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The Ways of Jesus: Forgiving Debts

The Dishonest Manager

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There is a series on Netflix I know some of you have watched.

It's called Schitt's Creek and it's about the Rose family. I must admit, when it first came out, I tried to watch it, but after watching several episodes, I just couldn't get into it. The Rose family was wealthy, like Richie Rich wealthy. They owned a national chain of video rental stores, called Rose Video. Unfortunately, the family's accountant was a thief and didn't pay taxes on behalf of the family and the business. The first episode opens with the family finding out about the accountant while the IRS ransacks their home, taking everything, except what they could quickly gather, and one asset; a town called Schitt's Creek. Johnny Rose, the patriarch of the family, bought it as a gag gift for his son, David. They were allowed to keep that asset because it essentially had no value. The Roses left their world of glitter and gold and went to live in a crappy roadside motel in Schitt's Creek.

As I said, I tried to watch it and couldn't. I felt like I was supposed to feel sorry for this family who had lost everything. But they didn't make it easy. They were spoiled, selfish, and generally unlikable. So much so that I kind of felt they got what they deserved, and I didn't want to watch them wallow in it. I started watching the series three times and, after two or three episodes each time, I quit. I really need a good guy. I need the spark of hope and moral compass of a truly good character in movies and TV shows. And at the beginning of Schitt's Creek, there wasn't one to be found.

In some ways, the same is true in today's parable. It's hard to feel sorry for any of them. In fact, when I talked to a colleague about this parable, he said, "It's one of my favorites, because when you read it, you are left thinking, 'This is messed up.'" Indeed.

This is Luke 16: 1-8.

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me

an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’³ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’⁷ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...

Scholars say this is the end of the parable, although in the Gospel of Luke it goes on for several more verses. However, we know the verses that follow were added to Jesus’ original story, making it seem as though Jesus explained what he just said. I read this week that one way to think about those extra verses is as sermon notes from early Christian preachers who were trying to figure out what this story was about. They offer a few possible explanations for the parable, but since they were not part of the original story, we will deal only with the first 8 verses.

Let’s begin with some assumptions I am making based on the text. First, it’s pretty clear that everyone in the story is a person of at least some privilege. The master was super wealthy, the manager had money, not as much as the master, but enough, and he and even the debtors could all read and write. Since being able to read and write was generally a sign of some socio-economic security, and less than 10% of the population in the first century Palestinian world could read and write, we can assume the debtors were not the poorest of the poor, they were probably on the edge, what we might describe as living paycheck to paycheck.

In Galilee, at this time, commercialized farming was starting to become a thing. Small peasant farms were being absorbed by big estates, overseen by managers. Peasants were forced off their land or became indentured servants. Often, the wealthy people ended up acquiring the land because the peasants owed them so much money, they had no choice but to give up what little land they had in payment for their debt. The fact that the debtors in the story carried a large debt load is another reason we can assume they were not peasants.

The character of the manager has been widely debated by scholars, especially because liberation theology has taught us to critique our sacred texts through the lenses of marginalized communities. So, it is important to mention that the manager of the estate could have been a high-ranking person who was enslaved, himself oppressed. My opinion, based on research, is the manager in this story was not enslaved. Someone who was enslaved would not have been simply dismissed for mismanaging the master's property, there would have been much more serious consequences. All of this to say, my interpretation of this parable assumes all the economic activity in the story took place in the economic sphere above the people the diggers and the beggars, who the manager did not want to be.

The manager knew his job prospects were not good. He wasn't really a worker bee, and he was too proud to beg. The only option, it seemed, was for him to endear himself to the debtors, the ones he had profited from up until this point because, don't forget, part of his job was to decide what the debtors owed, and he always made sure they owed enough to keep him comfortable.

He sat down with each debtor, basically on the way out the door, as he was clearing out his cubicle, and he adjusted their bills. Some interpreters would say he adjusted them so they were in line with the Jewish prohibition on charging interest, others say he adjusted them so that his portion of the profit margin was taken out. It is impossible to know for sure. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that these debts would never have been reduced if the manager wasn't planning to benefit. But certainly, the manager could have done the right thing for the wrong reason. Humans do that all the time.

The original listeners of Jesus' story knew how all of this worked. They knew debt contracts contained outrageous interest, hidden in the cost of the goods, to avoid Jewish law prohibiting charging interest. You see, even 2000 years ago, there were loopholes. We need to think of these debts like payday loans and student loans...they were extremely predatory in nature from start to finish.

And then, in the most bizarre plot twist ever, the story continues, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly..."

And the story ends. What? Once again, the manager takes money from his master, but instead of, "This is why you are being fired," the master says, "Way to go!" The master saw something in the manager's behavior he liked. Maybe the laser focus on his own interests? What a weird thing for him to applaud. What a weird way for Jesus to end a story.

Jewish New Testament scholar, Dr. Amy Jill Levine, says parables are supposed to provoke us, and if that is the case, this might be the most successful parable ever. It refuses to be reduced to a tweetable message: #loveallthepeople or #dontsweathesmallstuff. Interpreters can't even agree on what to call this story. Is it the Parable of the Dishonest Steward or the Unjust Steward or the Shrewd Manager? Certainly, the name we choose may predispose our reading toward one interpretation or another. What would you call this parable?

I would call it, "The Parable of a Dysfunctional System." Catchy, huh? Everyone in this parable is playing their part in the system. They are looking out for themselves and their own interests. Is it possible that Jesus told this story as a way of showing his followers how dysfunctional and corrupt the system was? It was an economic system in which everybody who participated, regardless of their place in it, ended up sullied. Maybe the lesson is, "The kin-dom of God is not this." And I think if Jesus was here today, he might feel inclined to tell us the same story, with the same lesson. The kin-dom of God is not this.

This kind of system is set up to uphold the disparity between the very rich and everyone else. How we feel about the actions of the characters in the story tells us something about our own moral perspective when it comes to the economic system in which we participate. The manager squandered the master's property, so he was fired. Who wouldn't do the same thing in the master's place? The manager first squandered his master's money and then wrote off part of the debt owed to his master, to the benefit of the debtors, costing the master more money. Do those actions cancel each other out from a moral perspective? The debtors, who have been kept under everyone's thumb because of their debt, benefitted from the manager's actions. Does that make them accomplices to his actions from a moral perspective?

In our culture of capitalism, not paying your debt is seen as a moral failing. We live in a world in which we have been told debt must be accurately and carefully

tracked, and payments must be made until the debt is paid in full, no exceptions. There is a clear right and wrong and that is what is right.

These moral assumptions about paying what you owe no matter what very often mask the violence of a fundamentally immoral, debt-based economic system; a system that virtually guarantees that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. We have known nothing else, so it doesn't even occur to us that it's wrong. To help us begin to think about that. Let me tell you about Haiti.

Haiti won its independence from France in 1804. Suddenly, it was an independent, black-led nation — created by people who were enslaved who fought their oppressors for their freedom and against all odds, won. France left, but returned to the island nation in 1825, with warships and canons, demanding the country pay reparations. To be clear, a rich European nation demanded reparations from a nation of formerly enslaved people for its loss of property, What loss of property, you might be asking? The land, but also, the people of Haiti. That's what they considered them...property.

So, with weapons pointed at them, the Haitians made an agreement with the French. The original agreement was for five annual payments of 30 million francs—an amount that was utterly impossible for the fledgling country to pay. Just the first payment alone was six times the country's annual revenue. France “generously” offered Haiti a loan to cover the payments it could not make, essentially relegating it to perpetual debt. Over the next century, Haiti paid French slaveholders and their descendants the equivalent of between \$20 and \$30 billion in today's dollars. It took Haiti 122 years to pay it off. University of Virginia scholar Marlene Daut calls this, "the greatest heist in history." The kingdom of God is not this.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/10/05/1042518732/-the-greatest-heist-in-history-how-haiti-was-forced-to-pay-reparations-for-freed>

What of paying debt no matter what now?

I want to continue to pull on this thread of immoral debt as we turn to student loans, an issue that has grabbed headlines since President Biden announced his plan to forgive some student debt for certain borrowers. This topic is a good example of how our faith could inform our lives and our positions on what's going

on in the world. It is also a reminder that Jesus' message was political, but not partisan.

This week, I read stories of people of all ages who feel hopeless and whose lives are financially wrecked because of student loan debt. Before I share a couple of their stories, I want to remind us that for a long time we have been telling our kids that the only way to succeed is by getting a college education. We are only recently talking about the importance of many careers that do not require a degree and the benefits of trade schools and community colleges. So, these people who have gone to school any way they could are doing so because we told them they had to.

I read about one borrower who took out \$60,000 in private student loans with a 9% interest rate. After a decade of making monthly payments, his student debt load currently stands at just under \$86,000, including \$22,000 owned by the government. A woman who went to college to be a nurse, owed \$128,000 when she graduated in 2011. She pays \$1200 a month and currently owes \$24,000 more than she borrowed. And I learned this week that there are people in our country whose social security checks are being garnished to pay back student loans? Some of those people have taught our children and taken care of our loved ones in the hospital. The kin-dom of God is not this.

The announcement about student loan forgiveness has been met with resistance from some who say the people with these debts are lazy, immoral, and irresponsible. Surprisingly (or not) some of the loudest voices against student loan forgiveness are from legislators and others who say they are Christians. They forget... "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," is more than a line from the Lord's Prayer. For Christians, it is a reminder of biblical tradition spelled out way back in Leviticus 25, which imposes a regular social practice of clearing debts to correct for the accumulated injustice of a crazily lopsided distribution of resources in society. But we don't like to talk about that part of Leviticus.

And we would rather today's parable was an allegory with God as the master who forgives everyone and celebrates when the little guy accidentally catches a break. But that is not the lesson Jesus wanted his audience or this audience to learn. Jesus had a lot to say about money, yet the Church has so thoroughly reworked his message to accommodate debt-based capitalism (because we have been

taught to worship capitalism and whiteness), that we can barely recognize it. We fall all over ourselves, like the early Christian preachers, trying to get this parable to say something a little less abrasive, a little less about the system in which we participate. And so, it seems, Jesus' message is as controversial today as it was 2000 years ago. The kin-dom of God is not this.

The kin-dom of God is a place where material wealth is shared so that no one is in need. Not so everyone has exactly the same amount, but so that some people aren't starving or without shelter or unable to take their kids to the doctor, or get their tooth filled, or buy glasses. The kin-dom of God is a world in which money is not worshiped as if it is more important than people. The well-being of people and our relationships with one another is always the priority. That is the economic system prescribed for ancient Israel and replicated in the early Christian communities we read about in Acts 2, where, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." We are meant to live in true community and, to be clear, holding crippling debt over each other's heads does not scream beloved community.

So, I cried my eyes out during the last episode of Schitt's Creek. So much had changed for the Rose family. They made friends, they found love, and they realized the important things in life cannot be bought and sold. The important things can only be experienced together.

I am so grateful to get to experience life, even the messy parts, with all of you. This is truly a special community that is held together, not because we all believe the same things or never disagree, but because we want the same things for each other and for our neighbors.

If this sounds like a community you want to officially join, I invite you to come forward as we sing, "They'll Know We Are Christians."