

Counting on God's Character

Luke 16: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
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Believers and nonbelievers alike acknowledge that Jesus was a compelling and innovative teacher. He spoke using word pictures from daily life. But his stories always had a twist that revealed the deep heart of God. He surprised, convicted, encouraged, and challenged his disciples with his stories. How'd he do it?

When you look at the stories Jesus told as a whole body of work, you get struck by two things: 1) his word pictures are very grounded in the real world, yet 2) Jesus is speaking of another Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. So he uses stories from the workaday world where we all live to open our eyes to the deeper heart of reality. God's Kingdom, God's way of doing things is breaking in on the world with the coming of Jesus. His parables show us how life is meant to work in the Kingdom of God. But he shows us that strange, new world by means of surprising stories grounded in ordinary life. That's one of the reasons Jesus is so brilliant.

There's something else we notice about Jesus' stories. Many of them are about the economy, that is, about the whole system of buying and selling, trading and earning wages. But his stories reveal a *strange* economy. The economics in the Kingdom of God do not work like the economics in our daily life. That's why Jesus' stories suggest such outrageous things. In our economy, the whole system runs on supply and demand. If eggs are scarce, the price of eggs goes up. If there's a huge crop of wheat, so that the market is flooded with available grain, the price of wheat goes down. In the economy of the Kingdom in Jesus' stories, though, business runs on the basis of an owner who has so much wealth that he is beyond the supply and demand of day to day life. Because the King of the Kingdom of God has unlimited resources, the entire economy of his kingdom can appear to us to be upside down. No one could run a business the way God does, unless he owned everything. That's the reality which Jesus teaches is breaking in on this world of ours. So we are always on the look out for the strange economy in the stories Jesus told.

Jesus began today's story by describing a situation that his listeners would have known immediately. A certain rich land owner had turned over day to day

oversight of his affairs to a manager. We get this. If you own a lot of land, you're not going to want to personally run the daily details of the farm duties, the relationships to your tenants and workers, and the arrangements for getting your produce to market. You've got people for that. Similarly, if you own a lot of buildings, you don't want to be the managing landlord. You've got a guy who collects the rent and handles problems. People who live in Trump Tower don't get to call Donald Trump when the air conditioning breaks. There's a guy who handles that. The rich man had a manager of his lands.

If we translated that word for manager literally, we might say the man was the *economer* of the rich man's lands. The economer is the guy who takes care of the economy of the estate. Such a manager was in charge of the whole economy of the master's property. He kept all goods and services flowing. Such managers in those days had all the authority of the landowner himself when negotiating deals. The economer could affix the seal, the equivalent of a signature, on a document. He could buy, sell, trade and negotiate for the master. He was also liable to the master for any malfeasance. On the one hand, this economer was considered family. On the other hand, if he messed up, he could be dismissed and kicked out with no recourse.

Well, someone came to the rich man and brought charges that the economer, this manager, was wasting the man's wealth. This is the same word used of the prodigal son who wasted his inheritance on reckless living. Jesus leaves the details of this squandering to our imagination. Maybe this manager made stupid trades with his master's capital, investing in flimsy ventures. Maybe he skimmed off money for himself and spent it acting like the big man in the town. Maybe he angered people because he squeezed the renters while living large himself. We get the sense that what this economer was doing wasn't quite kosher. Someone called him on it. They told the master that he had a corrupt manager.

The land owner summoned this economer of his and said, "What's this I hear about you?" This is sort of like the policeman who walks up to your car window and asks, "Do you know why I stopped you?" He already knows. But he wants you to admit it. Our wasteful manager made no reply, and so the master continued, "Turn in the account of your management. You can no longer be the economer of my household. The economy of my land is going to run without you." In other words, "Bring me the books. Go get your laptop, your company cell phone and your entry card. We're all done here." Now what's noteworthy is that he could have had the man sent off to jail. He could have pressed charges. He could have had him thrown into prison to pay off the debt of his malpractice. He

could have had the manager and his family sold as slaves. But the owner did none of those things. He was gracious. He would dismiss him and let natural consequences take their course. The owner was going to eat the losses his economer caused, and just wanted him gone.

As the economer left, he started thinking hard. I love the way Jesus describes his thoughts, “What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am too proud to beg.” Ah, the burden of white collar crime! It sounds like a pastor: I have a degree but no muscles! I have no money but I can’t stoop to asking others for help. I can’t admit that my whole lifestyle was a fake.

Then the crooked economer remembered his skill set. He had only the time between getting dismissed and going to get the books to turn them in. So the manager called in some of the people who owed his master money. He counted on the fact that no one had yet heard that he had been fired. Technically, he had no authority to make any more deals. Once the owner said he was fired his management was over. But before he turned in the books, maybe he could get something done. He said to one guy, “How much do you owe?” The debt was a hundred measures of oil. “Right,” he said, “Tell you what. Let’s make it fifty. Write a new statement of indebtedness, and I’ll sign it.” He made a similar deal with a man who owed a hundred measures of wheat. “Take your bill and write eighty.”

The debtors, of course, quickly agreed. I mean, imagine if your bank called and said, “We’re running a special today. How about if we forget about the interest on your house note?” You’d be wondering, “Wow, what did Mr. Chase have in his coffee today? What did Mrs. Hancock give Mr. Hancock for his birthday?” Now let me ask you this: if your bank actually, legitimately called to refinance your home, car and credit cards at zero interest, would you tell anybody about it? You know you’d be on the phone before the ink dried! Can you believe this? The man wants to cut out all interest! What a great bank! I suspect word had reached the landowner before his manager even got back with the account books.

So what happened when he turned in the accounts? The landowner actually commended the shrewd economer for his ingenious work. Let’s consider what had happened. The manager made deals after he had been fired. Technically, those deals were not valid. The owner could have gone to the men with the new deal and said, “Look, I’m sorry, but I can’t honor those deals. Your joy is premature. The manager really had no power to speak for me.” But in the Middle East, the bottom

line wasn't always the most important consideration. It was what we call an honor/shame culture. Your word uttered bound you to do what you said. Because the shame of not honoring your word was worse than anything you might have to do. Even though the manager had acted without true authority, people heard the voice of the master in these deals. Changing back the terms would have shamed the master for renegeing on his incredible generosity. And that's the next point. Word would already have gotten around. Good will had already been created. The master was known as the greatest, most generous landowner of all. He gave his tenants room to breathe. He motivated them to make good on the rest of their loans. The landowner received glory and elevation in the eyes of his community. How rich he must have been to be afford such debt reduction! The master got leveraged into being more generous than he planned to be. He had to hand it to his economer: that was a shrewd move.

Meanwhile, of course, the manager had made friends with the people whose deals he had re-negotiated. He would have a soft landing. So Jesus concluded with a comment that linked the kingdom of the world with the kingdom of God. He said "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

What does he mean by that? When Jesus taught, he liked to explode truth inside us, so we would see the Kingdom of God in a whole new way. He wanted to change us from the inside out. Our story today is the parable Jesus told as a follow up to the parable of the prodigal son and his older brother. Jesus had just told the story of a father so loving and generous that he welcomed home a son who had wasted his inheritance. This same father urged into the party a legalistic son who saw all of life as drudgery and duty. Now he speaks of a master who was so concerned with being generous that he let his mercy be leveraged into bad economic deals. He let the glory of being merciful override the amount of money he could make. And in the story, the person who got praised was the shrewd economer because *he staked his entire future on the character of the owner, the master's desire to be generous.*

Let's think closely about this. 1) If the master had only been concerned about enacting the full measure of punishment, he would have thrown the manager into jail or sold him into slavery at the very first. 2) If the manager were only interested in the bottom line, he would have voided those deals and told his debtors their

debts were back in force. But something else motivated him. He wanted to be known as generous.

Now, if a secular landowner prized the reputation of generosity, how much more will the God who is truly generous in his eternal heart go to great lengths to show his mercy? George Herbert, in a magnificent prayer, said,

But you Lord are patience, and pity, and sweetness, and love; therefore we sons of men are not consumed.

You have exalted your mercy above all things and you have made our salvation, not our punishment, to be your glory:
so that then where sin abounded, not death, but grace *superabounded*.¹

The landowner in the parable could have made the bottom line, or punishment of malfeasance to be his signature. But instead, he went with mercy. The shrewd manager knew that. And leveraged that personality of mercy to his advantage.

God has made our salvation, not our punishment to be his glory. He has decided to make a lot of deals that make no sense in the economy of the world. He lets us run up charges on his grace, and he does not make us pay it back. He bears the loss himself so that we might go free. When the accounts of our lives are looked at, they are found wanting. Even among the best of us, all our good works amount only to a total wasting of the Father's gifts to us. We have no personal credits to leverage when he summons us to bring the books. We are due debtors' prison.

Herbert also has a picture of this. He imagines Judgment Day when God calls for the book of each person's life. He has heard some people say that when called to account, they plan to open their book to a certain page, say the day they worked on the Habitat House, or adopted an orphan, or founded a hospital. Herbert says he's not going with that strategy at all. His plan when he gets summoned to turn in the book of his life is to thrust forward a New Testament into Jesus' hand. There you will find, he says, that all my faults, are thine.² Look at the gospel, Lord! You bought my sin on the cross. You purchased my debt with your blood. You took over the management I had botched and negotiated a new deal. You bought me in order to save me.

Only the Master with unlimited resources could run such an economy. I wonder sometimes if the angelic beings don't say to the Lord on the throne, "You

know, these humans are quite an expensive hobby of yours! More pricey to maintain than polo horses and power boats. Are they worth it? Can you afford to keep paying the debt of their sin? Can you stand to keep being generous toward them?” And the Lord simply says, “When they draw on my grace, they give me glory. I have paid for all of it. I can afford them, if they would but use me, draw from me, take from me. I have unlimited love and mercy for them. If they would just claim it!”

God has made our salvation, nor our punishment, to be his glory. He can afford us. Because he has already paid, in the currency of eternal blood, that we might go free. We are wastrels, scoundrels, deceivers, doubters, out for self. We try to fill ourselves with what we want and end up only full of emptiness. “Come on,” he says. “Spend my grace! Spend it on others. Drop your grudges in my name. Forgive their sins, for I paid for their transgressions too. Let them go, wash out the taste of bitterness from your mouth with the refreshing wine of my blood. Spend my grace. On yourself. On others. On the world. Go on, try to give away more love than I have! Try to forgive more than my heart of mercy. Try to love til you drain my ocean of compassion. Leverage my love in the midst of the world. You can’t pay a scrap of the debt on your life. But I already wrote, “Paid in Full” when on the cross I cried, “It is finished!”

Now what if this were true? What if our God really has so much that we can’t outspend him? What if giving away mercy and grace and forgiveness didn’t ruin his economy but actually strengthened it? What if I really realized that I can never, ever, give a proper account of my life to the God who made me and I deserve judgment. I can quit pretending. I can quit worrying. Then what if he turned to me and said, “I already paid your way! Go free! And go give away this love, this mercy, this freedom to others.” Dang, Lord, these humans are an expensive hobby. And all he replies is, “I’ve got it covered. I will get glory when they claim my mercy.”³

¹ George Herbert, “Prayer Before Sermon,” 1633.

² George Herbert, “Judgment”.

³ Thanks to the commentaries by Ken Bailey and Simon Kistemaker, and the insights of Alec Flynt.