

This week's "Lectionary 25" Gospel is probably the most difficult story Jesus ever told. It is usually called "the Parable of the Unjust Steward" or "the Dishonest Manager." Here it is,.

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'

"Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'

"So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

"And his master [or: the Lord] commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

"No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [or: mammon]."

Questions for Discussion

It is not clear whether "his master" (i.e. the rich man in the story) or "the Lord" (i.e. Jesus himself) commended the manager. Nor is it clear why he is called "dishonest." Is it because he squandered money in the first place, or because he wrote off those debts in the last place? In any event, remember that the manager was praised because of his cleverness, not because of his crookedness. Does the fact that Jesus told this story make you uncomfortable?

Consider "mammon," that is, the accumulation of wealth. Can it become a means for getting into "the eternal homes," as one verse suggests? Or is devotion to mammon guaranteed to keep you separated from God, as the last verse insists?

The ways lenders grant loans and borrowers pay interest can shape our social structures--sometimes fairly, sometimes unjustly. Think of home mortgages, auto loans, insurance policies, investment portfolios, plastic credit cards, bankruptcy laws and the latest adjustment in the Federal Reserve Bank's interest rate. These are all economic practices. Are the policies behind these practices equitable? Or not?