

An example: in many major U.S. cities there are express lanes reserved for carpoolers, and these lanes cut a great deal of time off a person's daily commute. Solo drivers are prohibited from these lanes, and they face a stiff fine if they are caught. But many people cheat the system every day, figuring that an occasional fine is simply the cost of doing business. They have no problem being in the Liar's Club; they just want to reach their destination ahead of the competition. The bottom line for Callahan is that decent folks are being drawn into cheating; drawn in by the fear that they won't make it in modern society otherwise.

At first glance, the parable of the dishonest manager seems like an invitation to join the Liar's Club and *"make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth"* (Luke 16:9). But a deeper examination reveals that this story is more about heavenly riches than it is about earthly wealth. The focus is on preparing for the next world, not getting ahead in this one.

We know that the dishonest manager is a card-carrying member of the cheating culture. He is charged with squandering the property of his rich boss and is given his two-weeks' notice. *"What will I do,"* the shady steward wonders, *"now that my master is taking the position away from me?"* (v. 3). He is not strong enough for manual labor and he is ashamed to sit in the street with a beggar's cup. So, he comes up with a plan.

To guarantee that he will have a place to land, the dishonest manager summons the master's debtors and gives them some astonishingly deep discounts. To the one who owes 100 jugs of olive oil, the manager slashes the debt to 50. To the one who owes 100 containers of wheat, the manager reduces the debt to 80.

It sounds like he's cooking the books, doesn't it? On the surface, it appears to be unethical, and maybe even criminal. Unfortunately for us, biblical scholars are unclear about the precise nature of these transactions, and so they suggest a couple of possibilities.

According to the first assessment, the manager is a crook, plain and simple, a man who dishonestly falsifies the records in order to gain the affection of the debtors. In

this case, he is cheating his master by reducing the size of the debts, and he is running the risk of being thrown in jail for stealing.

The problem with this interpretation is that it makes the master's reaction sound rather odd. The parable tells us that the rich man *commends* the dishonest manager because he has acted shrewdly. This is an unlikely response from a rich man who just lost 50 jugs of olive oil and 20 containers of wheat. While we might not expect the rich man to press charges, we certainly don't expect him to offer a commendation.

The second assessment sees the manager as a shrewd businessman, one who is willing to sacrifice short-term earnings for long-term security. When the manager calls the debtors to settle their accounts, he simply eliminates his own commission. The 50 jugs of olive oil and 20 containers of wheat are the manager's commission. By eliminating his commission, the shrewd manager knows he will curry favor with his master's clients and have a place to stay once he is out of work. In this case, he's not a liar. He is simply taking the long view.

This second interpretation helps us to make sense of the master's reaction. The rich man commends the manager for acting shrewdly, because he knows that there are times in which it is beneficial to resist the lure of a quick buck and make a long-term investment. The rich man knows that he hasn't lost anything himself: he'll still get the olive oil and the wheat that is due to him, and he cares little if his former employee loses his commissions.

The point of the parable is this, according to Jesus: *"No slave can serve two masters."* So, Jesus here is talking about **commitment**. You cannot maintain a dual focus on short-term profits and long-term security. You must pick one or the other and give it your undivided attention. As is true in the story of the dishonest manager, there are times in which we must sacrifice the commissions of this world so that we'll have the eternal comforts of God's world. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today's passage by saying, *"You cannot serve God and wealth"* (v. 13). That's no lie.

Problem is, our cheating culture encourages us to focus on earthly wealth, short-term profits and worldly commissions. It tempts us to cut corners in pursuit of financial success and pushes us to twist the truth in order to beat the competition. Today's Scripture challenges us to resist this temptation, to focus on a higher calling, and to be willing to sacrifice some of our earthly commissions in order to gain heavenly wealth. The passage is a call for us to practice Christian stewardship and make sacrificial gifts in support of God's work in the world. When we do this, we are following the example of the steward in the parable, a person who shrewdly trades short-term profits for long-term security.

The parable is also an invitation to **community**. As surprising as this sounds, remember what the manager discovers soon after he loses his job: He needs friends! He realizes that his money can't save him, and so he uses his financial prowess to create a community of support. This is an odd way to build friendships, but it earns the approval of Jesus: *"I tell you," he says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes"* (v. 9).

Jesus isn't saying that we should be dishonest; instead, he's advising us to use whatever wealth we have — what he calls "dishonest wealth" — to build a community that can endure. None of us is meant to live a life of isolation. None of us is designed to practice our faith apart from the Christian community. Like the dishonest steward, we need friends to help us through the tough times in life, and we need a community that we can serve through our own gifts of time and talent and treasure.

The commandments of this parable can be easily summarized: "Thou shalt invest in long-term savings — eternal savings," and "Thou shalt participate in community." There's nothing dishonest about it.

Prayer: Creator God, you call us to love and serve you with body, mind, and spirit through loving your creation and our sisters and brothers. Open our hearts in compassion and receive these petitions on behalf of the needs of the church and the world. Holy One, hear our prayers and make us faithful stewards of the fragile bounty of this earth so that we may be entrusted with the riches of heaven. Amen.

The Liars' Club

Sunday, November 11, 2018

Luke 16:1-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Thou shalt commit adultery. Repeat: Thou *shalt* commit adultery. That's what the Bible says. You can look it up in the King James Version of 1611, in which the word "not" was accidentally omitted. The typo so infuriated King James that he commanded all copies be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition. Because of the loss of a word, this version became known as "The Wicked Bible."

Unfortunately, it appears that more and more people today are leaving the "nots" out of their Ten Commandments. Either that, or they are simply ignoring them. Commandment number nine seems to be suffering the worst: "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). This commandment demands that we tell the truth, especially in a court of law, and it forbids anyone to tell a lie in order to gain an advantage over a neighbor. In the world of the Bible, justice can be done only if reality is not distorted by the telling of lies.

Honesty seems like an increasingly quaint notion, especially in a society that often behaves like a Liars' Club. In his book *The Cheating Culture*, author David Callahan argues that cheating is no longer limited to the secretive, shady society of criminals, hucksters, and other low-life characters. Everyone cheats, says Callahan, and because cheating is now socially acceptable, we keep on doing it.

Callahan says that the trouble stems from our brutally competitive economic climate which rewards bottom-line results and often allows winners to get away with ethical and criminal transgressions. Honesty is great, but it isn't always true that honest folks come out on top. Cheaters cheat because cheating helps them get ahead. Cheaters cheat because the chances of being caught are slim and the severity of the punishments is slight. For many, the benefits of a successful cheat far outweigh the risk of punishment.