

## Sharp Practice

Luke 16:1-13

(Luke 16:9) *"I tell you," said Jesus, "use worldly (dishonest) wealth to gain friends of yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes"*

To mark the 60th anniversary of the much loved British comedian Tony Hancock's move from radio to television, the BBC recently launched a Sitcom Series, consisting of new programmes and remakes of old shows. Episodes of 'Till Death Do Us Part', 'Steptoe & Son', as well as 'Hancock' s Half Hour' have been recreated using original scripts. But also new versions of programmes like 'Are You Being Served' and 'Porridge' were commissioned. What struck me when I watched those new versions of old shows is that they relied on the audience understanding the well-trodden formula, to such a point that you knew the punchline to the jokes before they had even been delivered!

There have been studies done about successful formulas for storylines to novels, film scripts and sitcoms, and once understand the basic structure to them you long for something to break the mould and surprise you for a change. Unless you like to play it safe and know where you are with a story.

Jesus' parable about the manager would have had a familiar ring to his hearers. It was a story from the street that may have raised a smile because it tells of a detested figure getting their cummuppence. Here was a middleman, doing the dirty work for a rich man to the expense of the poor. To make it worth his while, the manager added a little extra to the taxes being levied so that he could cream off something for himself - sharp practice which was common enough. But this fellow got caught, maybe he had become too greedy with his extra benefits. Anyway, he faced the sack.

"Brilliant," think the crowd, "we've heard this one before - this is the story when that lowdown crook is condemned to hell!" But it isn't - Jesus doesn't follow a well-trodden formula, instead the manager in his parable does something surprising. Here is that wonderful verse when he says to himself, "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg.". That must have raised a smile among the crowd.

Now this chap is obviously a survivor, so he thinks about making the best of his predicament. Knowing that it was useless to plead for his master's mercy, he instead appeals to his boss's debtors - the very people he was fleecing. What is the reason for this sharp practice? And why does he reduce what the poor owed to the rich man? Was it out of a sense of justice or righteousness? Maybe, but it was certainly to curry favour so that they would take him in when he was evicted from his manager's tithed cottage.

"Typical!" the crowd thinks. Here is a self-serving creep through and through - surely the story is back on the formulaic track. But, no! The master reappears to look through the ledgers, yet instead of cursing his manager for further sharp practice that has denied more money, the rich man praises him. "What? That can't be right!" And further more, Jesus praises him, too: *For the people of this age are more shrewd when dealing with their own, than the people of the light."*

So what do we make of it all? Well, Jesus is telling us to be canny! In other words, because most of us do not live isolated from the rest of the world, we live in the world and for us that means a Western, capitalist society. While there maybe many things we want to change about our society, we have to find ways of living in it as we follow Jesus. That is how we can read this parable. And Jesus says take the example of those we don't tend to associate with because of their sharp practice, they can teach us a thing or two about not conforming to social pressures. So, live in the world, but don't be of the world, and our example will challenge the world to what God wants.

An important part of our work as The Church at Carrs Lane is our Fair Trade shop where we sell produce from Traidcraft. That is an organisation that lives by the parable of the canny manager, operating within the global economy but doing so by ethical trading. Earlier this month we hosted a Traidcraft roadshow, where, along with displaying their new range of products for Christmas, the Justice Matters campaign was promoted. The campaign calls for British businesses to be prosecuted if they abuse or harm people abroad, including the effects of toxic pollution, forced destruction of homes to build new factories and the intimidation of opponents. The Justice Matters campaign states that during the last 10 years there have been 303 accusations of serious abuse in other countries by 127 British companies, but only one prosecution. Through the campaign Traidcraft is petitioning the government to end this injustice.

Similarly, the Methodist Tax Justice Network is working to address the issues around corporate tax, ethical investments and the raising and distribution of tax money in this country and globally. The Network is calling for greater financial transparency, new international tax laws, a new United Nations tax regulation body, national governments to close tax loopholes and eliminate corporate tax breaks, and all taxes to be used for sustainable development and public services. The Methodist Tax Justice Network is a canny manager, who wants to correct the ledger of global taxation so that the exploited are compensated and restored.

Jesus concludes his parable with several sayings about being trusted with money and not serving two masters, leading to the punchline: "*You can't serve both God and Money.*" But the Pharisees were not laughing. Like us, they considered themselves to be 'People of the Light', and they realized that they were the butt of the joke – as we are! Jesus said, "*What is highly valued among people is detestable in God's sight.*"

We are judged on how we use what we have, be that our time, our abilities, our compassion - and yes, our money. Our life does not have to conform to the expectations of society by following the well-trodden formula like an old sitcom. Instead, as 'People of Light' in the world today we must live by the punchline of Jesus' parable by being canny managers of our resources, sharp practitioners who seek justice.

Hear that verse, again: "*I tell you," said Jesus, "use worldly (dishonest) wealth to gain friends of yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes.*"

Neil Johnson  
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