

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm

Part I: Parable of the Dishonest Manager

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Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

I. Shock Treatment

Many of us in Florida are familiar with pools, either owning one or swimming in them frequently. I remember when my family had a pool in Scottsdale, Arizona. As a pool owner, I quickly learned the necessity of consistent upkeep. Dust and pollen settling on the water's surface, and flowers from Bougainvillea and other plants shedding into the pool meant that without diligent care, the clear, blue water would rapidly become cloudy and green. When the water turned murky, normal cleaning methods weren't enough. I had to 'shock' the pool with a gallon or two of chlorine. This shock-treatment was amazingly effective; within hours, the pool water was pure and clear once again.

In this series, we'll examine four of Jesus's parables that had a similarly startling impact on his listeners. These messages from Jesus may surprise us, but when embraced, they can act like chlorine in a stagnant pool – purifying and bringing balance and clarity, only to our lives rather than mere water. As we stand on the threshold of the New Year, what better time than now to undertake a deep spiritual cleanse?

Our first parable – the Parable of the Dishonest Manager – is perhaps the most surprising of all of Jesus's parables. A deceitful manager who defrauds his employer of substantial loan income is commended by his employer instead of being incarcerated! This parable has puzzled scholars and theologians for centuries, earning the moniker "the hardest parable" due to the debate surrounding its true message.

Even when the parable's message is uncovered, it is still one of the hardest parables to accept. Yet, doing so can be transformative. I know this from personal experience. It changed the whole course of my life and ministry when I first realized what Jesus was trying to tell us!

So, fasten your seatbelts. Bring your seatbacks to upright position and stow away your tray tables. We're in for quite a ride!

First, let's consider the parable's context. Our 21st-century secular perspective diverges sharply from the 1st-century Jewish context, causing us to overlook elements that would have been evident to Jesus's contemporaries. For example, in that era, many who had once owned modest family farms for generations were forced to sell due to economic hardships and revert to sharecropping on their ancestral land, contributing a share of their crop as lease payment.

Estimates suggest that leasing costs consumed up to 50% of the yield. After taxes, water rights, tithes, and reserving seed for the next season, a mere 20% might remain with the grower. A few bad seasons could swiftly transform subsistence into survival by loans, often from the landowner, leading to an inescapable debt, blurring the line between a sharecropper and a slave.

The notion of enslavement was particularly abhorrent to the Israelites, who, with a history of bondage in Egypt, were culturally committed to avoiding slavery. Upon settling in Canaan, they took measures to ensure land ownership and prevent debt slavery. For instance, Deuteronomy 23:19-20 prescribes:

You shall not charge interest on loans to your fellow Israelite—interest on money, provisions, or anything lent. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not your fellow Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless your endeavors in the land you are entering.

This directive may appear hypocritical at first glance, but it aimed to prevent domestic poverty rather than to extend charity abroad. Just imagine the global rush for loans if Canada declared interest illegal! The law's intent is protective, not philanthropic.

Additionally, the Israelites established the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8-55), a 50-year cycle designed to combat poverty through land redistribution, emancipation of slaves, agricultural rest, and debt forgiveness. Intriguingly, Leviticus, often labeled as the duller biblical book, holds a remarkably advanced model for economic equilibrium and ending systemic poverty.

Ever since Speaker Mike Johnson's declaration of a biblical basis for his political agenda, I've been waiting for him to impose an interest ban on domestic loans and designate a Jubilee Year in the U.S. to cancel all debts. But, perhaps his "biblical mandates" are more selective ...

Despite skepticism among some scholars about the actual practice of the Jubilee in Israel, the law against charging fellow Israelites interest was in effect in Jesus's day, at least in theory, if not in practice. As is often the case, laws meant to protect the vulnerable can often be circumvented by those in power.

Let's consider a modern analogy: So-called "Zero Percent Financing" offered by car manufacturers. It's hardly altruism; the interest is merely rolled into the vehicle's upfront cost. Similarly, in ancient Israel, a cunning landowner – or a dishonest estate manager – could exploit tenants with inflated "interest-free" loans, adding to the ire directed at landowners who, honorable or not, lived comfortably while the laborers spiraled into poverty.

Returning to the parable, the manager's commendation could imply his clandestine inflation of loan amounts without the master's consent, pocketing the difference. Faced with exposure, he shrewdly adjusts the debts to their rightful figures, possibly fabricating a tale of the landlord's ethical awakening.

Confronted with the ruse, the landlord's options are limited: expose the manager and risk looking oblivious or maintain the status quo, wary that any new hire might replicate the deceit. Regardless, he'd know this manager is unlikely to repeat his misconduct.

Voilà! We have just unraveled Jesus' most challenging parable. The reduced amounts in the loans were illicit from the outset, and the cunning manager ingeniously rectified the situation while maintaining favor with both the sharecroppers and the landlord—though undoubtedly, the landlord would now watch him like a hawk. His shrewdness relieved not only the sharecroppers' financial burdens but their bitterness toward the landowner.

If we accept this reading of the manager's strategy, it suggests that Jesus was calling out the Pharisees and other religious authorities. Over time, they had expanded God's commands to burdensome extent, a practice known as 'building a fence around the law.' By complying with these more stringent rules, they ostensibly prevented accidental transgressions of the actual commandment. For example, the observance of kosher law prohibits mixing meat and dairy. This is not because such a combination is divinely forbidden, but rather to sidestep the potential infraction of a more specific ordinance that one should not cook a kid in its mother's milk. Consequently, it's deemed non-kosher to prepare or eat a cheeseburger, in case the cheese might be derived from the mother of the cow that provided the beef for the patty.

Initially, the intentions of the Pharisees and other religious leaders may have been pure, aiming to guide the populace in following God's law and thereby securing God's blessings. However, they erected such a labyrinth of 'fences' that they created significant 'job security' for themselves. The laws were simple, but the multitude of complex fences necessitated an extensive religious hierarchy to manage. In time, these religious leaders treated the fences as if they were the laws themselves, potentially breeding resentment among the people towards a God perceived to be authoring unnecessary and overly burdensome regulations.

Jesus, in this narrative, essentially pours 'shock treatment' into this very murky pool of laws and regulations. He demands that the religious leaders of his era 'come clean' and enforce the simple, fundamental laws initially commanded by God, instead of imposing endless oppressive restrictions and claiming divine authority.

Before moving on, I invite you to reflect upon instances in your life when you felt a deeper connection to God upon realizing that certain rules you once held sacred were of more human origin than divine. Can you identify such instances?

II. Deep Shock

If you find the above explanation compelling, who could fault you? It may indeed be accurate. Yet, consider the implications for how one should live as a result. Within a more liberal denomination like the United Church of Christ, it's tempting to critique more conservative Christians for their Pharisaic tendencies – imposing needless rules far removed from the essence of God's will. Is God truly opposed to dancing, or women in leadership, or same-sex relationships among those whose orientation is naturally this way?

According to our interpretation of the parable, it's as if Jesus is endorsing our efforts to expose religious hypocrisy and alleviate the burdens imposed by conservative leaders.

Without discrediting the validity of this perspective – and certainly acknowledging the necessity of confronting modern-day Pharisees – I propose that, while inspiring, this view is not transformative. It invites self-congratulation rather than introspection or a radical reassessment of one's life.

The Jesus I've come to know and love not only affirms but also challenges me, urging a richer, more fulfilling existence. If Jesus's role were merely to validate our current ways, his presence in our lives would be superfluous. While our interpretation thus far may provide 'shock treatment' for religious fundamentalists, the Jesus I know tends to provide 'shock treatment' for everyone – fundamentalist and liberal alike!

Thus, allow me to suggest a more shocking interpretation – the one that changed the course of my life years ago.

In our reading of the parable thus far, the manager is lauded for absolving fictitious debts while maintaining the genuine ones. While this interpretation is intellectually and emotionally satisfying, it doesn't quite align with the Jesus known for praying for forgiveness for his executioners, instead of litigating their offenses against God. Jesus advocated for the absolution of actual, not merely imagined debts when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Suppose, in our parable, the debts to the landlord were legitimate and free of interest from the outset. Then, by reducing them, the manager would have lessened what was justly due.

"Why would the landlord praise such a significant cut?" you might wonder. It could be for reasons akin to God's approval of Jesus's plea for mercy on the Cross. The God Jesus revealed is one who cherishes us beyond all understanding, prioritizing connection over flawlessness. Our sole perfection lies in our perfect imperfection! This means that God must look beyond countless transgressions to reach our intrinsic goodness. At times, we may act generously, but next to God's largesse, we seem unimaginably tightfisted. Our love for others, and occasionally ourselves, pales in comparison to God's love. We extend grace and forgiveness sporadically, yet compared with God's forgiveness and grace, we appear to hold grudges and grip so tightly onto wrongdoings that not even a crowbar could pry our fingers loose from our grievances.

Jesus grasped the essence of God more deeply than we could ever hope to. He knew of God's endless majesty, abundant benevolence, and readiness to forgive. To envision Jesus's perception of God, imagine yourself as Earth's wealthiest person, with your closest friends among the poorest. Instead of indulging in global jaunts or sailing on a lavish yacht, you find joy in simple moments: watching children kick a makeshift ball around a dusty village square in a ragtag soccer game; sharing stories and singing songs by a village fire long into the night; preparing meals in a humble dwelling as a family recounts their day and dreams of a brighter future.

Despite your affluence, your friends face life's hardships that threaten their survival – a farmer's repeated droughts, a child's illness depleting meager savings. Occasionally, they set aside their pride and humbly ask for loans. Respecting their dignity, you comply, imposing no interest, allowing them to repay at their convenience.

Over time, your friends' debts accumulate due to frequent misfortunes and occasional missteps, lacking the means for rectification. The debts, even at zero interest, become colossal, instilling a profound sense of shame in them. While you insist that their debts are of no concern to you, and do nothing to stand in the way of your friendship, they can't help but project their feelings onto you. They assume your generosity is either pretense or will cease when you realize that repayment is impossible.

Consequently, isolation becomes your companion. Invitations to communal festivities dwindle; mealtime welcomes cease. Your friends' shame transforms into resentment; they presume your wealth obscures any empathy for their plight.

Now, despite your best intentions, you find yourself not only the wealthiest person on earth, but the loneliest.

Revisiting our parable, envision yourself as the landlord. Similar to your previous plight, but now, your manager has been the one administering the loans on your behalf. Only, he has also mishandled funds. Upon discovery, you demand accountability. Terrified of poverty and labor, your manager devises a plan to garner favor from the villagers, perhaps even to retain his position.

The manager, knowing your heart better than any villager, conveys your supposed decisions to reduce their debts – decisions generous beyond the villagers' wildest hopes.

As you arrive to confront the situation, you find the villagers are whooping it up. They're singing and dancing wildly! When they see you coming, it's like you've just poured gasoline on their fire. They lift you high on their shoulders, singing praises for your unanticipated clemency. Obviously, your manager's shrewdness has rekindled your bonds with them and vanquished the villagers' debts and shame.

In the midst of all the acclaim, you spot your manager standing sheepishly at the edge of the village square. When you are finally lowered back down to the ground, you walk straight over. His eyes grow wide with trepidation, not knowing what to expect. "Well done, you sly little devil," you wink. "I expect you to show up for work first thing in the morning."

This parable challenges us to comprehend a truth about God: a lesson arduous to learn yet profoundly transformative. Like a landowner capable of forgiving overwhelming debts, God's love and willingness to absolve us from our sins surpasses our comprehension.

In this story, humanity is the indebted sharecropper, unable to fathom unconditional love while submerged in guilt. Yet, deep within, we long for communion with the Divine, which seems unattainable under the weight of our shortcomings. Discovering God's true magnanimity, our response is nothing short of ecstatic.

If God is the landowner and we are the sharecroppers, who then is the manager?

Perhaps he is Jesus – or indeed, anyone who follows Jesus's teachings. We embrace Christ because he unveils the depth of God's forgiveness, the immensity of divine love, and the extent of God's spiritual wealth and generosity.

Amidst life's uncertainties, if Jesus's life and teachings – and his prayer that God would forgive his own crucifiers – accurately represent the heart of God's own heart, then we can pour this forgiveness, like a high dose of chlorine, into the murky pool of our own hearts. We can accept God's forgiveness for ourselves, and we can let go of our grudges against others. Literally, this is what it means to become a New Creation in Christ.

If you have not personally experienced Jesus's 'shock treatment' of Grace and Forgiveness, why not start the New Year by becoming a New Creation? Open up. Allow your debts to be forgiven by a generous God who vastly prefers relationship over perfection. Then, become part of God's work in the world – including this church – by daring to extend this same love to others, forgiving their debts as you have been forgiven.