

I need to warn you. We are about to read a story from the Bible that may be the most confusing story that Jesus ever shares. This is one of those passages of scripture that after reading it you say, "Huh?" Did Jesus really mean to say what he said? Did Luke misunderstand him? Did Jesus really say that the hero in the story is someone who is being dishonest?

For most of us, if we had been the gospel writer Luke, this is a story that we probably would have excluded in our gospel account. It's so confusing and it's so opposite of who we would think Jesus would affirm in this story. But alas, Luke did include it and we are going to read it and trust that God's Holy Spirit speaks through it.

Read Luke 16:1-15

A little later in the service today we will be invited to say the Lord's Prayer together. In the Lord's Prayer we will ask for God to give us our daily bread. And can anyone quickly remember what it is that we say immediately after we ask for God to give us our daily bread?

I'll give you a hint and say that what we will say after "give us our daily bread" is different than what our Methodist brothers and sisters will say for the Lord's Prayer. After asking for God to give us our daily bread we ask to have our debts forgiven as we forgive other debtors.

Food and debt are linked side by side in the Lord's Prayer. Food and debt is linked closely in our lives as well. Many of us feel deeper and deeper in financial debt while we seek to put food on our table. Many of us here today find ourselves arguing with spouses, parents, and children over money. Debt is a word we know something about.

Today's passage that we read is a confusing passage about money and debt. But there are passages of Scripture which are pretty straight forward about debt. Let me read to you some of them:

Exodus 22:25-27

Leviticus 25:35-38

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

So we learn from the Old Testament that it goes against God's Word to charge interest. The New Testament and particularly the gospel of Luke has a lot to say about money. Here is some of what Luke records:

Luke 1:52-53 (Mary)

Luke 3:10-14 (John the Baptist)

Luke 4:18-19 (Jesus' mission statement quoting Isaiah)

Luke 6:20-21 (Beatitudes)

Luke 12:15 (Then tells story about man who keeps building bigger barns)

Luke 19:8 (Zacchaeus)

Money and debt is a big part of our culture. But not always in a good way.

Maybe you can relate to the story that author and lawyer Valerie Rind tells about her own life. Rind's story began when her husband lost his job and opted to start his own business. Because he'd supported her while she was in law school, she was happy to loan his business \$15,000. Then, over the next few months he asked for more than \$30,000 in bits and pieces, eventually wiping out Rind's life savings.

Later, her husband mentioned that he was having trouble getting a credit card for his business – so Rind added him as a user to her own account. He ran up \$8,000 in debt.

What eventually caused Rind to file for divorce, however, was what she saw as an even bigger betrayal: Her husband told her when they were married that he owned his condo. In reality, he was merely renting it – and the asset that Rind had been factoring into their financial future was merely an illusion.

Debt is an accepted part of our culture. It is an accepted part of the church. Many of the most “successful” churches in our culture also are carrying heavy financial debts. I sometimes wonder if our Muslim friends have maybe figured out something that we Christians haven’t. In Islam they do not believe in the acquisition of financial debt.

I sometimes hear people say, “If I only had \$1 million I would be secure.” Or maybe it is \$2 million. Or I hear people say, “if only I could win the lottery.” But if we are honest with ourselves we know that this is merely an illusion that we are telling ourselves. The reality is that if we suddenly came into a large sum of money we would spend it just like we spend our smaller sums of money.

If we are frivolous with a little bit of money we will be frivolous with a large sum of money. If we overspend what we have now and buy items we don’t need then we will overspend and buy items we don’t need if we have a lot of money. If we are charitable with our small amounts of money then we will be charitable with large amounts of money. There is a reason we read and hear about these stories of lottery winners or famous athletes who end up with debt after being millionaires.

It is into this culture that we invite this morning’s strange gospel lesson. A lesson where a rich man is about to fire his manager for improperly handling his estate. This manager then decides that he does not want to do manual labor so he needs to come up with some type of shrewd plan. So this manager goes around to the tenant farmers who owe his boss lots of money.

The manager goes to these tenant farmers and cuts them all a deal without his boss’ knowledge. This manager cuts deals with these tenant farmers and says that they only need to pay half of what they owe. The manager figures that this way they will like him and maybe help him out when he loses his job.

Who do we think Jesus will lift up as the hero in this story? We are surprised when Jesus affirms this manager for undercutting his boss and being less than honest. Why would Jesus tell this story?

One part of this story which may be helpful to know is that this manager was part of a corrupt system. The tenants that owed money to his boss were working land that their ancestors once owned. However, through charging high interest rates these large scale landowners were able to force the working poor off of their land and force them to become tenants rather than owners.

One only has to look at many areas around our state to see this practice being carried out today. Practices where the wealthy begin to build developments which drive up the taxes around their property forcing local landowners to sale in order to stay out of debt.

But Jesus commends the manager for his selfish actions to reduce the payments of the tenants in order to save himself from becoming working poor. Is this a good story for Jesus to tell? A story where dishonesty is rewarded? Maybe or maybe not. It is a hard story for us to understand.

But maybe Jesus uses this story to teach us that how we handle our money in little ways has spiritual consequences. Maybe Jesus tells this story to model how someone handles dishonest wealth shows how they will handle honest wealth.

We live in a debtor nation. I've got my financial debts and you have yours. I have a house, a car, and two kids in college so debts are certainly a part of my life. I grew up on a dairy farm. My mom always said that she married into the national debt by marrying a dairy farmer.

But rather than wishing for some financial bonanza, I think this story may teach us that we need to be mindful of how we spend whatever money we have now. How generous are we? Do we live beyond our means? Do we think we can have anything that we want and not think about the future consequences of our current actions?

Jesus sums up the parable by saying that we cannot have two masters. We cannot serve both God and wealth. So where do we place our greater trust? Do we trust more in God or in our wealth?

If we want to challenge ourselves to see what our answer is we may want to check out where we are spending our money and why we have debt.

Our bank statement and our credit card statements and our tax returns may tell us a lot about whether or not we serve money or God. AMEN.

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-McGrath, Kristin, "Five True Credit Card Horror Stories," <http://creditcardforum.com/blog/true-credit-horror-stories/>

-Given: Sept. 18, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)