

In the bookcase behind me, almost one whole shelf is devoted to a gift that the parish gave me ten years ago. You gave me the complete set – all 12 volumes – of *Feasting on the Word*, which is one of the very best sources for making sense of every week’s readings throughout all three years of the lectionary.

For every reading, for all three years, there are four different columns of explanation. Four different biblical scholars give you their take on the reading. When you look up this week’s gospel reading, the first columnist describes it as *‘difficult.’* The second columnist describes it as *‘baffling.’* The third says it is *‘confusing’*, and the fourth says “*Good luck on preaching this!*” Apparently people who study the Bible for a living, find themselves in the same place that we do with this reading. And that place is “Huh? What?”

We’re familiar with the idea of a parable: it’s a simple story about earthly events that contains a heavenly truth. We get that. And this parable starts out just fine: a rich man hears that his financial manager is ‘squandering’ his money, so he asks him to present the books because he’s going to fire him. (It doesn’t say why he doesn’t fire the manager right away. Maybe he’s not convinced, or maybe he’s just fair-minded and wants to give the manager a chance to speak.)

What happens next, however, doesn’t prove the manager’s innocence. On the contrary it seems to prove his guilt: he goes off and does exactly what he has been accused of. Reasoning that he’s going to need a new job soon, he figures that he has to make a few friends quickly. So, he lets some people off the debts they owe to his master, in the hope that they’ll look out for him when he’s out of work. It’s a clever move, because the master can’t do anything about it. It would be embarrassing enough to admit that one of his servants has been swindling him, but it would be worse if he started taking back the ‘gifts’ given to his debtors.

So the manager has pulled a fast one on the master. But of course the master is going to find out, and we know what’s going to happen next. The master is going to be very angry, isn’t he? The manager is going to be punished, big time. Right?

But that’s not what happens. Instead, it says, the master ‘commends’ the manager for being so shrewd. Instead of punishment, the manager gets “Nice one, buddy!” What? We were following up to that point, but now we’ve lost the plot.

The parable ends there. Luke throws in that odd comment about making friends by means of dishonest wealth, which is very puzzling, and ends up with what he may have hoped were explanations of this story: “Whoever is faithful in little is faithful in much and whoever is dishonest in little is dishonest in much,” and the bit about how you can’t serve God and wealth.

Perhaps if we understood the language Jesus was speaking, and the times in which he lived, and we had been present when he told the story, we might have picked up some clues from his facial expression, we might have heard something in his tone of voice, and we might have known what he meant. But we don’t, and we didn’t and we weren’t. The best we can do is speculate.

- Is the point that the manager was really shrewd at looking out for himself, and that shrewdness is a good thing, something that we should copy – preferably without the dishonesty?

- Or is it that we ought to imitate the manager's generosity in using wealth to benefit others? He certainly did put wealth to good use, and that's a good example, – as long we overlook the tiny fact that it wasn't his to give away.
- Could it be a sort of back-handed lesson that wealth doesn't do you any good unless you use it well? Everything in this world is fleeting, including the benefits of wealth and status. Everything you think you own could vanish overnight, but the goodwill created by generosity will persist.

All of those interpretations work, even if you do have to overlook some little details, like swindling and dishonesty. Jesus could have come up with a better role model if he wanted to make those points. But he didn't. So we have to suspect that the barriers of language and time are baffling us here.

Of course, it's also possible that this story was supposed be baffling. We are told that the Pharisees were listening to Jesus teaching, and the Pharisees had been more than a little dishonest in twisting their own religious rules to fit in with the Roman occupation. Perhaps this story was aimed at them, and Jesus was giving the disciples a little wink. Perhaps the master's response was clever sarcasm – saying to the Pharisees something like “You think God is going to be impressed by how clever you've been? You think your unfaithfulness will be overlooked because you've been shrewd?”

It's possible. It's also possible that there are other whole layers of meaning that we miss because of those barriers of time and language.

- For example, the word used for 'wealth' in this passage, is 'mammon', which means 'that in which you put your trust.' So when it talks about wealth, it's not about being rich so much as having lots of whatever you most want.
- The word used for 'serve' means 'be controlled by.' So when it talks about serving mammon instead of God, it's about letting yourself be completely driven by the need to acquire wealth or stuff, or whatever.
- And the word we read as 'dishonest' also means 'not real' or 'not lasting' – the opposite of 'eternal.' So when it talks about making friends with dishonest wealth, it might not mean wealth that we came by dishonestly, but only wealth of this world, which will not last. So then it would mean that we should use whatever fleeting, worldly resources we may have, to do good and build relationships in preparation for the next.

It's even possible that the manager was not swindling his master but 'squandering' in a different way. What if he had been letting people off some of their debts before? Then his explanation to the master might be “Times are hard. Some of your customers can't afford to pay their bills, but if we forgive them a little of the debt, then we'll get paid something at least, and keep them as customers. The business is better off that way: we've offered a little help to some people who need it, and generated a little goodwill as well.” In that case, the master's reaction would be reasonable.

Which of these interpretations is right? Any of them! Perhaps none of them! If the biblical scholars in Volume 12 of *Feasting on the Word* don't know, then there's no reason we should!

And that's fine, because ultimately, the truth in any parable is not what it says to someone else but what it says to you. And with a 'difficult, baffling and confusing' parable like this, all we can do is pick the idea that says the most to us individually, and chew on it.

I can't predict what any of you will take from this parable, but what speaks most to me is the little additional line, "Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful in much." That, I think is the essence of life as a Christian: keeping faith in the littlest of things.

The renowned preacher Fred Craddock puts it this way:

"The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. ... Life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, ... teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, or feed the neighbour's cat."

May we always be wise enough to take advantage of all the little opportunities to be faithful in all the little ways that mean so very much.

Amen.