

“No Lie”

Luke 16:1-13

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Thou shalt commit adultery. That’s what the Bible says. Thou *shalt* commit adultery. You can look it up.

But you’d have to look it up in the King James Version of 1631 in which the word “not” was accidentally omitted. This typo so infuriated King Charles that he commanded that all copies be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition. This version became known as “The Wicked Bible.” No surprise.

Yet too often people leave the “nots” out of the Ten Commandments or ignore them altogether, with Number 9 suffering the worst neglect: “*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*” (Ex. 20:16, KJV). This commandment demands that the truth be told in a court of law and forbids anyone to tell a lie in order to gain an advantage over a neighbor. Justice can only be done if reality is not distorted by lies.

This seems like an increasingly quaint notion. Judge Judy would likely be out of business if it were otherwise. In his book *The Cheating Culture*, David Callahan argues that cheating is no longer limited to the shady society of criminals. Many are doing it and because everyone sees others doing it they keep on. Can we spell “s-t-e-r-o-i-d-s?” Some endeavors seem to have it built in. A golfer once told me that golf is the only game where you shoot six, write down five and yell “Fore!”

Too often attorneys are fingered at the center of such shenanigans. Too delicious to resist, I tell this story with the blessing of Attorney Chris Carveth with the agreement that he and you shall give me your best clergy jokes for self-deprecation in a future message.

A lawyer named Mr. Strange chose his tombstone. The stonecutter asked what inscription he’d like. The lawyer replied, “*Here lies John Strange, an honest man and a lawyer.*”

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” replied the stonemason. “It’s against the law to bury three people in the same grave.” Not amused, Attorney Strange asked the stonemason for another suggestion. “He lies an honest lawyer” was the reply.

Mr. Strange protested. “But that won’t tell people who it was.” Retorted the stonemason: “It most certainly will. People will read, ‘Here lies an honest lawyer’ and exclaim, ‘That’s Strange!’”

With that we turn to the Gospel and ask “What is the message of the parable of the dishonest manager?” At first glance Jesus seems to sanction dishonesty: “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth” (Luke 16:9). A deeper examination reveals the story challenges believers to **get over** our naiveté and **get with** Jesus’ program. Assuming we are attracted to worldly wealth (and few of us are not, as last Wednesday’s Powerball jackpot suggests), the story’s shock value is nothing more than its real-life context.

The details are simple and typical of mid-Eastern folk tales. The manager is a card-carrying cheater, charged with squandering his boss’ money and given his two weeks’ notice. “You’re fired!” bellows a first-century Donald. Too weak for manual labor, too ashamed to beg, the manager comes up with a plan so he can survive after termination. He rewrites the bills of his master’s debtors: 20% reduction for one, 50% for another. Again, it sounds like Jesus is commending unethical behavior.

Often readers assume the manager is ripping off his boss, taking what belongs to the boss, helping the customers who will look out for him in the future. But that makes no sense in light of verse 8: “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...” Even if the boss is getting something instead of nothing, the best we might hope is that he wouldn’t press charges, not offer a commendation.

Bible scholars suggest that what happened is that the manager cut his own commission. He sacrifices short-term earnings for long-term security. The parallel scholars use is first-century tax collectors, who

were contractors notorious for their dishonesty. Those familiar with the Bible think “Zaccheaus.” As long as tax collectors collected what was due the government, anything more they could get away with was theirs to keep. Or think sub-contractors today. They get paid a fixed fee for their work. However much less it costs them to build the project or provide the service is their profit. In both cases the temptation to cheat is great.

It is then reasonable to think that the manager did not cut money owed the master, but his commission for managing and collecting the payments. If so, he is not defrauding his boss. This interpretation makes sense of the master’s reaction since he still gets what he is owed. He commends the manager because the boss knows there are times when it is worth resisting the short-term return and taking the long view.

For those who question a 50% commission as too high to be logical: this was likely part of the manager’s problem to begin with. Like tax collectors who defrauded, part of “squandering” his master’s property may well have been taking an exorbitant personal commission. This put the burden on the debtors, who couldn’t pay, which left the manager with nothing to deliver to the boss.

This everyday world of first-century economics makes an other-worldly point: “*No slave can serve two masters.*” Honesty is the short-term sacrifice for the long-term benefit of a relationship of integrity with God and one another. Jesus concludes today’s passage in a crystal-clear contrast: “*You cannot serve God and wealth.*” And that’s no lie.

The world around us encourages us to focus on wealth as the final goal, to cut corners in pursuit of financial success, to twist the truth in order to beat the competition. It starts early. My step-sons’ high school has taken significant security measures to protect personal property, notably cell phones and iPods, in the gym locker room. Yet even with these measures, cameras cannot be put in the locker room and the moment of opportunity for theft is when a boy or girl leaves an unattended backpack or open locker. This is a community where the average annual household income is \$124,000. This episode from

school orientation this past week reminded me of the quote attributed to John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil and America's first billionaire (in the early 1900's). When a reporter asked him "*How much money is enough*" he responded "*Just a little bit more.*"

Today's parable challenges us to resist, focusing on a higher calling that allows us to sleep at night and look ourselves in the face in the morning. It also calls us to community. The dishonest manager's money can't save him. He needs friends. It occurs to me that this very difficult teaching—to put God ahead of wealth and honesty ahead of opportunism—is made easier when we seek to live it out in a community of like-minded people. I know—because you tell me—that the reason some of you are in church week in and week out is because the business world is so very tough, not only in terms of hours worked and sacrifices expected, but because of the very culture that drives toward profit alone and makes expediency one of the highest moral values.

We need this community of Mary Taylor Memorial Church to provide friends that help us through the tough times, economic or otherwise; and to be a community that helps us keep our priorities in order by serving God through our gifts of time, talent and—yes—treasure. I believe, by and large, you have found or will find such a community here.

That said, no neat conclusion ends this sermon. The challenges are significant when the face off is between God and money. One wit has said that the only problem with tainted money is that there 'taint enough of it. Perhaps, instead of the "No Fear" slogan that blazed across graphic t-shirts among the young people years ago, we need ones that say "No lie."

Or maybe we just need to live in such a way that people will already know that about us. Amen.