

Dishonest or astute? It all depends upon one’s perspective. By means of a parable, Jesus reminded his disciples of their accountability to God. “Prepare a full account of your stewardship.” Many people recoil at the thought of being held accountable by anyone. If today’s parable caused you to scratch your head, I assure you, that you are not alone.

The incongruity of a story that praises a scoundrel has vexed biblical commentators for centuries. The last pagan Roman Emperor (+ 363 A.D.) –appropriately nicknamed Julian the Apostate–cited this very parable to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith.¹

The Church has had to answer the claim that evil is being rewarded. The setting for today’s parable is that of a large estate in which the steward is entrusted with managing the business affairs of that estate. He reduces the debt without authorization.² He forfeited all profit, both for himself and the owner, using the latitude given to himself in managing the estate.

The steward receives credit for having arranged such a good deal between the landowner and the renters. The renters would be appreciative and indebted to the steward; the owner ends up looking generous. The steward hopes to gain favor, for he knows he is about to be dismissed. Jesus is not praising the steward’s dishonesty, but rather his far-sighted guile and cleverness to obtain something far greater– his future.

While serving as a high school Chaplain, I noticed a senior at a sandwich shop near school. It was a closed campus, and sadly for him, he picked the same day that I happened to be there with another administrator. He saw me, instantly realizing that he was busted. He approached me somewhat sheepishly. But he threw me for a loop, inquiring if he could go to confession! Here? I smiled and replied: “Certainly.” Pointing

¹ Bailey, K. E. 1983. *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Quoting Martin Scharlemann, *Proclaiming the Parables*, p. 81, 1972 edition.

² If the renters thought that he was acting without the approval of the landowner, they would not have agreed; the risk would have been too great.

towards the administrator whom he did not see, I added. “Of course, the Admissions Director seated around the corner isn’t bound by the seal of the confessional. But nice try.” At least he understood quite well what I had taught about the seal of the confessional!

Of this passage, Saint Augustine offered several interpretations, noting: “It is not because that servant cheated but because he exercised foresight for the future.”³ On the phrase, “make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth,” called the *mammon of iniquity* in older versions, he said: “False riches are what iniquity calls riches, because the true riches are to be found with God.”⁴

Augustine also considered that the wealth was acquired unjustly. He said, “Don't you imitate your father by being a money lender at extortionate rates...If your father had learned how to rob, you must learn how to pay out.”⁵ So in rewriting the loans, he was correcting an earlier wrong. Yes, it is a confusing passage! The manager was clever and resourceful.

There are times when we need to employ these gifts to survive. Jesus is concerned here with something much more critical than a financial crisis. His concern is that we avert spiritual crisis through the exercise of faith and foresight.

Prudence can take many forms given a particular situation. As a cardinal virtue, it disposes our practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. St. Thomas Aquinas defined prudence as “right reason in action.”⁶

Everyone faces situations in life in which we are forced to make decisions that could go either way. Prudence helps us apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about both the good we desire to achieve and the evil we must avoid.

³ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 359A.10

⁴ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 359A.13

⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 359A.15

⁶ Summa Theologica, II-II, Q. 47, art. 2

Parents exhibit this virtue the most. They want to be actively involved in the faith life of their children, but as they grow older, they wonder to what degree they should be encouraging their children to make their own decisions. The answer is not always clear in each circumstance. Parents must balance the need to have their children interiorize their faith vs. commanding aspects of the practice of the faith under obedience.

I strongly suggest a daily prayer for prudence; ask God to help you discern the right course, that you may, in the words of Saint Paul, “lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity.”