

# That Does Not Make Sense!

## Luke 16:1-13

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 18, 2016

In 1998, in the second season of the Comedy Central animated series South Park, which just began its 20<sup>th</sup> season this week, the famous Chewbacca Defense was born. Johnny Cochran – introduced as “the guy who got OJ off” -- was defending a record label against a claim that it had stolen a song that the school’s chef had written years earlier. When it comes time for his closing argument, Cochran brings out a picture of Chewbacca – the full-body haired Wookiee from Star Wars – and makes his case, which goes like this:

*Ladies and gentlemen of this supposed jury, I have one final thing I want you to consider. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Chewbacca. Chewbacca is a Wookiee from the planet Kashyyyk. But Chewbacca lives on the planet Endor. Now think about it; that does not make sense!...Why would a Wookiee, an 8-foot-tall Wookiee, want to live on Endor, with a bunch of 2-foot-tall Ewoks? That does not make sense! But more important, you have to ask yourself: What does this have to do with this case? Nothing. Ladies and gentlemen, it has nothing to do with this case! It does not make sense! Look at me. I'm a lawyer defending a major record company, and I'm talkin' about Chewbacca! Does that make sense? Ladies and gentlemen, I am not making any sense! None of this makes sense! And so you have to remember, when you're in that jury room deliberatin' and conjugatin' the Emancipation Proclamation, does it make sense? No! Ladies and gentlemen of this supposed jury, it does not make sense! If Chewbacca lives on Endor, you must acquit! The defense rests.<sup>1</sup>*

When I first read the gospel lesson in today’s lectionary, this was my first thought – “That does not make sense!”

You know how sometimes there are passages of scripture that you know you’ve read before – you might even know them by name. But then you sit down and you really read it, and all that you can think is...is this really in the Bible? That’s how it was with me and the “Parable of the Dishonest Manager” this time.

I don’t know how many times I have read this parable before without *really* reading it. It’s been a few. But then there I am, sitting in my office, trying to come up with a sermon title to put in the newsletter for this month; and I’m reading this parable as if for the first time, and all I can think of is “That does not make sense!”

(And it repeats in my mind, just like that, in the South Park Johnny Cochran voice and everything.)

So I decided – let’s go with it. The Lord works in mysterious ways, you know!

So when it comes time to start working on this sermon, I hit the commentaries hard, hoping that I would find some consensus interpretation that helps to make sense of this parable. But alas, the only consensus that appears to have developed in interpreting this parable is that it

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<sup>1</sup> South Park. “Chef Aid.” Season 2, episode 14. Available: <http://southpark.cc.com/clips/103454/the-chewbacca-defense>

really doesn't make much sense. Almost every volume I read began with comments like these:

"Here is one difficult text..."<sup>2</sup>

"This may be one of Jesus' most outrageous parables..."<sup>3</sup> "Here is a strange text on which to preach..."<sup>4</sup>

"None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like the story of the dishonest steward..."<sup>5</sup>

"This uniquely Lukan parable is generally considered one of the most difficult passages in the Gospel..."<sup>6</sup>

"Scholarship about the parable of the Dishonest Steward is riddled with warnings about how this text baffles..."<sup>7</sup>

"Most likely, there as many perspectives and interpretations of this parable as there are readers..."<sup>8</sup>

"It is no exaggeration to say that the parable's meaning has stumped even the best and most creative interpreters of Scripture..."<sup>9</sup>

"What is Jesus thinking when he tells the parable of the unjust steward?...we come to the Gospel text, and we wonder what in the world the master storyteller has in mind in telling such a confusing tale..."<sup>10</sup>

"The parable of the Unjust Steward is one about which no less a biblical authority than Augustine said to have remarked, 'I can't believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.'"<sup>11</sup>

These are all direct quotes from published commentaries. I don't think I read a single perspective which did not articulate some similar sentiment of surprise, confusion, bafflement, or just plain disbelief. So, at least I'm in good company in supposing that this story just doesn't make sense.

Now the problem, of course, is that this isn't just any story. This is a parable of Jesus. And it isn't even just any old parable of Jesus – it is one that even the most critical and skeptical biblical scholars are fairly certain originated directly from Jesus. This is because it passes one of the primary scholarly tests for determining authentic sayings of Jesus – the "criterion of embarrassment." Simply put, one could imagine how and why the early church or a gospel writer might have embellished their portrait of Jesus with memorable or articulate sayings or stories. But one can hardly imagine this being done with something that is embarrassing or hard to accept. As such, the only reason for such a story or saying to be included in the tradition is because it is something that Jesus really said and therefore could not be easily disregarded.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Hunter. *Feasting on the Gospels*. Luke. Vol. 2. p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> William Willamon. "Wheeling and Dealing with an Eye Toward the Future." *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 26. No. 3. (1998). p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Charles B. Cousar. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C. Vol. 4. p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Raj Nadella. *Feasting on the Gospels*. p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher H. Edmonston. *Feasting on the Gospels*. p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> G. Penny Nixon. *Feasting on the Word*. p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Peter S. Hawkins. "Living By the Word." *The Christian Century*. September 18, 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. Online: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-08/september-18-25th-sunday-ordinary-time>

<sup>11</sup> J. William Harkins. *Feasting on the Gospels*. p. 92.

Such is the parable of the Dishonest Manager. A rich man – who is probably an absentee landowner – catches one of his managers in malpractice. He's not quite caught red-handed, but from his reaction, we can only assume he is guilty of the charges brought against him. When the boss tells him to clean out his desk and produce a copy of the accounts, the manager knows he is up the proverbial creek. But the boss evidently hadn't much experience or didn't attend the seminars on efficient firing practices, because rather than being escorted directly out of the building never to return after he was handed his walking papers, the manager was left with a little bit of time to maneuver before he hit the streets at the end of the day. So, not willing to endure the unemployment lines or lower himself to a life of manual labor, the manager executes one last devious scheme. In his remaining time, he calls up the master's debtors, and one by one, slashes their debts. In doing so, he hopes to secure their gratitude and goodwill, so that at the end of the day, when he has nowhere else to go, he'll be able to cash in with some new found friends who owe him one.

It's a solid, if unethical, plan. And when the master shows up to show his manager the door, and learns of his manager's last hurrah, he can't help but be impressed by the sheer audacity and shrewdness of the man.

Yay for him. But the real kicker comes in Jesus' closing comments to the parable: "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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." The words of our Lord: Luke chapter 16, verses 8 and 9.<sup>12</sup>

Now, that does not make sense!

In my opinion, things don't get any clearer in the following verses. Luke has Jesus go on to say that "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

These follow-up sayings sound more like the Jesus we expect. The problem is that they don't really make any sense in the context of this parable. In fact, they seem to almost directly condemn the actions of the manager of the story, refute the praise bestowed upon the manager by his master and subsequently by Jesus, and call into serious question Jesus' suggestion to "go and do likewise."

I'll say it again – that does not make sense!

Now, most biblical scholars believe that this parable originally stood alone, and that Luke tacked on additional sayings from the Jesus tradition to the end to help advance his own narrative arc. Luke has a "thing" for presenting the gospel through a particularly economic lens, so it is not really surprising that he would present this parable as an admonition against the dangers of wealth. Thus Luke has Jesus conclude this section by saying that we cannot

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<sup>12</sup> NRSV.

serve both God and wealth.<sup>13</sup> But as one commentator candidly pointed out, “This may be true, but how does this really relate to the parable?”<sup>14</sup> Another went even further, saying, “As if to rescue the parable for future preachers, Luke has Jesus deliver a series of wisdom-like sayings that seem intended to sound “shrewd” in a godly way. Commentators struggle to make sense of them; [and] with all due respect, I am utterly unconvinced that they do make sense.”<sup>15</sup>

After much study, I too, remain utterly unconvinced that this parable makes sense. I have been unimpressed by the frequent turn of homiletical commentaries that in my view put a wishful spin on Jesus’ words so that the parable comes off as “outrageously wonderful” in the words of William Willamon<sup>16</sup>, or as some kind of intriguing joke, as suggested by Clarence Jordan.<sup>17</sup> Nor have I been swayed by dubious speculations such as that of Jeremias that Jesus was dealing with an actual case which had previously been indignantly related to him.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, I am skeptical of interpretative efforts to explain away the apparent contradictions of the story by postulating that the so-called dishonest manager actually acts in a righteous manner by eliminating accumulated interest in his master’s debit accounts, a practice prohibited in Deuteronomy.<sup>19</sup> And I am unmoved by the assertion that what Jesus is really getting at in this story is a desire for his disciples to be more streetwise – akin to when he sent out the twelve in Matthew with the advice to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”<sup>20</sup>

In the end, I have taken heart that from the beginning, interpreters have struggled to make sense of this parable, and that this does indeed seem to be the only scholarly consensus around this text. Perhaps, this lack of clarity is in and of itself good news for all of us who often struggle to find meaning in the world of scripture. And so, to quote the apostle Paul, “What then are we to say about these things?”<sup>21</sup> The only thing I have found concerning this parable which truly makes sense to me comes from Peter Hawkins, who had this to say in the conclusion of his column on this week’s gospel text:

*Maybe the point of this short story, then, doesn’t have to be the clear takeaway I want. Maybe its presentation of our malady serves Jesus’ purpose. I’m haunted by what the rich man says at the beginning of the tale: “What is this I hear about you? Give me an account of your management.” Maybe that’s the question and the command we need to hear...<sup>22</sup>*

Perhaps it is. Even if we don’t want it...

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 16:13

<sup>14</sup> J. William Harkins. “Feasting on the Gospels.” p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Peter S. Hawkins. “Living By the Word.”

<sup>16</sup> Willamon. p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> *The International Bible Commentary*. Revised Ed. (1986) p. 1215.

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 23:19-20.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 10:16, NRSV

<sup>21</sup> Romans 8:31a

<sup>22</sup> Peter S. Hawkins. “A Story Without a Hero.” Sunday’s Coming Blog from *The Christian Century*. Sunday, September 18. Available: <http://christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-09/story-without-hero>