

# Jesus and the Politics of Wealth

15th Sunday After Pentecost, September 22, 2019

In our gospel reading, the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus "throws us for a loop," as he often does. He doesn't simply point out the harmfulness of how the manager is handling his life, and advise us to do the opposite. (Although we should.) He's not telling that kind of "black & white" moral tale. (Though we sometimes need to hear those.) What is he up to here?

Jesus is leading us to think more deeply about what is right and what is wrong, in a world that is **dominated** by a snake-like cleverness, which -- when necessary -- can make itself **appear** quite noble, even to the poor. A world where what seems to be good can actually be bad, and vice versa. Good people can easily be misled in such a society. **I won't even mention the name** of one contemporary world leader, a "wealth worshipper," not far away from us, who is having this kind of sway even now, as we speak. (But it rhymes with "rump.") I could easily take that pun much further... but let's not get distracted from the gospel.

Jesus is doing something here within this parable (and how he interprets it) that is quite radical. But also quite subtle. He is pointing out something that, in itself, is bad -- harmful -- and he is showing us how it can be transformed into something good, something genuinely helpful for us and our world.

Notice the **shift** he makes between the parable itself, and how he interprets it. He starts out telling us the story of a "dishonest manager." A **person**.

But in the end, he is speaking to us of what he calls "dishonest wealth." Not a person, but a **thing**.

In the end, he is saying something that is so "counter-cultural" for us, that it may not penetrate, but just roll off of us, like water on a duck's back. Because he is saying that "wealth" as we know it -- is, in itself -- something harmful. That there is no such thing as "good" wealth. That **all** wealth is dishonest. Because while it is portrayed as something good, or at least neutral -- in reality, it is built by 'bringing ruin to the poor' (Amos 8:4-7.) **Even if** that is not the wealthy person's intention. Because whether he realizes it or not, he is part of a much larger system, and that system is "rigged" to create "haves" and "have nots." Its foundation is "*more for me; less for you.*" That is the underlying mechanism of wealth generation and accrual.

It is not an easy point he is making. We naturally assume that if we are good people -- if we haven't lied, cheated, or stolen to get the wealth we have -- then our wealth is "good" wealth. But, here (in this parable), Jesus is trying to lift that veil from our eyes

-- so we can "see" that this is not actually how it works. For even though we, in ourselves, are honest; wealth, in itself, is not. And so, when it accrues in our lives, **we cannot help** being made complicit in the larger system that creates it in the first place.

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So is Jesus here preaching "doom and gloom" to all but the poor?

No. On the contrary, he is trying to free his disciples – to free **us** – from the pervasive illusion that wealth, in itself, is a good thing, or even a neutral thing. And, then, he takes it a step further.

He shows us next that even though wealth is the **fruit** of a poisonous tree, it can become good.... in how we understand and use it. So that -- **even though we are being made complicit** in a harmful cultural system -- there is absolutely nothing for us to be guilty or ashamed of. For, by grace, something harmful can be transformed into something helpful. "Tainted fruit" can be turned into "good food" to feed the poor. "Poison" can be turned into "medicine" to heal the sick. Just as the Cross -- clearly an instrument of violence -- became an instrument of redeeming love.

Jesus is teaching **strategy** here. He is offering us a **personal economic strategy** that is rooted in the Cross. He is showing us how to *economically* be "in" the world, but not "of" it. How to **revel** in what he calls "true riches." How to **free ourselves** from the guilt of being complicit in the harmful system of wealth generation and accrual. In a still deeper sense -- he is showing us how to **change** that harmful system, beginning with ourselves (which is always his starting point).

It's not a simple message. As St. Paul once told the Corinthians, it is "meat," not "milk" (1 Cor. 2:1-3:3.) And yet, at the same time, it is much like the simple counsel that the first St. John in the Wilderness gave: *"If you have two shirts, give one to a person who has none. If you have more food than you need, share it with someone who has less than they need"* (Luke 3:11.) I realize that, on a practical level, it's not quite that simple in our day. But the principle is the same.

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," let's remember that we're praying for **more** than what we ourselves need to just survive. We're praying for **enough to share**. And, one way or another, that prayer is always answered.

And that is "**Good News**" – for the poor, and for us all. Thanks be to God.

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