So, here’s the deal: I hate this parable. Can’t say it more plainly. I wasn’t going to talk about it at all—except to say that—but then I thought: I know it’s not easy for most folks, and maybe I have some kind of obligation as a preacher to comment on it.

My intention is for this to be my once-and-for-all commentary on this story with which Jesus has blessed us. From now on, I was thinking, I can just say, “Remember that sermon on September 18, 2022.” (Yeah, I know: I barely remember my sermon from two weeks ago. Still, you catch my drift, I’m sure.)

Here goes. I read about 25 pages online, from two conservative-leaning and two liberal-leaning commentaries. I mean conservative and liberal here as modifiers of theological approach.

Plowing through those I came across some pretty far-fetched, even outlandish, explications of this difficult story about an incompetent, and eventually dishonest, manager. I won’t go into all those, but sometimes I marvel at the lengths to which some theologians will go to help Jesus come out smelling like a rose instead of saying, “Well, he just missed the mark here. Not the point he was making, but the way in which he made it.” After all, this is God incarnate, meaning divine and human, and I simply take this as a blip in human judgment. Enough of that, already; I’m beginning to feel a little shaky standing in the pulpit and saying such things.

Oh, the online websites. They are: Got Questions, The Truth of the Matter (neither of them identifies a particular author), Working Preacher (author of this article, Lois Malcolm), and Sermon Writer (author, Richard Donovan).

These are some things they hold in common:

* Unrighteous wealth here does not refer to money made by nefarious means, but merely wealth in general, in other places, “filthy lucre.”
* The manager is not fired for being dishonest, but incompetent. His dishonest arises in his scheme with the account holders.
* Generally, they agree that the rich man (the master) is not being ironic or sarcastic, but genuinely admiring of the scheme, even though he’s the victim of it.

My favorite among these four is Dick Donovan (as his name appears in his website bio) who was an Army chaplain for 26 years, including four years as Homiletics Officer charged with improving preaching in the Army. His bachelor’s degree is from Manhattan Bible College, his Master of Theology he earned at Princeton.

Donovan makes the point that the manager’s scheme is indeed shrewd, as he seems to have put the master in a tough situation. By heavily discounting the accounts receivable, the manager has probably boosted the reputation of his former boss, setting him up for a greater volume of deals in the future. On the other hand, he has certainly cost him some money and goods in the short run. If the boss tries to void the discounts made by his manager, he’ll look bad and lose business instead. Same thing if he tries to punish the wheeler-dealer who has now made new friends of those account holders.

I’ll do a quick run-through of the conclusions made by the four commentators; obviously, there will be some repetition:

* GOT QUESTIONS: If God is our Master, then our wealth will be at His disposal. In other words, the faithful and just steward whose Master is God will employ that wealth in building up the kingdom of God.
* TRUTH OF THE MATTER: Be faithful over the little Christ gives you by investing in kingdom purposes and not squander it on yourself. As you prove faithful, God will entrust true riches to serving the true master, Jesus Christ. Do not serve money or become a slave to money; instead, be devoted to Christ and use your wealth to serve Christ and gain friends by promoting the gospel for eternity.
* Lois Malcolm at WORKING PREACHER: What this dishonest manager sets in play has analogues with what happens when the reign of God emerges among us (17:21). Old hierarchies are overturned and new friendships are established. Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us — not only in their homes in this life, but even in the “eternal homes” (6:20-26)!
* Richard Donovan at SERMON WRITER: In this parable, the dishonest manager is about to be dismissed from his job, but is wise enough to use his last-minute opportunity to prepare for the future. He does so by doing favors for his master’s debtors (at his master’s expense), knowing that those debtors will incur an obligation to welcome him into their homes after he has been dismissed from his employment. The lesson of the parable is not that we should be dishonest, but that we should use every means at our disposal to prepare for our eternal home (16:9)

Can we say that’s done now? I hope so. And to give Jesus his due, which is a big part of why we’re here on a Sunday morning, whatever difficult this pea-brained preacher has with the parable, Jesus has us talking about it two thousand years later. I think a lot of writers and preachers and poets would be happy with that.

So. Here’s what I wanted to talk about this morning—briefly, you’ll be glad to hear.

From the Collect, the first seven words: “Grant us, Lord, not be anxious . . .” There is more after that, but it’s not a bad prayer all by itself. Grant us not to be anxious. We sometimes act as if we believe that being anxious (worried, tied up in knots, etc.) is the solution to a problem. It’s not. Trust me, I’ve tried. And it’s only after allowing our anxiety to pass, after taking a breath (read, opening ourselves to the Spirit) that we can begin to do anything about whatever problem—real or imagined—that we’re facing.

And I will admit, begrudgingly, that’s just what the shady manager does in the parable. He has a moment, “What shall I do‽”—before he thinks more calmly about a plan.

The Collect gets more specific about anxiety, “not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly.”

The reading from Isaiah illustrates the earthly things with striking phrases like “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.” We know, all of us, about corporate and personal greed that makes workers, human beings, into little more than widgets in the machinery to make the rich even richer. And if we examine our own lives, as we are called to do, we might even find ways that actions we take for our own comfort take their toll on those who have less and on this earth of ours that belongs to all of us, and more importantly, to God.

Finally (there’s that word you were hoping to hear), Paul speaks to us all in the words he wrote to Timothy. They serve to clarify a goal of all the foregoing—our opening prayer, the prophet, and Jesus’ parable—and hold up before us the reason for all that: “I urge that supplications, prayers, and thanksgivings be made for everyone . . . that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” + + +