



What Will I Do?

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explores the parable of the unjust manager in Luke 16:1-13.

A number of disreputable characters feature in the parables of Jesus, but the unjust manager is in a class of his own. He is a clever, crafty criminal and Jesus commends him! This is a puzzling parable which turns things upside down to bring about transformation – and it still speaks to us today.

Jesus is “on the way to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51–19:28), a physical journey which is calling disciples to an inner journey of being transformed into “people of the resurrection” (Lk 9:20:36).

The parable of the unjust manager shares parallels with the father and the two sons parable (Lk 15:11–32) which Jesus told to the Pharisees and scribes.

When first written the Gospels had no chapter divisions, so the unjust manager parable is like an appendix to the parable of the father and the two sons. It, too, is about

God, sin, grace and mercy. Jesus could have been using a well-known case as an example. This certainly would have had the disciples' attention and they would have expected him to disapprove.

Background to the Text

In the preindustrial world of Jesus, agriculture was at the centre of the economy. Issues revolved around who had control of the land, what the land produced and who had power over the surplus. Palestine was part of the commerce of the Roman Empire which had a uniform currency. Its roads ensured commercial routes of worldwide trade. Rich land owners in this network employed estate managers who exercised considerable authority. They rented out property, made loans and settled debts in the name of their master. Managers lived on fees collected from debts and rents, and by charging debtors

interest on what was owed. All transactions were recorded in a written contract approved by both parties.

Rural people had a commonly held notion of “limited goods” – there was only so much wealth and land to go around. So when a man was described as “rich” it would have meant greedy.

Closer Look at Story *Manager Dismissed*

In the parable the rich lord orders the manager: “Give me an accounting of your management” – meaning show me the account books. The manager is fired immediately – but he keeps the books. He now has no authority so any action he takes will not be binding on the lord.

Now Jesus's listeners would have been stunned by the manager's sudden dismissal because in their world a person in authority would not dismiss anyone without lengthy negotiations. For example, the manager could have drawn on family affiliations: “My father served your father. My grandfather served your grandfather.” Or, he could have blamed others or confronted whomever reported him. He could even have brought influential people to plead his case. But in the story, the manager tried none of these. He remained silent – seemingly accepting his guilt. That he accepted immediate dismissal was totally confusing to the listeners.

Manager Looks to His Future

The manager was amazed at the lord's mercy – he was dismissed but not fined or imprisoned. He made a realistic stocktake of his situation. He was incapable of hard physical work. And he feared being reduced to begging – a too-common occurrence.

So before the news of his sacking got out, he worked out a way whereby “people may welcome me into their homes” (Lk 16:4).

He called in the debtors on his list one by one. They would have assumed he was acting under the lord's instructions.

He reduced their debts and the reductions were enormous. For example, 50 measures of oil was worth about 500 denarii – a farm worker's wage for 18 months. It is possible of

course that the manager was cancelling his own cut of the takings.

The Lord's Response

Now the rich lord faced a dilemma. If he undid the arrangements, he risked alienating villages where his amazing generosity was being celebrated. But he would be praised if he allowed the arrangements to remain.

Surprisingly, the lord praised the manager for acting "shrewdly" (NSRV) or "astutely" (JB). The word *phronimos* suggests the cleverness required for self-preservation. It is not necessarily ethical but means that the person plays their cards well.

The Parable for Us

We can see the likenesses between the parable of the unjust manager and the parable of the father and two sons (Lk 15:11-32). Both have a noble father/lord who shows mercy to a wayward underling. Both have an ignoble son/manager "squandering his property" (Lk 15:13; 16:1). Both underlings faced the truth and loss of their situations and then cast themselves on the mercy of the noble one. Both deal with broken trust and its consequences. So how does this shape our thinking of God's mercy today?

Some interpreters see the "lord" as applying to Jesus. Just as the manager is confronted by his personal crisis, so are we exposed by the challenges of the reign of God.

And there is the silence. Once confronted the manager accepts his actions. He chooses to risk his future because he has confidence in his lord's mercy. He acts resolutely to give himself a new start.

Scripture scholar Tom Wright asks: "Does this parable call the Church to learn to think unconventionally, make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the wind and discover again in the truth of the Gospel as our lasting home?"

The rich person was perceived as greedy in a world of limited goods. Maybe we can think of the manager not as "squandering" the lord's property but as creatively redistributing the lord's wealth. Or was the debt he wiped money owed to him personally? Does the puzzle

of this parable make us question the way we think of wealth distribution today – especially in New Zealand, which now has the widest and fastest-growing gap between the rich and poor in the so-called developed world?

"Does this parable call the Church to learn to think unconventionally, make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the wind and discover again in the truth of the Gospel as our lasting home?"

The parable could cause us to reflect on the payment of fair wages to workers and the responsibility of businesses and individuals to contribute a fair share of taxes to the common good. The manager could well be the teacher of Christian communities regarding this practice of justice.

John Paul II in *On Social Concerns* reminds us of the structures of sin operating in our societies. He described it as "the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, even whole nations or blocs of nations" where "cases of *social sins* are the result of the accumulation and

concentration of many *personal sins*." These personal sins cause, support or exploit evil – eg, the impoverishment of peoples, racism, destruction of environments, human trafficking, tax evasion. Those in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit social evil fail to do so out of laziness, fear, silence, complicity or indifference. In this way, as individuals we lend support to the structures of sin.

The parable of the unjust manager is as surprising and puzzling to us as it would have been to the disciples. But that it puzzles us is also what makes it so fascinating and worthwhile to read: we are forced to think about wealth – what it is, how we use it, how we participate in its distribution – and to think, too, about how we understand mercy. 🌿

22 September – Luke 16:1-13
RL 25th Sunday Ordinary Time
RCL 15th Sunday After Pentecost

Painting: *The Tax Collector* (1542)
by Marinus van Reymerswale
Alte Pinakothek, Munich



Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.

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