

SALVATION FOR SCOUNDRELS
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Luke 16:1-9

The central character in this parable is a scoundrel. He takes his master's money and squanders it. We know he's a scoundrel, but what is he doing in the Bible?

This man is a scoundrel. When he sees he is about to lose his job, he cooks the books to give himself every advantage. What is such a person doing in the gospel of Luke?

The man is a scoundrel. We'll admit we've always been fascinated by scoundrels, whether it's Billy the Kid in the Wild West or Marlon Brando portraying the ruthless Godfather. This man is a scoundrel, but what business does he have being in a parable of Jesus, of all things? We don't expect to find a character like this in the Bible, in the gospels, and especially as a model to be imitated in a parable of Jesus. What's going on here?

People have been troubled by this parable ever since it appeared in Luke's gospel, and we may not clear the air today, but let's see what's going on. It says that the manager was "squandering" the master's money. What exactly he was doing is not made clear, but it didn't make the master happy. "You can't be my manager anymore."

The manager knows that his days, even his hours, are numbered. What is he going to do to provide for his future? He hits on a plan. Before the word can get out that he has been fired, he calls in those who are in debt to the master. To one he says: "How much do you owe?" "A hundred jugs of oil." "Take your bill quickly and make it fifty." (He's got to do it quickly, before he finds out that the manager has been fired.) To a second: "How much do you owe?" "A hundred bushels of wheat." "Quick, make it eighty."

The manager's little scheme has the desired effect. People start hearing how generous this master is, and they start singing his praises. What a generous, merciful man this rich man is! So, when the rich man encounters the manager again, he commends him. We can imagine him saying something like: "Pretty good, manager. You've got everybody in town saying what a generous and merciful person I am. So I can't exactly turn around and be harsh to you. You've fixed it so I've got to be merciful to you."

We might wish that there were one more verse in this parable, so we could know if the rich man took the manager back or not. But Jesus leaves us hanging, as he often does, and lets us ponder it for ourselves.

I know—none of this might make any sense. I told you it was a hard parable, maybe the most difficult that Jesus ever told. But maybe the hardest thing about this parable is its location in Luke's gospel. It comes right after the parable of the prodigal son. This least liked parable comes after the one that for many is the most beloved.

You remember that lovely parable. The younger son asks for his inheritance from the father while the old man is still alive—what a way to treat your daddy. Then he goes off and he "squanders" it. There's that word again. The manager had squandered money. The prodigal son loses everything, and is stuck in a pigpen feeding pigs. And, as did the manager, the son has a little conversation with himself. He doesn't try to excuse his actions, or blame somebody else. Instead, he decides to go home. "I will say to my father: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I don't deserve to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

The son hopes that the father will be at least a little bit merciful to him. But the father shows mercy beyond anything he expected: "Bring a robe and put it on him, and a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet. Let's have a big party. This my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found."

No wonder we love that parable. We see the mercy of God so dramatically portrayed. But you know, we can say that the prodigal son was really something of a scoundrel himself—taking the father's money and squandering it like that. He gets an idea to solve his problem—like the manager. He depends on the mercy of his father, just as the manager depended on the mercy of the master.

OK, they are two totally different parables. But they are both about scoundrels, and they are both for scoundrels. Here is a gospel for scoundrels.

We think of the Bible as a nice book for nice people. But lots of the people in the Bible are scoundrels. Here is Abraham, passing his wife Sarah off as his sister because he's scared. Here is Jacob, the trickster, outmaneuvering his brother to get the father's blessing. Here is David, breaking every commandment in the book to have a little fling with Bathsheba. Here is Simon Peter, promising to be so brave, but then on Good Friday denying he ever knew Jesus, and using cuss words to reinforce his point. What a bunch!

Sometimes you hear someone say, "We need to return to the morality of the Bible." No we don't! Some of the stuff people do in the Bible would in our day get you thrown in jail or worse. There are scoundrels here.

Do you know any other scoundrels to whom this gospel might apply? What about, well, you and me? Somebody came up to preacher and author Will Campbell one time and challenged him: "You preachers are always making the Christian faith so complicated. I want you to tell me in twenty-five words or less what it's all about." Will Campbell took only eight words: "We're all scoundrels, but God loves us anyway."¹ (Actually Will used a less genteel word than "scoundrel," but you get the idea.) You might deny the designation of scoundrel, but didn't we confess it, or something close, just a few minutes ago? "We have sinned against others and before you, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." Sounds scoundrel-like to me.

In fact, when we pray the prayer of confession each week, and when we sing "Lord have mercy upon us," we are doing what both the prodigal son and the manager do: We don't make excuses, we don't pass blame to someone else, we don't bargain with God that we'll do better if God will just let us off the hook. We don't do anything like that. Instead, we confess our sin. We have sinned against others and before you.

I don't know any other time in our week that we do that. Most of the time, on most of our days, if we're found to be in the wrong, we try to cover it up ("You must mean somebody else"), or blame somebody ("The woman made me eat that apple"), or make excuses ("I was having a bad day"). Only here do we set all that aside and confess our sin. Only here do we totally and completely cast ourselves upon the mercy of God, just as did the prodigal son and the manager. Lord, we're scoundrels. We don't have a leg to stand on. Lord, have mercy upon us.

¹ I think this is told in Campbell's book *Brother to a Dragonfly*.

These parables, one beloved and the other strange, are the gospel for scoundrels. There's one other scoundrel to mention, and it is the one who tells the parable. It's Jesus. It sounds sacrilegious to say that about Jesus—he's no scoundrel. But the religious leaders would have seen him just that way. "He's doing it again, eating with those sinner. . . . He's healing on the Sabbath, breaking the rules." And finally they deal with him the way we always deal with the very worst of scoundrels—they hustled him out of the city like a common criminal and nailed him to a cross.

The book of Deuteronomy says that anyone who hangs on a tree—that is, the cross—is accursed.² That's what happens to Jesus. He is accursed. He takes our scoundrelness, and puts it on himself. He became a curse, for us. "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

You know, if you're feeling pretty good about yourself, pretty well-behaved, law-abiding, nice, then there may not be much here for you. You're too good to need the gospel. But in those times when you are all too aware of your failure, your shame, your silly words and stupid actions that injure and offend; that is to say, when you know you're a scoundrel, then even this strange parable is good news. If this master can go easy on this scoundrel manager, then how much more will a loving God extend mercy to us? Jesus takes your sin on himself. The Lord's mercy is great. There is no condemnation, literally none, for those who are in Christ Jesus.³ Thanks be to God. †

² Deuteronomy 27:26.

³ Romans 8:1. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II 2, p. 167.