

Did Jesus Praise a Crook?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 21, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; *Luke 16:1-13*.

Does our Gospel lesson for this morning make any of you feel uncomfortable about the morality of what Jesus was saying? The steward was clearly guilty of fraud but there isn't a hint that Jesus condemned his crime. We're left with an uneasy feeling that we're supposed to admire this steward's clever trick of escaping suffering by dishonesty. Did Jesus really praise a crook in this parable? What did Jesus want us to learn from this rascally steward?

Think about the story. It's about a man who wasn't doing a good job and got fired. He was entrusted with the responsibility of running his employer's business. But he was continuously wasting the firm's money. We aren't sure whether he was embezzling the money and pocketing himself or if he was just mismanaging it. At any rate the business was losing money. The owner of the business discovered the problem and called the man into his office. "Look here," he says. "You're not doing what I hired you to do. We're losing money and it's your fault. I can't afford to keep paying you to lose my money. You're fired! Turn in your keys!"

The steward goes out thinking, "What am I going to do? I'm not in any shape to be a ditch digger and I don't want to go on welfare." His future looks bleak. No job. No home. No money. He's hopeless. So he thinks of what he can possibly do to make the best out of a bad situation. Now this man isn't a paragon of virtue. He has no moral qualms about cheating or dishonesty. So he comes up with a terrific idea. The news hasn't gotten out yet that he's been fired so he decides to call in his boss's debtors one by one. 'How much do you owe?'

'A hundred dollars.'

'Hey! I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I've always really liked you. So just write out a check for fifty dollars and I'll mark your receipt, "paid in full." After all, what are friends for?'

He shakes the man's hand, slaps him on the back and walks him to the door and asks about his wife and kids.

Then, I imagine, just before the debtor leaves he turns and says, 'Hey, if there's anything I can ever do for you let me know.'

By doing this dishonest thing he makes friends for life. He can count on these people to offer him a place to stay and food to eat when he's out of work.

News of this gets back to his boss. Now even though he's lost a good bit of money because of this sheister manager he still smiles and commends him for his shrewdness.

That rascal's no dummy! he says. 'He knows how to take care of himself.'

What's the point of this story? Why did Jesus tell it? He certainly didn't mean to praise the steward's dishonesty. Jesus came to save us from dishonesty, not to encourage it. For example, the tax-collector Zacchaeus, after salvation came to his home, said, "One half of my goods I give to feed the poor; and if I've wronged anyone, I restore it to him fourfold".

So, no, Jesus wasn't commending fraud or dishonesty. What Jesus wanted to teach us was this; that this steward, rascal that he was, nevertheless had some good qualities, qualities that Christians need to cultivate and exemplify.

Now I see at least three challenges for us in this parable.

First, it's a challenge to face squarely up to the facts, however bleak and disturbing they may be. This man faced up to the fact that he'd been found out. He'd been wasting his boss's money. He knew he'd been fired and wouldn't have much hope of getting another job as good as this one. He didn't live in a fool's paradise. He didn't wear rose colored glasses. He didn't pretend that things weren't as bad as they were. He squarely faced the facts.

This quality, this willingness to look at the facts is one which we Christians need to cultivate and apply. For example, a few years ago my brother in law was in for a physical check up. David is about 37 years old and had been smoking since he was a young teen-ager. The doctor bluntly told him to stop smoking. He said, 'Look! You have a wife and three kids who need you. You keep on smoking and you have a good chance of lung cancer or a heart-attack. You can do what you want but you'd better stop smoking.' David faced the facts squarely and stopped.

Now my point isn't to point a finger at smokers. There are all sorts of facts we ignore. For example, are there facts you have to face up to in your marriage? Sometimes a marriage falls apart and a wife or husband seems taken by surprise. What happened? 'I didn't know there was anything wrong.' But there *were* some things wrong. The facts were there but they were ignored.

Or are you ignoring facts about your work? Sometimes a person ignores the facts about their job performance. Excuses are made or warnings ignored until they find themselves out of work.

The most important facts that people ignore have to do with their relationship with God. Are their facts you need to face up to in with respect to your faith in Christ? Are there things that God's trying to tell

you that you're not listening to.

Although we can't look up to the dishonest steward as a model of morality we can commend him for facing up to the facts in his own life. This lesson still needs to be learned.

Secondly, this story is a challenge to look ahead, to exercise foresight. This rascally manager had the wisdom to think ahead, to project himself into the future, and picture himself plunged into homelessness, poverty, and unemployment; and he tried to plan as best he could for that bleak future which he faced.

This quality of foresight is one which we should also cultivate and apply if we're going to accomplish, in this life, what God want of us. Christians believe that this life is important; that God has given us life to enjoy to the full. But we also pray for a kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And we're to live this life in the light of our 'eternal habitations.' This means that, looking ahead, we'll order our earthly lives in such a way that we make it clear they we really do believe that 'the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are unseen are eternal'.

Third, this parable is a challenge to Christ's followers to use our minds, our God-given intelligence, as an integral part of our commitment to God in Christ. This rascally manager not only faced up to the uncomfortable facts of his situation, he not only looked ahead, but he used his brains to think of a way to escape the bleak future which lay before him.

When Jesus was asked at one time the question, 'Which is the greatest commandment of the law?' he replied by quoting Dt 6⁵: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy

might'. But he added a highly significant clause not found in Deuteronomy, 'And with all thy mind'. What he meant was probably this, that for full Christian commitment it's necessary not only to dedicate ourselves to the doing of the will of God in Christ, it's also necessary to think out the most effective way to carry out God's will in practice. For example, when the apostle Paul was planning his great missionary journeys, he thought out the best way to allow the Gospel to make its maximum impact. Realizing that the Roman Empire was predominantly urban, he focused on the cities, Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Rome, from which the good news could spread to the surrounding areas. When he got to a city, he went straight to the Jewish synagogue, if there was one, because, although he wasn't very optimistic about converting many Jews, he knew that in each synagogue there were nearly always a fringe of gentiles who were seeking after God and who were highly receptive to the Gospel. It was mainly from their ranks that the membership of the Christian Church was recruited in those early days. The point is, that Paul's Christian commitment didn't involve him simply in missionary work. His Christian commitment made it necessary for him to use his God-given intelligence to think and plan the most effective and fruitful missionary strategy and methods.

This is also a quality that's so much needed in our Christian commitment; the quality of thinking and using our God given intelligence to figure out ways to extend God's kingdom here, to build the church, to achieve a just and righteous society. As Christians we need to think and plan for the future. In a word, we need to love the Lord God not only with heart, soul and strength, but also with the mind. That's the third challenge that this parable of the unjust steward presents.

The children of this world, like the unjust steward, are so often more

shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light. And that ought not to be so. Let's learn something from the unjust steward. Let's learn to face the facts as squarely as he did. Let's learn to plan for the future of this church and this world with as much shrewdness as he did. Let's use our heads as well as our hearts as we live out our commitment to Jesus Christ in this world.

Let us pray: Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you desire, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.