

Jesus praises dishonesty?

THE GOOD NEWS

GOD'S WORD IN EVERYDAY LIVING

By Father Paul Turner



I HATE THIS parable (Lk 16:1-13). It seems like someone has made a terrible mistake. No matter how many times I read it, I come to the same conclusion: Jesus praises dishonesty.

A wily manager, about to be fired, prepares his last financial report. But first he runs to the people who owe goods to his master and rewrites their bills. He *cheats* his master and makes friends with the debtors, thinking his kindness will win him a new job when the other shoe drops. But then the master *compliments* the manager on his shrewdness! The end.

Jesus praises dishonesty.

Many people have tried to find a way out of reaching that red-faced conclusion. For example, consider these solutions:

● "The master had inflated the original bills." Clever idea, but the setup for the manager's actions is that the goods truly are owed to the master.

● "St. Luke heard it wrong." Sure, blame the evangelist. But Luke is easily the most talented writer in the New Testament. It's unlikely he's made a mistake here.

● "Jesus goofed." OK, at times it's true, Jesus hardly seems like a role model — his tirades against the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36), his violence in the temple (John 2:15) and his treatment of the Canaanite woman (Mark 7:24-30) make a peace-loving Christian blush for shame. But then we'd have to deal with a Jesus who makes mistakes, and that's a little too much humanity even for the most faithful

follower.

No solution will completely satisfy, because we're left with the disarming approval Jesus gives to dishonest behavior. However, the most plausible solution to me is that this parable fits in with those in which Jesus praises the outcast. The poor, the much-maligned Samaritans, powerless women, in-the-way children, sinful prostitutes, and the isolated sick all take center stage with Jesus. Why not toss a crook into the mix?

This parable kicks us in the same way the one about the Good Samaritan must have stung Jesus' band of faithful Jews. Jews hated Samaritans. How could one of them possibly be the good guy in a parable? Our capitalism-drenched sense of righteousness provokes the same response in this case. How can a thief be the hero?

WELL, LET'S BE honest. We've got plenty of scenarios in which the thief is the hero. Ever been to a football game? How do you feel when your team recovers a fumble?

Ever get through the checkout stand of the grocery store with an extra apple? Do you brag about it when you get home?

Ever reuse an uncanceled stamp? Ever sneak through an admissions gate undetected? Ever move up at intermission for a seat worth more than the one you paid for? Ever cheat the IRS? Ever sell a used car for more than it was worth? Did you congratulate yourself?

Well, then, lighten up a bit on Jesus and his choice of parables. He doesn't want us to focus on the dishonesty, but on the escape from ruin. The resurrection will be the ultimate deception: Jesus steals life and escapes death.

Imagine you're the wily manager, about to lose your job (= your life). Imagine God is your master. When you present your last report, do you want God to give you a break?

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Daily Scripture Readings

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

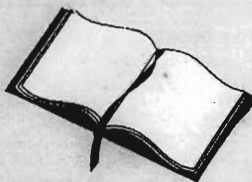
Sunday, September 17

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14

Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-32



Monday, September 18

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Psalms 28:2, 7-9

Luke 7:1-10

Thursday, September 21

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13

Psalms 19:2-5

Matthew 9:9-13

Tuesday, September 19

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Psalms 101:1-3, 5-6

Luke 7:11-17

Friday, September 22

1 Timothy 6:2c-12

Psalms 49:6-10, 17-20

Luke 8:1-3

Wednesday, September 20

1 Timothy 3:14-16

Psalms 111:1-6

Luke 7:31-35

Saturday, September 23

1 Timothy 6:13-16

Psalms 100:2-5

Luke 8:4-15

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday, September 24

Amos 8:4-7

Psalms 113:1-2, 4-8

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Luke 16:1-13