

Opportunities for Good

A middle-aged man was working as a night clerk in a small hotel in New York City. An elderly couple came in late one night looking for a room. The man said, “We haven’t been able to find a room anywhere. You’re our last hope.” “Sorry,” the clerk said, “We’re all full.” The couple stood there helplessly. Then the clerk said, “But you’re welcome to stay in my room if you’d like. I’m here all night.” The man said, “Then I’ll pay you double the going rate.” The clerk replied, “Oh, no you won’t. You’re my guests. I’ll have it no other way.” With that, he took their bags up to his room where they got a good night’s sleep.

Two years later, this same elderly gentleman came to the hotel in the early morning hours, just as the clerk was getting off work. “Come with me,” he said. “There’s something I want to show you.” They got into a stretch limousine parked out in front and drove a short distance across Manhattan. The driver stopped in front of a towering new hotel within weeks of its grand opening. Then putting out his hand the man said, “My name is William Waldorf Astor, and this is the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. I’d like you to be my general manager.”

A simple act of kindness paid off for the lowly night clerk who found himself at the top of America’s hotel world in its biggest city. That same quick thinking put the manager or steward in Jesus’ parable in a comparable good position after his dismissal from the landowner’s service. Let’s take a closer look at this story that’s puzzled Christians for centuries – why would Jesus commend the actions of a seemingly dishonest employee, especially in the light of the parable about the Kingdom of God that comes directly after it in the gospel of Luke?

As a companion to Matthew 18’s account of the debtor who failed to forgive his fellow servant who owed him a relatively small amount of money compared to the enormous debt he

had just been forgiven by his employer, the manager in this parable does the opposite. He ‘forgives’ the debt others owe his master by having them change the bill to a lesser figure and paying that amount. Now he will not only engage the law of reciprocity common in that culture (a good deed done to someone meant that person was obligated to return a good deed) to cushion his uncertain future (“I don’t have the strength to dig ditches, and I’m too proud to beg.” Luke 16:3), but he’ll make his employer look good to those whose debt was lessened. Thus, the manager ‘forgives’ his employer for firing him.

That’s because it appears a judgment was made quickly without a proper hearing, “One day a report came that the manager was wasting his employer’s money. So the employer called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Get your report in order, because you are going to be fired.’” (Luke 16:1-2) Based on an accusation, the rich man decided on dismissal rather than a formal defence from the manager. That would make the *manager* the one unjustly treated by his soon-to-be former boss. Whether alleged or proven, injustice has a way of disheartening those who’ve been exposed to it. How we respond to the circumstances of life, especially the injustice we experience, is a matter of character and faith: of choosing to believe that “all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28); of allowing God to lead the way, believing that his will for our lives is good and perfect in every way, like the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “For I know the plans I have for you,” says Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

However, the Greek verb *diaskorpizon* indicates wasting or squandering, the same one used in the parable of the prodigal son of how the younger brother uses his father’s inheritance in a far-away land. At this point, the employer doesn’t call the manager dishonest, a crook or a

thief, just someone who has mismanaged his money to the extent that firing would be the most appropriate course of action.

It was the practice of managers to charge substantial commission or interest (even though that was illegal in Jewish law) on accounts which would have inflated the final debt figure. Or perhaps the amount may have been too high in the first place, beyond the actual fair market price the customer should have been charged. These partially ‘forgiven’ debtors weren’t small peasant farmers, but large agribusiness people who would stand to lose a lot if they had to pay the full price to the rich man: one owed 900 gallons of olive oil, the product of a very large plantation of olive trees; the other 1000-1500 bushels of wheat, about twenty times the amount from a private family farm. These were influential businessmen who could provide the manager at the very least with a place to stay while pursuing other job leads that they would know about. The genius of the manager’s quick thinking was tempered by possible compassion for them to lessen their burden of debt.

“The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. Here’s the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.” (Luke 16:8-9) Although the manager did his employer out of the full amount on the books, he did gain his admiration for decisive action. And so should we attempt to follow the lesson Luke summarizes the parable with – use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. It’s easy to go for short-term benefits rather than long-term security. The manager chose the latter, and so should we.

The success of American department store founder J.C. Penny had to do with his personal philosophy. Penny was the son of a Baptist minister who grew up on a farm in Hamilton, Missouri. In 1902 he opened the Golden Rule Stores. Penny was against any kind of debt. He

kept his prices low and if people weren't satisfied with their purchases, they could return them. Penny had no employees, calling those who worked for him "associates." Penny refused to put pressure on his managers, believing that in the long-term the company would be profitable.

By 1916 the company had 127 stores. He remained active in the business until his death at the age of 95. He kept an office of secretaries to answer requests from young people seeking advice, as well as to keep connected to the numerous charitable organizations that he supported. Penny always gave more than 10 % of his profits to the church. For him, long-term relationships were what business was all about. It's also what God seeks from us – followers of Jesus who are committed to developing eternal connections with the One who has everything to give.

Jesus concludes this teaching by several exhortations, "If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones." (Luke 16:10a) Most of life is made up of little things, opportunities God gives us to conduct honest business, tutor a child, visit a person in a nursing home, or help a neighbor in need. What we do with those opportunities says a lot about who we really are inside. Because we can also be the other way, "If you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own?" (Luke 16:10b-12) Our ability to handle bigger things is questioned if we don't show capable and wise handling of our relatively small present resources. If we prove to be bad stewards of God's riches in this life, how can we expect him to give us riches in the next?

"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Luke 16:13)

Money can exert a powerful pull, like a strong magnet, threatening to pull us away from God. If we move too close, we do so at our own risk. Not that riches or financial resources are wrong in themselves, but the temptation to put too much effort into acquiring or stockpiling money can lead us away from the more important things – relationships with others and God, for now and forever.

William Colgate came to America at the age of 20 in the year 1803. He was an apprentice at a New York City candle and soap making company. Three years later, he mastered the craft and set up his own business. His firm prospered from the very beginning because he was the only soap maker in the city to offer delivery service.

His business received a big boost from the war of 1812 since imported soap from England was cut off from the U.S. market. Colgate's sales increased and he branched out into other products. He built one of the largest factories in New Jersey in 1820. Colgate was a deeply religious man and gave 10 % of his company earnings to charities. He was also instrumental in starting the American Bible Society, and for creating a university later named in his honor. The humanitarian works that Colgate's wealth enabled him to do is an indication of what we should be willing to share with others as opportunities come along.

Whether the manager was convicted justly or unjustly, we know that Jesus is our ultimate model of one who forgave debt and made a way for eternal redemption. He cancelled our entire debt, not just 20% or 50% like the manager. He opened the way for a full relationship with God and each of God's children, not just with those who benefited by the manager's actions. For this, we can be thankful for the love of God that moves us to become more and more like Jesus. Amen.