

The Gospel passage today is one of those Bible passages that preachers would rather avoid. Known as the parable of the unjust steward, it is difficult to interpret. The story itself sounds quite contemporary. A dishonest manager is about to lose his job because he has mispent his employer's assets. Because he doesn't want to do manual labour or receive charity, he goes round all the people who owe his employer money and reduces their debts. He does this so that they will be hospitable to him after he loses his job. To our surprise, the employer commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Why is he commended?

It may have been a warning to those who were prosperous and influential but would eventually lose their power and need to find support where they could. But the words are addressed to the disciples, and this is the difficulty. The tone is ironical, spoken with what we might call dry humour, which Jesus often brought into his teaching. This parable speaks to the theme of easiness, lack of effort, discipleship, commitment or following through. As we look closely at the parable of the dishonest steward, we can see that Jesus is saying that people who do dishonest deeds put a lot of effort into their deeds.

A steward was fired for not doing his job well. Then he thought, "What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.."

So he calls in all the people who owe his master money and tells them to change their bills. He figures in this way, those people will be beholden to him and they will take care of him now that he has lost his job.

Pretty smart thinking, right?

The master then finds out about his shrewdness as the text says and commends the steward for his fast thinking.

Even today a lot of people put a lot of effort into doing wrong things for their own selfish ends.

For example "Two partners had a clothing store. One would stay in the back room while the other waited on the people. The one waiting on the people would pretend he was hard of hearing. When a customer chose a suit he liked, he would ask the price. The clerk would call to his partner in the back room, "How much is the suit Harry"

Harry would reply in a loud and clear voice so the customer would be sure to hear £150.00. The clerk would then say it was £129.00. Many people would hurry and buy that suit for £129.00 thinking they were getting a bargain because they thought the clerk heard the wrong price. Little did they know that the partners were pulling a fast one on them and in their own greed they jumped at the chance of making a killing.

Now the point Jesus is making with this parable is --- if the wicked people of this world go to so much trouble and effort to be wicked, to be dishonest, to cheat, and to be so selfish -- why can't my disciples put as much or even more effort into being sons and daughters of the light.

Jesus is letting his disciples know with great force, and with a dry sense of humour, that people of the world are outsmarting the people of light. This conniving rogue faced the facts, sized up a situation and acted in quick, cold logic. Jesus wished that his followers would do as much from nobler motives.

Jesus is saying in a humorous way, if only Christians were as eager and ingenious in their attempts to attain goodness as people of the world are in their attempts to attain money and comfort. Jesus wants us to act with the same intensity in our discipleship toward him as rascals, cheats, and crooks act in their attempt to gain comfort and wealth.

To place this text in context, Jesus is heading for Jerusalem and he is sensing that those following, the disciples and the others who were always around him, do not realize what kind of life he is calling them to follow. He is sensing they are along for a joy ride. They are along to see the thrills of his miracles, to get a little free bread and fish. They are coming along to witness a good argument between Jesus and the religious rulers.

They do not comprehend the seriousness, the dedication, the discipleship, he is calling them to live by. So Jesus says from our text: "for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."

This parable is not just about money, it is not just about dishonest stewardship, but it is about commitment, discipleship, of following Jesus with one's whole life. Jesus wants our lifestyle to be fully committed to him. He wants the way we act, the way we think, the way we make decisions, the way we work, the way we interact with others all to be influenced by our commitment to him as Lord and master of our lives.

Jesus is saying if crooks and those who are only looking out for their own welfare are so ingenious and can act so decisively about things that really don't matter, why do Christians seem so casual about the care of their souls? If only we paid as much attention to the things which concern our souls as we do to the things which concern our livelihood, we would be much better people. Our Christianity will begin to be real and effective only when we spend as much time and effort on it as we do on our worldly activities.

Do you see the point Jesus is making here? He is saying that since the people of the world are so intense in their way of life, why aren't my followers? If the crooks of the world will stop at nothing to make money, why aren't we who are followers of Jesus as committed to him with such zeal, ambition, and dedication?

Unfortunately the Prayer Book reading omits the verses immediately following, which have the clear message that if we are not honest and faithful in small matters, we will not respond worthily to the greater blessings which God bestows on us. Jesus closes this parable with a statement which strikes to the heart of the matter as he says in verse 13: "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Here 'mammon' means material possessions.

Jesus concludes with this sharp statement as a way to sum up what he had been trying to say all along. And if you are going to be for me, then give me all the effort you can. Give me your entire effort. He is saying he doesn't want any half-hearted discipleship. He wants total effort on our part. If the dishonest people can put so much effort into their work, why, oh why can't you try even harder to serve me, love me and love your neighbour? Let us pray,

Almighty God, whose love created the world and all that is therein, have mercy on our misuse of what is entrusted to us. Keep us in the way of honest living and give us grace to resist the temptation of material gain wrongly acquired. In Jesus' name. Amen