

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm

Part I: The Hardest Parable

Niantic Community Church

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Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

What could Jesus be illustrating through the parable of a deceitful manager who defrauds his employer of substantial loan income, only to be commended instead of incarcerated? This narrative has puzzled scholars and theologians for centuries, earning the moniker "the hardest parable" due to the debate surrounding its true message.

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 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.

Recently, with Speaker Mike Johnson's declaration of a biblical basis for his political agenda, one wonders when he will propose an interest ban on domestic loans or designate a Jubilee Year in the U.S. to cancel all debts. Or, will his "biblical mandates" be 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: the "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 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 amplified God's commands to an extreme degree, a practice known as 'building a fence around the law.' By adhering to these more stringent rules, one ostensibly avoided breaking the actual commandments through carelessness. Thus, for instance, keeping kosher law entails not mixing meat and dairy—not because it's divinely forbidden, but to avoid the potential transgression of a more specific prohibition never to boil a kid in its mother's milk.

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, demands that 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.

If you find this 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 moderately liberal church like ours, it's tempting to critique more conservative denominations for their Pharisaic tendencies – imposing needless rules far removed from the essence of divine favor. Is God truly opposed to dancing, women in leadership, or same-sex relationships among those naturally inclined?

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 intellectually and emotionally satisfying, this interpretation 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. Yet, in our reading of the parable thus far, the manager is lauded for absolving fictitious debts while maintaining the genuine ones.

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 in 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.

So 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. In fact, they seem to be in the largest celebration since God invented sex. When they see you coming, it's like you've just poured gasoline on their fire. They elevate you 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 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 proclaim, "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 death and resurrection, hold truth, then we can proclaim one thing to each and every one of God's children with confidence: "Friend, in the name of Jesus Christ, any debt you owe to God has been absolved! Focus now on amending relationships with others, for you are eternally embraced by your Creator, who is forever by your side."