

# Called to Cheat

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## Called to Cheat

Text: Luke 16.1-9

Good morning. If I had more time, I would tell you how deeply pleased and honored both Catherine and I are to be here with you today. But, since time is limited, I invite you to fill the blanks, and turn to the parable that the Lectionary sets as our text for today.

This is certainly not one of the most popular or the best-known parables of Jesus. We have all seen countless church windows depicting the sower broadcasting seed; or the shepherd caring for the lost sheep; or the Samaritan helping the man by the wayside; or the father welcoming the lost son. But I am pretty sure you have never seen a window in which a sly man, looking sideways at another, says: “Where it says a hundred, write fifty!” This guy is a scoundrel! He does not deserve to be on a church window! Were it not that the Lectionary directs us to do so, we would rather not even preach about him!

This is precisely why this parable is important. It is important both on its own and because it brings into question our common understanding that the parables of Jesus are mostly about

how to be nice. If you cannot use this parable as justification for cheating on your employer, you must not use the parable of the talents as justification for wise investments in the stock market.

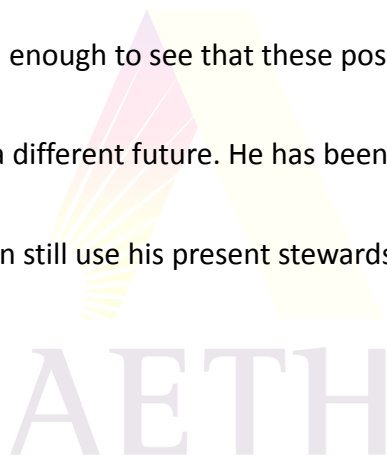
This parable, like many of the other parables of Jesus, is not about being nice, or about behaving as society expects us to behave. It is not about cheating or not cheating on your employer. It is about something much more radical than that. It is about what it means to live as those who truly believe in the promise of a different order.

In a nutshell, the manager in the parable has been given notice. He has not been sacked yet. He still has authority over his master's goods. But he has been given notice, and the options that will be available to him are not very pleasant. Working with his hands would require a strength he does not have. And begging would be an unacceptable humiliation.

Most people in that situation would follow one of two possible courses: Some will say, "Since I will not be the manager forever, let me enjoy what I have now." "Live it up!" Others will say,

“Since I shall no longer have authority over such things, forget them! They are of no value to me.”

But this manager, whom the master would commend for his shrewd wisdom, does none of these things. He will not have to dig nor to beg. He will not discard the authority he still has over his master’s possessions. He will not even live it up, as someone who knows that his enjoyment will end. He is shrewd enough to see that these possessions that his master still has left in his hands can be used for a different future. He has been given notice. His stewardship will be taken from him. But he can still use his present stewardship with a view to the coming order.



That is precisely what he does. He uses his temporary authority over his master’s goods, no longer in the service of the present, but now in the service of a future that is inevitable. His authority is not illegitimate, for he still has the stewardship. But he knows that this stewardship is only temporary, and he uses it in the light of the future he knows is coming.

This should speak to all of us. We have all been given the management of certain goods, of certain gifts, of a certain power and authority, of a measure of education and knowledge.

Generally, we enjoy that management, and are content with it. But we can never really forget that it will not be ours forever; that, like the man in the parable, we have all been given notice.

The parable does not tell us how much time the man had before his notice became effective.

Perhaps he didn't know. In most cases, we too do not know. But we do know that we have been given notice. And we ask ourselves, like that other steward: "What will I do?"

This is not a new question. It is a question that humankind has had to face as generation succeeds generation. What we consider ours – what society considers ours – is not really ours.

It will pass. What will we do? And here again the two most common answers remain the same:

Some say, "Since this life is passing, I will spend all my time preparing for the future. I will ignore or despise the passing goods of the present, in order to attain the goods of the future life.

Forget these goods that are not really good!" Sadly, this has been the attitude of many

Christians throughout the ages. Others will say, "Since this life is passing, let me enjoy it to the

hilt. Forget about the future!" Sadly, this is the attitude of many in our society today. And even

more sadly, both views abandon all responsibility for the world God has put in our hands, for the goods God has given us, for the environment and for the neighbor. One says, "I do not need to be concerned about such things, for all the goods of this world are passing." We even had a Secretary of the Interior a few years ago who declared that there is no need to worry about the environment, because Jesus is coming soon. Then others say, "Let us enjoy and exploit what we have, for life is short. So, who cares what happens to the environment or to the neighbor? Enjoy life. Trample over others. Destroy the environment. Life is short!"

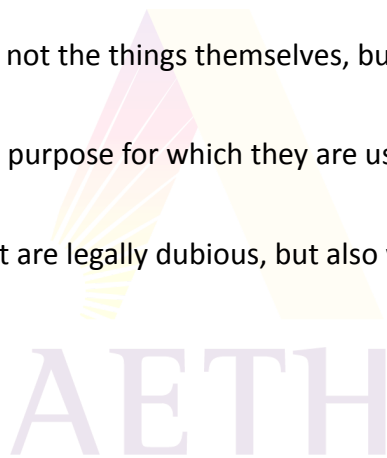
But not so the steward in the parable. He is so wise that "his master commended the dishonest steward." There has been much discussion as to whether this "master" or "lord" in verse 8 is the lord in the parable or the Lord (with a capital L) who tells the parable. The NRSV opts for the first option, calling him "his master;" but other versions disagree, and the Greek does not make it clear.

Ultimately, however, it makes little difference, for both Christianity and Judaism have long held that the Master and Lord of the future order is none other than the Master and Lord of the

present order – with the all-important difference that the present order is corrupted by evil.

While the steward of the parable will no longer be under the authority of his previous master, the case with us is different. We may pass from one order to another, but the Lord and Master will be the same.

Verse 11 establishes a contrast between “unjust wealth” and “true riches.” What makes some wealth “dishonest” or “unjust” is not the things themselves, but the order by which they are attained and distributed, and the purpose for which they are used. Wealth is unjust, not only when it is acquired by means that are legally dubious, but also when it is retained instead of being shared.



But let's quit preaching and start meddling. In an institution such as this, there is a particular kind of wealth. It is the wealth of knowledge – the wealth and power of truth. When compared to the rest of humankind, all of us who are here have an unusual amount of knowledge. This is good. We may well say that such knowledge is a gift of God. It is also a gift from generations of teachers, donors, administrators, and many others. And for that we must be grateful.

But knowledge, as any other kind of wealth, is not really just a gift. It is more like a loan or a trust. Just as the man in the parable was a manager of what actually belonged to the master, so we must realize that we are only temporary managers of the knowledge we have been bequeathed, and of any further knowledge we might attain.

Knowledge, like money, like land, or like any other kind of wealth, can be used to attain greater power. It can be used for the sole purpose of pursuing a career, or to have control over others, or to assuage our insecurities at the expense of others. Such use, even though society may consider it normal and even admirable, makes knowledge part of what the parable would call “unjust riches.” It is not knowledge itself that is unjust; it is its unjust distribution; and, even more, its unjust use that makes it unjust.

At a time such as this Hispanic Heritage Month, when we consider people who for many reasons have been deprived of access to knowledge, we must begin by realizing that by the very way in which it is distributed, knowledge is part of the unjust riches to which the parable refers. Please note that I am not saying that we should feel particularly guilty about that. Such

injustice is the result of an existing order in which we are all caught. We can no more opt out of it than a fish can opt out of water.

In saying all this, it is not my purpose to make you feel guilty, for my knowledge and my wealth are as unjust as any other. Furthermore, were I to convince you that you and I are unjustly privileged in our knowledge, I would have accomplished little.

This was made clear to me some years ago, when two colleagues and I had been speaking at a university in California. After the lectures, when we were part of a panel, one of those colleagues, Gustavo Gutiérrez, leaned over and said: "It always amazes me, how ready people are to declare that their privilege is unjust, and how unready they are to consider what this means for their use of privilege."

The parable we are considering, like all the other parables about the reign of God, tells us that the present order shall pass. It is not only each one of us individually that is on notice. It is the entire world order that is on notice. It is the unjust distribution of wealth, the unjust

distribution of power, the unjust distribution of knowledge, that are on notice.

The question therefore is not whether or not our possession of knowledge is part of an unjust order. The question is whether and how we shall use this knowledge, like wise stewards, for the promised order of justice.

Setting aside a “Hispanic Heritage Month” immediately brings to mind the need for greater Latinx participation in the knowledge of this institution, and in the knowledge we share. That is an important task. That may seem like a big task. But that is only a first step. That is the easy part. It is not enough to bring in Latinx people to share in our knowledge. We need to bring them in – we need to bring in people of every race, and every nation, and every language – in order to be part of a wider conversation about the just use of knowledge. We need to have a conversation with the wide range of wisdom that exists in our communities. We need to think beyond a month, beyond a year, beyond a generation. We need to find ways to use our unjust knowledge for purposes of justice.

My sisters, my brothers, we are on notice. May we be wise enough, and faithful enough, so that in the end we may be commended by the Lord of the parable and giver of all knowledge.

So be it!

