

+
AMDG

Proper 20C, Pentecost 18 - September 18, 2016

Well, if you heard today's Gospel and scratched your head and said, "WHAT?!?", you're in good company, because biblical scholars and commentators have puzzled over these strange and inconsistent verses for many centuries. And their opinions are all over the map.

Is Jesus commending shady business practices? Is he suggesting you buy your friends with someone else's money?

But, if we take these confusing of verses, and look at them within the context of Jesus' larger message in Luke, rather than looking at this passage in isolation, then it begins to make a little more sense. Also, a little bit of historical background can give us a little more insight into what was being said...but not much.

First, some historical background. Wealthy landowners in Jesus' time, were often absentee landlords, leaving the management of their affairs in the hands of managers. As you can imagine, these property managers and the landowners they represented were not well-liked. The property managers, just like tax-collectors, made their money by over-charging tenants for their rent, often by 100% or more. So, when the manager in our story was cutting the debtors' bills, may have been eliminating his commission. Luke's story may have been appealing to an audience that was under the thumb of absentee-landlords and their greedy managers. The other thing to consider about this passage is that it goes along with several others that come before and after and focus on wealth and possessions. When we hear this passage on a given Sunday, without hearing the other sections of the Gospel that come before and after the passage, we miss the larger theme of wealth and possessions in light of the Gospel. These parables and sayings in Luke are not about how bad it is to have wealth, but what our proper relationship should be to wealth in the light of the Good News. When Jesus is commending the dishonest manager in this story - or the clever slaves who invest the owner's money in a later parable - he's not commending their business practices as much as he is their relationship to wealth. They do not treat wealth as

an end in itself or something to be held onto. They see wealth as belonging to someone greater, and to use it for the good of others. The dishonest manager in our story used the wealth of his boss, and his own fees, to offer mercy to people in debt. He was building relationship by means of wealth, even if it was dishonestly.

When Jesus criticizes the wealthy - as with the rich man who had a great harvest and pulled his barns down to put up bigger barns - Jesus is not criticizing wealth itself, but having one's focus on gaining and keeping wealth. In the broader Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches his followers that their wealth and possessions are not their own, but God's. And the proper use of wealth is to benefit those in need, as well as their own needs.

Ending today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us we can't be focused on both wealth and God. We have to choose. When we're focused on wealth instead of on God, our goal is on holding onto what we have and trying to get more. But when our focus is on God, we see wealth and possessions as blessings from God, and our outlook is one of gratitude. Living in gratitude for God's blessings, wealth becomes a tool for doing God's will in the world. Bringing God's extravagant love and mercy to those in greatest need. And, an amazing thing begins to happen when our focus shifts away from wealth and possessions and more towards doing God's will...our wealth - both material and spiritual - increase exponentially, and so does our gratitude and love for God and creation. So, let us pray...

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.