

You've heard the expression *burn after reading*? It's one that's been around for a long time, its usage being traced back to the 1300's and applied in the same way to the same situations we use it for today—destroying a written document containing information you don't want anyone else to know. It may be about your own life, or it may be something destroyed by someone on behalf of another to keep that other's reputation intact, perhaps that of a powerful person, where if one frayed thread is pulled many more will follow until an entire dynasty unravels and is torn apart!

A couple of weeks ago we read a text that raised a cry among us asking: *did Jesus really say that!* We might ask the same thing here this morning, *did he really say that*, or maybe ask did Luke *accurately record what* Jesus said, which is a plausible question, because Luke is the only one of our Gospel writers who included this teaching in his story about Christ. Maybe we can lay it to a mistake Luke made when he wrote this story about Jesus' approval of the manager who juggled the books in order to save his own skin! How can this story of deception be the basis of one of the character points Jesus worked into his lesson plan to teach his disciples? Best for us to approach this text this morning with a *burn after reading* tactic and keep Jesus' reputation intact!

But we don't. Instead, we wrestle with what it says and try to *clean it up*. First we can note that the manager's boss, the rich man, made an accusation based solely on rumor. What is this *I hear about you*, he said, as he put the manager on the spot. Now that just does not seem fair, does it? Maybe it justifies a bit the less than

noble action the manager took in response. Tit for tat, two wrongs *might* make what went on here, right, even though we know better.

So we chip away at what the manager did and try to clean things up by saying that he reduced the amount each farmer owed by deducting what *he the manager* would have earned—the fee that was rightfully his for managing the rich man’s business. The manager wasn’t taking away anything due the rich man for use of the land. He was simply slicing off what he had loaded on to the rent to put in his own pocket; that was how he was paid. That seems a reasonable way to go.

But then there’s a bigger mess to clean up further on in the story, where the manager is *labeled as being dishonest* and is actually commended for being *shrewd!* And Jesus wades into this swamp we’re in with this text, with his own endorsement of what the rich man said, recommending that we follow the manager’s tactic of making friends for ourselves by *dishonest wealth*. Seems like we could be here all morning and afternoon parsing our way through this good news! Maybe we better go with *burn after reading* and get on with our lives after all!

But we won’t. We’ll take this text for what it is, God’s Living Word for our lives which are full of contradictions that we face every day. How well we manage to keep these lives of ours and live them out virtuously day-by-day is a matter of grace, the grace of God whose benefit of mercy touches all life.

By the grace of God, this manager took a bad situation and reversed it, made it better for the farmers who were in debt to the

landowner. Just as sharecropping in our day takes unfair advantage of farmers by charging exorbitant rent, rich landowners preyed upon those who worked their land, weighing them down with excessive charges that kept them indebted. This manager, who took the steps he did to save his own skin, helped the farmers out in the process.

He made “friends” the text says, by what he did. He and those beleaguered farmers were standing on equal ground, both scrambling to keep their heads above water, one no better than off than the other, one not lording it over the other, one not *indebted* to the other. The oppressive order of class and life that had existed between their status of manager and debtor was wiped away, reversed—*the lowly lifted as the proud and powerful were brought down*. [Luke 1:52] The manager was no longer in a *greater-than-thou* position with those two farmers. He stood on equal ground with them.

And Jesus approved, approved of the commendation the rich man gave the “dishonest” manager, that he had acted *shrewdly*! *For the children of this age* Jesus said, *are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light*. Shrewd has a bad ring to it as we listen to him, yet it is the exact same word he had used when he talked about the faithful and *prudent* manager who was still awake when the master of the house returned. It’s a recurring theme in Jesus’ teachings to his disciples—to be *prudent*, to be *shrewd*. It is not used with the meaning of shrewd as being *self-serving*, but as being *wise, informed*.

As Jesus ended this lesson, we're still muddling our way through with handling *dishonest wealth* in a meaningful way. Whether it's a small amount or large, his disciples are to be *faithful managers, faithful stewards* of whatever has been entrusted to them, and that is their desire to be his disciple in the first place. It is not an easy path they have chosen, one that is neatly defined and clearly marked and walled off from all the attractions and distractions of this world. This lesson again reminds us of the conflicts we will face as we seek to be loyal to Christ and follow in his way.

Throughout all of Luke, Jesus teaches about the power wealth has over all life, the all-pervasive *way of the world* that worships only its own reflection in life, and tends only to its own needs at the expense of others, and believes it is entitled to indulge its own way and will, careless as it makes its way along through life of any thought of any greater power that could exist. Here again, another lesson ends with the admonition that *you cannot serve God and wealth*.

By the grace of God, a *shrewd, dishonest* manager took a bad situation and reversed it, made life better for two oppressed farmers and it became better for himself too. How well we manage to keep these lives of ours and live them out virtuously day-by-day is a matter of grace, the grace of God whose benefit of mercy uses us to touch all life. Maybe the one cohesive lesson we can take away is to see everyone as an equal, to treat everyone justly and with fairness, simply to live as *friends in and with our world*, to understand we are all equally worthy and loved in the eyes of God. *By the grace of*

God, dear friends, it's up to us to bring all that to reality and into practice in our daily encounters and relations with others. How else but through our trust in God's mercy, will we find the courage and the way to do it? We best not *burn this text after reading*. We'll need to hear it again, when it cycles back through our readings!
Amen!

"burn after reading....!" Luke 16:1-13 091822 Mkh