

I hate this parable. A dishonest steward, about to be fired, prepares his last financial report. But first he goes to the people who owe goods to his master and rewrites their bills. He cheats his master and makes friends with the debtors, thinking one of them will hire him after he gets the ax. But then the master compliments his steward for acting prudently. The end. It makes no sense.

St. Luke put a few stories in his gospel that do not appear in any of the others: the annunciation, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the thief on the cross, to name a few. This parable also appears only in Luke's Gospel, and most people wish he had left it out. It seems to say that Jesus praises dishonesty. Actually, he praises prudence, and the person being praised just happens to be dishonest.

Still this story doesn't help when parents encourage their children to make good choices, when businesses are tempted to cheat customers, when students steal term papers off the internet, and when someone you trust lies to you.

On the other hand, the parable is consistent with this about Jesus: He always cared for the underdog. He said the poor would be blessed. Samaritans appeared as heroes. He included powerless women among his disciples. He made time for disorderly children. He forgave prostitutes. He rescued lepers from isolation. In this parable, he says there's hope even for a crook. This is good news for us.

Most of us are basically good people, but once in a while we take short cuts, and we brag about it. You get home from the grocery and find out you were not charged for the milk. You reuse an uncanceled postage stamp. You get through the admissions gate of a ballgame undetected. During intermission at a concert you move up closer to an empty seat more expensive than the one you paid for. You fudge a bit with the IRS. You walk across the street against a red light if there is no traffic. And after something like this happens, you rejoice. If you drive over the speed limit on your way to work and don't get caught, you probably don't turn yourself in to the nearest traffic cop. You feel good that you got away with something. I'm not advocating dishonesty, but everyone cuts corners in hopes of getting a break. The conditions of this parable are a little more common than they may at first appear. We praise ourselves for our cleverness, even when we are not completely honest. I wish Jesus had told this parable about a person who was both prudent and honest, but his version makes us look for the good qualities of bad people.

I'm sure Jesus would say this parable is not a license to cheat. It is a summons to think creatively. On the last day when God asks about our behavior, we will want to show that we were industrious in fulfilling the tasks we received. If we were as clever doing good as we often are doing evil, how pleased God would be.