

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ who frees us from our own sin in order to be a blessing to our neighbors, amen.

We live in a lying, cheating culture. It's gotten worse the older I've gotten. It's so bad now a days I can't even watch the news on TV without wondering if this is a real news item or just so much more fake news... There's so much corruption everywhere, but none more insidious than what's happening in Washington DC. Politicians earn about \$150,000 per year and yet retire after a few years in office as multi-millionaires. How can that be without some degree of corruption? Then take the case of Jeffery Epstein who recently committed suicide in a New York City jail cell. He supposedly had ties to at least one former president and to the Duke of York, Prince Andrew. Epstein was charged with running an underage human sex trafficking operation for his friends.

Did you know the King James Bible at one time had a rather startling commandment? Thou shalt commit adultery. Repeat: Thou shalt commit adultery. That's what the 1631 version of the King James Bible said. You can look it up. In the King James Version of 1631, the word "not" was accidentally omitted. This typo so infuriated King Charles he commanded all copies to be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition. Because of the loss of a word, this version became known as the "Wicked" or "Adulterers" or the "Sinners" Bible. Unfortunately, it appears more and more people today are

leaving the “nots” out of their Ten Commandments. Either that, or they’re simply ignoring them.

Every time I read this parable about the dishonest steward or manager, I think about the manager’s “come to Jesus” moment when he realizes he’s been caught mishandling the owner’s property. He seems to double down on his dishonest behavior. He goes deeper into sin if you will. He looks for a way out and decides the only way to have any hope for a future that isn’t on skid row is to somehow make the master’s clients love him. Pretty shrewd plan if you ask me... The punch line of this really strange parable comes when the master looks at the books and sees what the dishonest manager has done, but instead of taking him to court and having him thrown in jail, he commends him for his shrewd actions. Jesus’ commentary on this parable is even more outlandish sounding when He says, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” What?!? How can this be? Is Jesus condoning what amounts to embezzlement?

At first glance, it seems to be an invitation to join the Liar’s Club and “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth,” (Luke 16:9) but a deeper examination reveals this story is more about being a good steward than earthly wealth. Its focus is on being the good steward or manager God intended us to be from the very beginning of time. From the start of the story, we know the

dishonest manager is a card-carrying member of the cheating culture — he's charged with squandering the property of his rich boss and is immediately given his two-weeks' notice. "You're fired!" the Rich Boss bellows, sounding like a first-century Donald Trump.

Biblical scholars are unclear about the precise nature of the dishonest manager's transactions. So, they suggest a couple of possibilities. According to the first option, the manager is a crook, plain and simple, a man who dishonestly falsifies the records in order to gain the affection of the debtors. The problem with this interpretation is that it makes the master's reaction sound rather odd. The parable tells us that the rich man commends — yes, commends — the dishonest manager because he has acted shrewdly, but this is an unlikely response from a rich man who has just lost 50 jugs of olive oil and 20 containers of wheat. While we might not expect the rich man to press charges, we certainly don't expect him to offer a commendation.

There's a second option, one that sees the manager as a shrewd businessman, one who is willing to sacrifice short-term earnings for long-term security. In this interpretation, when the manager calls the debtors to settle their accounts, he simply eliminates his own commission from the tally. He forgives that portion of the debt the clients owe to him, not the amount owed to the Rich Man who owns the business. In this case, he's not a liar. He is simply forgiving a

debt or transgression. Isn't that what we're called to do in the first place? Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors we pray in the newer version of the Lord's Prayer... This second interpretation helps us to make sense of the master's reaction. The rich man commends the manager for acting shrewdly, because he knows there are times when it's beneficial to resist the lure of a quick buck and forgive those who owe us big time. On top of this, the rich man knows he hasn't lost anything himself — he'll still get the olive oil and the wheat the debtors owe him. What does he care if his former employee takes his commissions with him or not?

The point of the parable is this, according to Jesus: “No slave can serve two masters.” So, Jesus is really talking about commitment. You cannot maintain a dual focus on short-term profits and long-term security. You have to pick one or the other and give it your undivided attention. As is true in the story of the dishonest manager, there are times when we sacrifice the pay days of this world, so we can enjoy the benefits of the Kingdom of God. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today's passage by saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (v. 13).

That's no lie. Problem is, our cheating culture encourages us to focus on earthly wealth, short-term profits and worldly commissions. It tempts us to cut corners in pursuit of financial success and pushes us to twist the truth in order to

beat the competition. Today's Scripture challenges us to resist this temptation, to focus on a higher calling, and to be willing to sacrifice some of our earthly pay days in order to be good stewards of the wealth we receive from God. The passage is a call for us to practice Christian stewardship.

The parable is also an invitation to community. As surprising as this sounds, take note of what the manager discovers soon after he loses his job: He needs friends. He realizes his money can't save him, so he uses his financial prowess to create a community of support. This is an odd way to build friendships, but it earns the approval of Jesus: "I tell you," he says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (v. 9).

Is this an invitation to join the Liar's Club? Not at all. Jesus isn't saying we should be dishonest; instead, he's advising us to use whatever wealth we have — what he calls "dishonest wealth" — to build a community that can endure. None of us is meant to live a life of isolation, and none of us is designed to practice our faith apart from the Christian community. Like the dishonest steward, we need friends to help us through the tough times in life, and we need a community where we can serve through our own gifts of time and talent and treasure.

The commandments of this parable can be easily summarized: “Thou shalt be good stewards or managers by forgiving the debts that are owed to you,” and “Thou shalt participate in community.” There’s nothing dishonest about it.

May we each come to understand we do not own, but are only stewards of God’s riches. May we learn to be generous with God’s riches by forgiving those who owe us. May we generously share what God first gave to us and in so doing renounce the claim manna and wealth holds on us. Instead, let us claim the love and Grace of God our Father who is our one and only master. Amen.