaricate; rather, this is a time for moral clarity and courage. The God we worship is a God of love, a God

who came to walk and teach and live among us. And when that Love was met with violence, the incisive power of Jesus' nonviolent, merciful response is what changed everything forever. That is the Savior we follow – not a demagogue who creates enemies for us so he can claim to be protecting us from evil, but God Almighty who shows us that our ultimate security is in God alone; the Risen Christ who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; the Holy Spirit who is continually trying to help us understand that we are all one – one body, one family, one creation. Thanks be to God for the wisdom and mercy we have been given, that we might follow Christ Jesus faithfully through whatever may come! Hallelujah and Amen!