

I don't mind telling you: If you have trouble understanding the parable of the dishonest manager, you're in good company.

Out of all of the parables of Jesus, the one we just read, is the one that most bible teachers (including myself), find the most "troublesome". (So, I spent a lot of time in preparation this week)...

And that's the thing with Jesus' parables – to understand them properly, we gotta think deep...

Some folk make the claim, "*Jesus told stories, to make it **easy** for us to understand.*", but that's not true. It was for the exact opposite reason. Back in Chapter 8, Jesus said to His disciples: I tell you lot, **the secrets of the kingdom of God**, but others, I tell them **in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'**

So, to understand the parables, we've gotta be true Disciples of Jesus. We've gotta connect at a spiritual level, and we've gotta think deep. And this parable, is probably the toughest one of the lot, so we're going to need our thinking-caps on today.

It's about a bloke who gets caught-out cheating his boss (wasting his boss's possessions). And when he knows that his job is in peril, he cheats his boss out of a bit more...

He calls the debtors in, and says:

“How much do you owe my boss?”

“Righto, well, let’s cut that down a bit (we’ll change the ledgers). You now only owe him **this** much (50% discount)”.

“And what about you? What do you owe?”

“Righto, well, let’s cut it down to this (20% discount).” ...

And he gave out these massive discounts (at his boss’ expense), so that they would think, “Oh, you’re such a nice guy (making things easier for me like that)”, And that way, when he **did** lose his job, at least there’d be some folk who **are** happy to see him.

Now, if this parable had a good moral ending, I would want to see this crook of a manager, getting thrown into jail or something... **But he doesn’t!!!** His boss commends him!!! And that’s why this parable is so hard for us to understand...

So, to make sense of this parable, we’ve gotta look:

- at the parable itself;
- what has lead up to Jesus telling it; and
- at the interactions and the teaching that follow it.

And I’m going to take this message over 2 weeks, because there is the general lesson, which provides us with a general spiritual insight; And there is a “specific” lesson, which **applies** the general principal...

The main teaching that follows this parable, is **specifically** about money, and:

- how we value money;
- what we do with it; and
- what motivations we have, in the use of money.

That's the specific lesson, and I'm going to try my best to leave that (mainly) for next week.

So, let's set the scene.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, is something that the old religious system, could not handle. It was way back in Chapter 5, that Jesus gave the example of trying to patch old clothes with new fabric. It doesn't work. It will shrink and tear away; or putting new wine into old wine-skins (that doesn't work either) – they will burst and the wine will be ruined – they just cannot contain it...

So, he gave us the 'heads-up' (right back in Chapter 5), that the old religious system, would not be able to handle the Gospel... And now that we're in Chapter **16**, we're seeing that play out.

Jesus has been inviting and inviting and inviting. And the ones who **have** been responding to the invitation, are the worst of sinners (and that's good. They have been coming with repentant hearts.), while the religious hierarchy/elite, are **rejecting** Jesus...

And Jesus gave an image of salt that has lost its saltiness. Salt, that loses the very essence of what it means to be salt, is good for nothing, but to be thrown out. And His point was, that the people of God, who lose the very essence of what it

means to be the people of God, are good for nothing, but to be thrown out...

So, who was he talking about? He was talking about the religious leaders (Scribes & Pharisees). They were supposed to be God's representatives/managers (if you like)... But they're the ones who are rejecting Jesus... They're the ones who are supposed to be bringing the lost into the Kingdom, but they're annoyed when these pesky "sinners" keep turning up and repenting. And they're annoyed, that Jesus keeps receiving them into fellowship.

So, what do we have here? What we have, is an image of a manager (the religious leaders), who do not value, the things that the master values....

In the parable, the manager has been wasting what the master wanted. What does God want?

- God longs for the lost to be found;
- He celebrates when the sinner comes to repentance...
- Our Heavenly Father celebrates it;

The religious leaders despised it.

But Jesus highlights 2 things that the religious leaders **did** value:

- In V14, it said that they were lovers of money (and God-willing, we'll talk about that more next week); and
- in V15, it said that they wanted to justify themselves before men.

They wanted:

- the approval of men

- to be looked-up-to;
- to be liked.

I don't know if you realise this or not, but "It's a tough job, being a preacher". The temptation is always there, to teach what is popular – to give a message that **isn't** going to make people squirm in their seats, because people don't like to squirm in their seats.

The temptation, is to churn out teaching that appeals to the flesh; to churn out teaching that makes us feel good about ourselves (as we are), and **doesn't** challenge us to change... because that's the sort of thing that people like to hear/will come to hear again...

People like:

- to be affirmed;
- to be told, "You're OK";
- And they like it even better, if you tell them "You're so wonderful. And God is lucky to have you";
- to think that "getting rich" and "having nice stuff" is God's will for them; and
- it when their motivations are not questioned, and when their self-centredness is being proclaimed as "a blessing"

What they **don't** like:

- is to be reminded of sin;
- especially don't like to be told that what they want to do (or what they are doing), **is** sin.
- to be reminded of their responsibility to live Godly and ethical lives;

- to be told that their priorities **should not** be about “self” and “their comfort and possessions”.

That’s why so many preachers today, will gloss-over what the Scriptures say.

Some will preach what we call a “Prosperity Gospel” (God wants to bless you. He wants to make you rich). (That’s a popular message. People like to hear that one).

And it’s also why many preachers want to dumb-down “sin” and “sinfulness”, as if it doesn’t matter anymore... (Times have changed. That’s not sin anymore). In some churches today, you’ll never hear the word “sin”, because it offends. And so some read the Bible with a pair of scissors in their hand and cut out the bits they don’t like.

Let me tell you, there’s nothing that gives Jesus a bad name faster, then when those who proclaim to be Christians (and especially church leaders), do the wrong thing, because they are seen as the hypocrites that they are.

And so, the temptation for a preacher, is to tell people what they want to hear, and that way they’ll be liked. And on some matters, that’s what the Scribes and the Pharisees did. They did it with their teaching on “wealth”, and they did it in their teaching on “marriage”...

Isn’t it interesting, that the battlegrounds of ethics and morality, and Spiritual truth, are often at their most fierce when it comes to marriage and sexuality. It’s always been that

way. John the Baptist was beheaded because he dared to tell King Herod that he shouldn't be shackled-up with his brother's wife...

So, let's talk about "Marriage and Divorce".

In Jesus' day, (like many cultures of the day, and like many cultures today), it was a man's world. And sadly, sometimes the women were not respected as they should be. But the ethics of God, would not have it. Marriage, is for life. A man is not entitled to discard the woman he had married, simply because something younger and sweeter has caught his eye.

But you know (as well as I do), that no matter what the rules are, or what the expectations are, some marriages will still break up, won't they?

And way back, before the time of Jesus, if a man discarded his wife, she would find herself in a hopeless predicament.

Who would:

- provide for her?
- protect her?
- care for her?
- love her???

You see, if a man discarded his wife, no other man could take her in, because she was still a married woman. And if anyone **did** take her in, the two of them could be charged with "adultery" and stoned...

But as the People of Israel were about to cross into the promised land, Moses gave a very lengthy speech, outlining how the People of Israel will be different to the other nations. And in Deuteronomy 24, he mentions a “certificate of divorce”. If after marrying a woman, a man finds “indecent in her”, he might decide to divorce her. But if he does, he has to provide her with a “certificate of divorce”. And that **certificate**, was a life-giving thing for a woman – it freed her, to be married again.

Now we know (through the teaching of Jesus) that Marriage is meant to be for a lifetime, where the husband gives of himself, and the wife gives of herself – each putting the other first. And we learn more about marriage, when Jesus gives the image of “the church” being the bride of Christ... And that’s where we realise that we shouldn’t be looking for justification to divorce – we are meant to show grace and forgive one another, and be reconciled to one another.... “Irreconcilable differences”? Not possible. With repentance comes reconciliation.

But the religious leaders (the same as preachers today) wanted to be popular – they wanted to be liked... And so they “dumbed-down” sin... Such that some of their teachings allowed a man to divorce his wife for something as petty as “I’m not happy with her cooking”... (“*indecent in her*”)

They could think up any reason, write out a certificate of divorce, and right, you’re on your own now...

It’s a bit like in the parable, the manager chopped down the debt of those who owed the Master... “That’s not sin. You can divorce your wife”... Making themselves popular...

And into this situation, Jesus said:

18 "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

Jesus 'pulled rank on them'.

Those religious leaders had no right to make themselves popular by lessening the life-long commitment, that marriage is.

Now, I do need to highlight that in this brief statement in Luke, Jesus seems to be saying that Divorce can **never** happen. And I can confidently tell you, "That this is God's design for marriage – no divorce. God hates divorce.". And that, is what we promise when a Bride and a Groom take each other's hands, and they look into their eyes, and make their vows, "*Til death, do us part*".... And by God's grace, my prayer, is that we will each honour those vows.

But in Jesus' teaching in **Matthew**, it seems that in cases of sexual immorality, divorce **shouldn't** happen, but it might... And I want you to hear, that if this lesson on marriage is too late for you, and you **are** a divorced person, "Divorce is **not** the unforgivable sin." And the open arms of Jesus, are the arms of "welcome" and "grace" and "forgiveness".

Now, here comes the overall Spiritual lesson of this Parable:

- **The Kingdom of God has come.**
Something new, is here.

We don't live by a system of rules and regulations (like the Pharisees did). In the Lord Jesus Christ, we live by the Spirit of God, and in us, by the Holy Spirit, the Law is fulfilled.

- The Kingdom of God, is the new garment.
Don't try and patch up the old garment with it.
- The Kingdom of God, is the new wine.
Don't try to contain it in the old wine-skin.

In my daily Bible readings during the week, I was reading Galatians 4, where Paul describes the relationship between “living by the Law”, and living as “heirs of the promise”.

And he uses the example of a child who is an heir. He will one day be the owner of everything... But not yet. Until he comes of age (and steps-up into his inheritance) the child is little different to a slave. He is under guardians and managers; He has to do what he's told.

And so, the Law, was like our guardian/manager. It told us what to do, and we obeyed. But now, in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are adopted as His sons, and He fills us with His Spirit, so that we are transformed, and by the Spirit of God, we embrace the ways of God (without being forced to do them)...

And that's pretty-much what Jesus is saying here.

16 "The Law and the Prophets were until John;

John the Baptist, was seen as the last of the prophets, pointing the way to the New Kingdom in Jesus Christ.

And Jesus says:

since then [since the coming of John] the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.

And they were.

The Scribes and the Pharisees, were there, busy putting up barriers to stop sinners from repenting and coming to the Kingdom of God,, but the preaching of Jesus, and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, was such good news (that's what the word "Gospel" means – Good news). The Gospel of the Kingdom of God, was so good, that common, ordinary people forced their way past all of the burdens and all of the barriers put up by the religious elite, and they came direct to Jesus...

In the Lord Jesus Christ, The Kingdom of God has come. And the Spiritual Law is now fulfilled.

But that doesn't mean that God's Law is written off... *God's Law is not like our national/state legislation, that is subject to change, depending on the whim of today's government.* God's Old Testament Law, "codifies" (if you like), the Justice, Love and Mercy of God...

Do you remember when Jesus summarised the Law?

Love the Lord your God, with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength; And love your neighbour as yourself... And He said, that's a summary of all of the Law and the prophets...

Now, you tell me:

How could the coming of Jesus do away with the justice/love/mercy of God?

The Kingdom of God has come. The Kingdom, is a **place** of Justice; Love; and Mercy.

And that's why Jesus said: ¹⁷ ... it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

The Law of God does **not** become void. For we, the people of God (who make up the Kingdom of God):

- we no longer **need** the Law to be “codified”;
- We don't need it to say “Do this and don't do that, or else you're going to be punished”...
- We no longer live by the Law out of fear...

But, we continue to do what the Law requires, because now we live by the Spirit of God, in all of His justice and love and mercy.

You see, Jesus sorta summed it up in V15, when He said to the Pharisees “You lot **justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.**”

The cravings of the flesh are very different from the cravings of the Spirit. Jesus said: **what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.**

The old religious system, had become so polluted, that some of their practices were an abomination in the sight of God... They tried to live by the **letter** of the Law, but they failed, because the flesh got in the way. They didn't honour God...

And that's where I will fail. If you or I, try to live by the **letter** of the Law, “*Right, there's the line, and I can step right up to that line, as long as I do not cross it*” – If that's the way we live, trying to please God, we've missed the whole point.

Because now the Kingdom has come. It's an entirely new way of living.

If you have trouble with “sin”, It's not a problem of “not knowing the rules”. It's a spiritual/faith problem; it's a relationship with God problem.

So, let's come back to the Parable and make sense of the most difficult part.

The most confusing bit, is when the dishonest manager gives away his boss' money, and his boss commends him.

So, let's clear this up:

“The Dishonest Manager was **not** commended for his dishonesty”. He was commended for recognising that “a change was coming”, and he immediately took action (while there was still time).

Jesus used an ungodly character in His parable to teach us a spiritual truth. He said: ⁸ **The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.**

What can Disciples of Jesus learn from people of the world? Recognise that a change has come, and immediately take action. The old way of living by the written Law, has gone. The Kingdom of God has come, and we now live by faith.

And as we're going to see next week, leaving our old way of doing things, and living as citizens of the Kingdom of God, is a very practical thing. We cast off the desires of “the flesh”, and we live by “the Spirit”.

And so, the lesson of the parable of the dishonest manager is **not**, “Be like the pharisees who “lessened the debt”. The Gospel makes us very aware of the debt. The Gospel reminds us, that the cost of forgiveness, of my many sins, was the death of Jesus. And so preachers of the Gospel should never, ever “drop the standard” of how we as Christians should live...

The point of the parable, is: The Kingdom has come. The way to please God, is no longer about “keeping the letter of the law” – it’s a matter of the heart.

- A life surrendered to God; And
- being filled with the Spirit; And
- living, not for this world, but for the Kingdom to come.

So, that’s the Spiritual principle. We’ll get into the specifics next week.