

Don't we all love stories where the good guy uses wit and cunning to defeat a villain? But it can be disturbing when a villain uses that same wit and cunning. And yet Jesus once told his disciples a parable about a dishonest man who did just that. In this case, Jesus told a parable about a rich man who had a manager who was accused of wasting the rich man's possessions. So he called him in and says "Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer."

Now this is understandable. The guy has been loose with his boss' money. So the boss has no choice but to give him a pink slip. But, evidently he doesn't fire him at once. So he says to himself, "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to do manual labor, and I'm embarrassed to go on welfare. I know what I'll do. I'll use my remaining time and some of my boss' resources to insure my future."

So he called in his boss' customers gave them huge discounts. The manager was insuring that he would have some friends who would be indebted to him when he no longer had a job. Now for the shocker: Jesus concludes this parable by having the manager's boss praise him because he had acted so shrewdly.

That's troubling to many people. Jesus seems to be giving approval to a shady character and his shady deals. Theologians and preachers have puzzled long over this parable. Some scholars believe that even Luke was embarrassed by it. What do you suppose the Master was trying to do with this parable?

In preparing something to say this weekend I ran across at least five different ways people suggested to

explain the disturbing fact that Jesus seems to be complimenting an evil doer.

- Some suggest that the **owner** was the bad guy who had been cheating his customers and the manager was setting things right.
- Another suggests that the manager was crooked and now he was repenting and paying back what **he** had overcharged. I don't think either of those excuses really work. There is no indication of innocence or repentance, he did it so he wouldn't have to dig ditches.
- Perhaps, say some commentators, **this is chiefly a parable about forgiveness**. Jesus was praising the dishonest manager for forgiving his boss' debtors. And this makes some sense. After all, Jesus was all about forgiveness and this parable comes right after the story of the prodigal who came home and was graciously welcomed and forgiven by his father. That interpretation has its appeal. God's forgiveness does meet one of our deepest need, and it's one possible explanation of why Jesus would praise the dishonest manager. He forgave his master's debtors.
- Another possible explanation is that **this really is a parable about money**. Luke, in fact, seems to interpret the parable in this way, since he attaches some of Jesus' other teachings about money right after this parable. This explanation, too, has its appeal. Jesus had more to say about money than any other topic in the Gospel of Luke. There are more passages in Luke about money than there are about death, marriage or family values. Jesus warned time after time about the dangers of riches.

- However, there is a final alternative that we need to consider: Perhaps Jesus actually was praising the man **for doing something about his situation**. Notice how Jesus ends this parable. “The master commended the dishonest manager because he **had acted shrewdly**.” Jesus was not praising his dishonesty, but his ingenuity and his initiative. This man took hold of his life and got himself out of a tight situation. He didn’t sit around flogging himself saying, “What shall I do? What shall I do?” He didn’t spend all his time on his knees praying, “O Lord, please get me out of this.” Jesus was praising this man taking action. I suspect Jesus had little sympathy for persons who always expected God to do things for them that they were perfectly capable of handling themselves.

Jesus said, “For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.” Those are important words. The **people of light are good people**, moral people, religious people, but they can also be somewhat reserved people, detached, almost apathetic people. Worldly people are more apt to head where the action is. Remember to whom Jesus was directing this parable. It was to his disciples. It wasn’t to the Pharisees or the multitudes. He was speaking to those closest to him.

I think he was saying, “Look, guys, I know you are a nice people, and that’s great, but I need you to be more than nice. I need for you to get out there and make a difference in the world.” I believe that is what Jesus is saying to his church even today.

Sure we're nice people. Jesus likes nice people but he wants more from those who claim to be his disciples.

We hear about odd lawsuits every now and then; here is one for you. It seems that one lovely Sunday when the sermon and the service had been especially long, the congregation rushed, as usual, from its pews the moment the final hymn sounded. Abigail, still in a prayerful mood, moved more slowly and was trampled. She sued the church and its officials for damages.

"Those in charge of the church knew that most of the congregation stampedes after long sermons," Abigail argued. "They should have recognized the danger in the situation. Not being prepared to cope with it, they were negligent."

The church's attorney argued like this in response: "A church is a nonprofit organization manned for the most part by volunteers. No one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business concern. Abigail, therefore, has no real claim."

If you were the judge would you award damages to Abigail? You can decide that yourself. What I found interesting in this situation was the characterization of the church. "A church is a nonprofit organization manned for the most part by volunteers. . . No one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business."

Why not? What if we were as good at what we do as McDonald's is at what they do, or Coca Cola or Microsoft? What if we were as committed to spreading the good news as Google or your cable company is to winning new customers?

This is the point Jesus is trying to make. He wants people who bear his name to not only be nice people but to be people who make a difference in the world. He wants to invest our time and energy in the things we claim to be essential as Christians. Isn't that what a clever person does?

How is your investment doing? Is it turning out less profitable than it might because of a lack of preparation? We can't rush in late and out early-- like we're picking up a loaf of bread at a convenient mart-- and expect to have a full blown religious experience that will change us and change our world.

We can't live as Christian adults working out of the vague memories of catechism lessons we sort of learned as kids. We need to be "crafty" enough to take advantage of opportunities to deepen our faith. We need to be as aggressively committed and involved as the gospel crook was aggressively dishonest.

We can't carry our Christianity around like a spare tire saved for emergencies, because by then it might be too flat and lifeless to do us any good. The clever, the crafty Christian will consciously plan on being Christian this week and will work at it with the dedication that something essential and world changing deserves.