

Only a Savior Like Jesus Could Love People Like You

A Sermon Preached by Bishop William H. Willimon

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Luke 16:1-13

I admit it: many of you know much more about business than I. Unlike many of you, I've never actually held a real job in the real world where you had to show up and get your hands dirty and do heavy lifting. (My only work experience is as a Methodist preacher and a Duke professor, making me a business virgin.) I am also aware that there are students present, young, impressionable, minds.

Like many Americans, I take a dim view of business, informed by the movie, *Wall Street*. 1 and 2.

Stealing is wrong! Students write that down, so you'll remember it. Stealing is wrong whether practiced by a shoplifting teenager or a commodity leveraging stock broker. Wrong!

And so I begin this sermon by reiterating that I in no way condone or tolerate stealing.

Despite what Jesus says.

I stand before you forced -- by Dean Wells' gracious invitation -- to preach the most perplexing of Jesus' parables. Jesus told many strange stories; this, the strangest. Even the Jesus Seminar, that doesn't believe much about Jesus, believes Jesus told this shocking story.

Not to be critical of you, but I must say that it rather bothered me that, as this parable was being read, you sat there as if this parable from Luke 16 made perfect sense.

Made me wonder about *your* morality.

But, to heck with morality. Jesus is on a roll: You hear the one about the *rich man* (and you know how deeply we class-warfare-liberal democrats resent the rich!) who heard that his manager was stealing from the company? So he calls him in and says, "Show me the books, you, you alleged *thief!*"

And the manager responds, "The books? Sure. Master just allow me a few.... notations."

"I'm too proud to beg and too lazy to do any honest labor," he says to himself.

Thus the swindle begins. The little crook calls in some of his master's customers. "How much do you owe my master? A thousand? Let me drop a zero so it's only a hundred. How you like dem numbers?" To another: Four million! "Well look at this. It appears, thanks to my efforts, you own only four hundred!"

Huge sums are written off so that when the master sacks the little crook, he can go to these debtors and say, "Hey! Remember me? The guy that helped you jilt my former boss?"

Next day the boss calls in the little swindler and says, "OK, show me the books!"

The manager presents the ledger. You can see where he's scratched through, erased, rewritten and thoroughly cooked the books.

And the master says... "You, you *business genius you!* I wish all these priggish sons-o-light in this company showed as much individual initiative, worldly wisdom, and

commercial creativity! You are one shrewd operator! I'm moving you up to the front office even without a Fuqua MBA, you act like you had one."

Jesus, there are young people here. Dean Wells has written an important book on *ethics*! He's like an expert on exemplary behavior! Jesus!

Jesus couldn't be serious in telling this story, could he? Surely he must have delivered this parable with a wink. In the original, surely Jesus ended with, "Just kidding! We all know that stealing is a no no in the Ten Commandments. Boys and girls, Martha Stewart could tell you, model yourself on this story and the Feds will nail you! It's a joke!"

No. Though Jesus should have ended this parable with that disclaimer, what he said was, "The master *commended* the dishonest manager... for the children of this age are more shrewd...than are the children of light. I tell you, *make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth...*"

Jesus!

Can you feel what a burden it is for Jesus to have forced me, child of light, with a good deal of enlightened theological education, to tell this story (praising the immoral children of this age) to fellow children of light like you? The majority of people on this campus or in this town remained abed this morning. That's why we good church going Christians call them, among other things, "children of this age." Their morality is the worldly wisdom of this age, slaves to the grubby go-along-to-get-along values of this age.

But you, unlike them, got up, got dressed, and got to Duke Chapel – certifying you as the closest thing in Durham to "children of light."

And some of you are expecting that right now I'm going to say, "Relax. You can all thank God that when faced with a perplexing parable like this one you are in the hands of qualified, professional with an advanced degree in interpreting Jesus! He didn't really mean to commend the dishonest manager. It's First Century Near Eastern Semetic hyperbole. In the Greek, *kleptō* (for all you laypeople who don't know Greek) doesn't really mean 'steal,' it means borrow, sort of."

Well, forget it. I know that you children of light would love me to pull a little historical-critical slight of hand in order to get Jesus to say something other than what he clearly said. Believe me. If there were any way to get out of this outrageous, ill-considered, perplexing parable, the historical critics in the Department of Religion would have delivered us of it long ago.

Commending dishonesty? Praising thievery? Flinging back in our faces our enlightened, upstanding morality? Jesus!

I know that many of you – children of light – have come here this morning hoping to be the recipients of more light, hoping to engage in some fine moral tuning for your already well burnished positive self-image. Some of you are young. You're students. You are trying to find the right way to walk in life. You want to be a better person and you have come to church because, well, what better place to stiffen the old moral fiber and be begged to be a better person than church?

While I hate to see Jesus disappoint you, would you just consider the possibility that *Jesus is about much more important matters even than helping you to be a better person?* Maybe Jesus is not going to wait until you get your books cleaned up and you

are a certified “better person” before he loves you and takes delight in you, even when the best that can be said about your raunchy ethics is “shrewd.”

The last time I preached on this parable was in an affluent summer church in Southampton, Long Island. This tycoon (with Goldman Sachs, as recall) took me to lunch so he could lambast me for preaching this parable without saying for sure why Jesus told this parable. He called me “irresponsible.” A guy at Goldman Sachs calls *me* irresponsible? Jesus.

Well, the best I could defend myself was to say, “Look. I’m a good person therefore I can’t stand business people who pay themselves big bonuses and walk away scot free. But Jesus? Jesus makes a guy like you the hero of his parable!”

You got to love a Savior who would dare a story like this to children of light like you and me. How odd of Jesus to insult our goodness by commending this guy’s badness? With all of the serious, morally uplifting, important political, economic, and social issues before us, why would Jesus waste this holy day with his unholy, “Hey kid. Come over here. You hear the one about the boss who called in this little creep and....”

James Joyce’s story, “Grace,” opens with a drunk businessman falling down stairs in a bar. He is a drunk who has, due to drink, neglected his poor wife and family. After his near fatal, drunken plunge, a group of his bar friends scheme to reform him by getting him to a Jesuit, Father Purdon who has a reputation for tough sermons. That ought to sober him up and bring him to his senses! To their dismay, that night the preacher preaches on this parable: “For the children of this age are wiser...than the children of light....”

Joyce says, “Father Purdon developed the text with resonant assurance....one of the most difficult texts in all the Scriptures.... It was a text which might seem to the casual observer at variance with the lofty morality elsewhere preached by Jesus Christ. But, [the preacher] told his hearers, the text seemed to him specially adapted for the guidance of those whose lot it was to lead the life of the world...it was a text for business men and professional men. Jesus Christ with his divine understanding of every cranny of our human nature, understood that not all were called to the religious life.”¹

And Joyce names the story, “Grace.”

Let’s be honest. Despite our earnest efforts and preening pretension, most of us are, more than we like to admit, “children of this age.” We want to move toward the light, but then there are these shady urges, these secret habits, the things we think and do when nobody’s looking. Some of the things we did last night after the party don’t look so good in the light of Sunday in church. We pledge our allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven, but the Kingdoms of this World own us. Look at our master card receipts.

You got to love a Savior who doesn’t mind getting mixed up with some of us low “children of this age,” even to allow us to nail him to a cross, so determined was he to love us, as we are, rather than as who we wish we were. Only a Savior with a gentle, bemused appreciation for the antics of the “children of this age,” could save sinners -- like us.

¹ James Joyce, “Grace,” in *Dubliners* (Viking, 1958), 173-174.

Why did Jesus tell this story? I don't know. Forty years thinking about this story *and I don't know!* But then, I've had four decades of working for the "children of light" and something about church can mislead one into thinking that when Jesus says, "I've come to seek and save *sinners!*" Jesus isn't actually talking about me.

But if by chance, there's somebody here, who is a card-carrying member of "the children of this age," somebody better at being shrewd than being good, then maybe you hear this story differently from the rest of us good ones. Maybe you thrill, when the master calls in somebody who's a lot worse than you and says, with a smile, "Well done, shrewd servant. Sometimes I tire of these goody children of light with their moral pretentions. I can use a shrewd wheeler dealer like you."

How dare Jesus delight in forcing a preacher like me to make somebody like *you* his beloved hero of the story? Jesus.