

This shocking, sardonic parable of our Lord is to be enjoyed for its shrewd humor and pondered for its wisdom: its genre is "wisdom parable." It literally has a "point," shafting us with a penetrating truth driven in with a *fortiori* force: Those who claim to pay attention to the divine revelation ("light," vs.8) ought to use their heads (*phronimo·s*, same vs.)--as do one-dimensional worldlings--to calculate the outcomes of various courses of action, and then act so as to maximize self-benefits. To put this in a question: What should I do now for my best interest in the future? It's for all of us who are "fond of money" (vs.14), who (as Wordsworth said) "getting and spending...lay waste our powers" instead of pursuing "true riches" (vs.11)....Myself in early retirement, I made the following translation in preparation for a preretirement workshop (Sept/81). An appropriate time for me to confront, once again, this parable: I've finished spending about a year on house-building (what could be more this-worldly?) and am ecstatic every day about outcroppings and fruitings from my inner life after a half century of serious study-meditation-action (what could be more other-worldly, at least in the sense of this-world useless, than my present torrent of thinksheets and poems?)....The following paraphrase aims at (1) accuracy and (2) nuance-reproduction. Besides the Greek and Latin texts, I found particularly good a German paraphrase, Joerg Zink's DAS NEUE TESTAMENT and these English translations: Moffatt, Complete, JB, NAB, NEB, NIV, and NASB...and of course RSV.

Luke 16.1-9: Jesus said this to his disciples: The absentee landlord of a large estate got wind of something that made him uneasy enough to want to ckeck out the rumor. More than rumor: complaints that his manager had been squandering not only increment but also capital! When this rich landlord arrived at his place, he called in that manager and said to him, "What's this I hear about you? If the auditsconfirms my fears, you're out! You won't be managing my property any longer! Turn in your accounts." Now as you can easily guess, this manager didn't get to be manager by being dumb. You'd expect him to pull something slick when up against the wall, wouldn't you? Well, you're right: he did. He bounced the crisis around inside his crafty mind and this is what he came up with. He said to himself, "I'm in a tight bind. If I don't do something quick, before he discovers how I've juggled the accounts and then fires me, I'll be in hopeless shape. Business management is my only marketable skill. I'm too weak and flabby to dig ditches, and too proud to beg--how shameful that would be!...I've got it! I know what I'll do so that when the boss takes my job from me, I'll be shut out here but not everywhere. I'm just sure that the only out I can think of will work! I'll ingratiate myself with the boss' debtors by reducing their debts so they'll feel obligated to me and in the future open their houses to me and help me in my job-search!" So he called in every single one of the debtors, one at a time. (One of his managerial powers was debt-reduction in hardship cases.) Here comes the first one. "I know how much you owe," the manager says to him, "but you tell me." As you can understand, the poor man trembled with fears of the worst; and the worst then was even worse than the worst now--why, you could even be sold into slavery if you couldn't pay up. Weakly, the debtor replied, "900 gallons of olive oil." Said the manager, "I've torn up your contract and written a new one. Here, sign it." The man was astounded to find that the new bond was for only 450 gallons! He was immobilized with incomprehension and joy. The manager jolted him: "Be quick about it, you're not the only one: others are waiting outside." When the next debtor entered, the manager said, "You, how much do you owe?" The answer was, "1,000 bushels of wheat." "Sit down," said the manager, "I've destroyed the old contract. In this new one, write '800 bushels.'" Now, as you know, the owner was already at the boiling point on this employee; how do you suppose he reacted to this new treachery? He called him in and said, "You devious devil, you! What a slick swindle! I can't imagine a wilier use of your last chance! If you'd been that astute in managing my affairs you'd be getting a raise instead of the boot!

Contrast this sanction-of consequence parable with this ultimate sanction: "Take no thought...."

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That is, if you'd been that astute and also honest, which you weren't and aren't. But I wouldn't be where I am if I didn't admire fast dealing and practice it. So I've got to congratulate you for using your head even though you did it for your own advantage and against my interests." The owner laughed and said, "Would that you were as good at estate management as you are at crisis management.".... What on earth do you suppose Jesus would make of such a story? Well, on different occasions he probably drew different morals from it--some of them are tags on Luke's telling of the parable (all the way through vs.15). Like this:

Looking his disciples in the eyes, Jesus said, "And you: what about you? Can you learn anything from that dishonest manager whose boss credited him with being imaginative and enterprising, with calculating consequences and weighing options, with prudent foresight, with figuring out what was best for him when nothing looked even good, with presence of mind in a crisis, with avoiding being boxed in even when trapped, with doing something effective when it looked as though there was just nothing he could do, with being decisive and self-directive when it seemed that his power of decision had been taken from him, with clear vision when in a fix that you'd think would have hurled him into confusion?" [EXERCISE: Here write what you think you can learn from this rascal:

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Then Jesus said, "Worldlings, who set their sights only on thisworldly goals, do a better job of putting their minds to their own advantage than do those who are illumined by God's revelation and accepted into God's kingdom. They are shrewder operators in their world than the children of light are in theirs." [EXERCISE: So what?

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"So I tell you," said Jesus, "use worldly goods and powers to make friends for yourselves--<sup>BUT</sup> such friends as can, when money is a thing of the past, welcome you into the age to come, into the tents of eternity. Look to the bottom line! Which will it be? Wealth elusive or lasting?"

Again Jesus said, "Whoever proves reliable with trifles will be so also when given a great trust: an honest manager is honest no matter the size of the job; and the same goes for shifty characters: big or little trust, they're shifty. And if you don't have integrity in handling worldly business, who would trust you with the weightier matters of the heart, the true wealth? Furthermore, these two tug at you from opposite directions: you can't center your attention on both God and money. And if you're unfaithful in handling what belongs to somebody else, who'll give you what should belong to you? Again, what gets your attention gets your heart, and what gets your heart controls your action. That manager was employed to put his attention, his heart, his mind, his hand to the owner's interests--but he let the center shift to the money, and his affection followed his eyes: he couldn't serve both the money and his master. So I say to you again, you cannot be both a slave to things and a servant of God. And think about this: God sees through you, knows your hearts, reads your minds. What is lofty and valued in the world's eyes is loathsome and contemptible in God's eyes." [EXERCISE: In what sense is this not other-worldly?

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*You may want to write down some personal statements that come to mind as you meditate on all the above. Here are some of mine, to fill out the page: (1) I feel the sting of that false employee: the manager of a business in our family "misplaced" a million \$, none of which was recovered; and the business collapsed. (2) While it was not by calculation, in Chappaqua (which we visit monthly) they "welcome us into their homes" anytime overnight, and we do houses in rotation. (3) We humans must become better managers ("stewards") of the thin and fragile biosphere which is the ecosphere ("house-space") of "all creatures great and small"--by turning down the baby tap, turning up the inner life, and turning off weaponry.*