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Luke 12:41-48

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THE FAITHFUL STEWARD

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

As the church in Jerusalem grew, it ran into some logistical issues: a complaint was made that some of the widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution (Acts 6:1). The twelve apostles took this so seriously that they convened the whole church. They invited the believers to pick seven of their best men: “men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” The apostles laid their hands on these men, commissioning them to the humble work of serving (*diakoneō*) tables. These were the first deacons. The word deacon (*diakonos*) means one who serves. The ministry of the deacons freed the apostles to focus on their own ministry: prayer and the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word. The apostles and the deacons formed the leadership of the church, but their ministry lay in service.

Sadly, church history is full of people who have abused church office for their own personal ends, leaving countless casualties in their wake. Eugene Peterson warns about the dangers of church leadership:

On the assumption of leadership—even modest forays into leadership—possibilities for sin that were previously inaccessible immediately present themselves. And these new possibilities are exceedingly difficult to recognize as sins, for each comes in the form of a virtue...

[I]t is in our virtuous behavior that we are liable to the gravest sins. It is while we are being good that we have the chance of being really bad. It is in this context of being responsible, being obedient, that we most easily substitute our will for God's will, because it is so easy to suppose that they are identical. It is in the course of being a good pastor that we have the most chance of developing pastoral *hubris*—pride, arrogance, and insensitivity to what Jesus called “the least of these my brethren.”¹

Last month *Time* magazine named Pope Francis its Person of the Year for 2013. He has been pope for less than a year, but in this short time he has made a major impact on the world. He has taken his papal name from Francis of Assisi, the first pope to do so. Rejecting the pomp and privilege that has accrued to the papal office, he lives simply and in the humble service of others. He is showing that even the highest church office should be used for service. The world has been quick to recognize and applaud the difference.

In our journey through Luke's gospel Jesus has just told the disciples a parable that is usually called the Parable of the Watchful Servants (12:36-38). But at the heart of this parable we find not the actions of the servants but the actions of the master. What a master he is! This is a master who turns social convention upside down by serving his servants. So we should perhaps better call this the Parable of the Serving Master.

Jesus continues his instruction to his disciples with another parable about a master and his servants:

Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?” And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom

his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” (Luke 12:41-48 ESV)

The previous parable about the serving master has left Peter a little confused. He asks Jesus a question, and we can assume that, as usual, he is speaking for all the disciples. “Is it for *us* that you are telling this parable or for *all*?” What an interesting question? What has prompted Peter to ask this? What troubles him? Peter has divided the world into *us* and *them*.

Jesus is surrounded by three groups of people. I find it helpful to think of them as three concentric rings around Jesus. Closest are his disciples; Jesus is speaking directly to them for most of the current sermon (12:1-13:9). They are struggling to make sense of what he is teaching them, to make sense of what it means to follow him in discipleship in God's kingdom. Next is the curious crowd, trampling one another in their desire to get close to Jesus. On the periphery are the hostile scribes and Pharisees who are hoping to catch Jesus in something he might say.

In Peter's world *we* are the twelve disciples, the inner circle, and *they* are outer circles: the crowd and the Pharisees. Is he asking about who gets to recline at the master's table? Does he want *them* to be included or excluded? If Jesus sat *them* down at his table would Peter be sad or happy? Is he afraid that the disciples will lose their privileged position as the inner circle if *they* are included? It was not that long ago that the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them (9:46) and they will argue about this again at the Last Supper (22:24). They still view closeness to Jesus as being about honor, privilege, greatness and exclusivity. They still don't understand how God's kingdom works. They risk thinking like the outermost circle, the Pharisees.

Jesus doesn't answer Peter's question directly, but responds with another question: “Who then...?” He tells another parable, but this parable doesn't answer Peter's question directly. But we need to read the parable in light of Peter's question, for the parable shows how Jesus understands the underlying issue behind Peter's question.

This parable continues the metaphor of the previous parable, that of a master, his house and his servants. The master appoints one of his slaves to be steward or manager over his household, that is, to be over all the other slaves. The master gives only one responsibility: to

give the other slaves their allotted food at the right time. The steward is charged with caring for those under him. "Blessed is that servant whom his master finds so doing when he comes." Praiseworthy is the steward who keeps nourishing and nurturing those entrusted to his care. In the previous parable Jesus had pronounced a similar blessing on the slaves whom the master finds watchful when he comes. The master rewarded those slaves by seating them at his table and serving them. The master rewards this steward by promoting him to be over all his possessions. In each parable Jesus prefaces the reward with the phrase, "Truly, I say to you," emphasizing the reward. The steward who cares for the other slaves is the faithful and wise steward. He follows the pattern of the master who serves his servants.

But not all stewards are faithful and wise. Not all stewards accept that their office is for the benefit of others. Some misconstrue it to be for the benefit of self. Such a steward views the continued absence of the master as an opportunity to indulge his own selfish interests. He misuses his authority to abuse the staff by beating them. He diverts the resources that he is to use for the benefit of others to satisfy his own needs, eating, drinking and getting drunk. This steward is so busy enjoying himself and abusing others that he fails to be alert to the return of his master. The consequences of his behavior are that he is removed from the ranks of the faithful and placed among the unfaithful.

Jesus has made a distinction between the faithful and unfaithful stewards. He makes a further distinction among the unfaithful stewards between those who know and those who don't know the master's will. Both did things that deserve a beating. The first did so despite knowing his master's will, but the second acted out of ignorance.

Who are the servants who know their master's will yet refuse to be prepared or to act according to his will? It seems likely that these are the scribes and Pharisees. They claimed to know God's will. They were the religious leaders of the Jews. They knew the religious texts. They were very careful about acting rightly. In addition to the commandments contained in the written law, the Torah, which they numbered at 613, they had a much larger set of additional commandments, the oral law, which the gospels call the traditions of the elders. This oral law formed *halakah*, the rules governing conduct in every aspect of life. The Pharisees thought that by keeping *halakah* they were preparing the people and the land for God to come. But in the previous chapter Jesus has challenged the Pharisees over these rules of *halakah* (11:39-52). This is what has made them intent on trying to catch Jesus out. The Pharisees were supposed to be leading the people, but they did not care for the people. At the beginning of the current sermon, Jesus warned about them: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (12:1).

Who are the servants who do not know? Presumably they are the crowd. They have heard the teaching of Jesus but have been unable to understand because much of his teaching has been given in parables, "so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'" (8:10).

These parables in Luke 12:35-48 are usually interpreted as being about the return of Jesus and the need to be ready for that. Matthew incorporates these parables into the Olivet Discourse, the block of teaching that Jesus gives his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24-25), which is about coming times. But Luke places these parables in a different context. Though the master's coming is often mentioned these parables are not really about the return of Jesus. They

are about life in God's kingdom, about service in the Lord's household. They continue themes from earlier in the chapter.

This second parable is about the steward who is both faithful and wise. Earlier in the chapter Jesus has warned the disciples about unwise or foolish behavior. He has rebuked the Pharisees, "You fools!" (11:40). They have been doing the wrong things. They are preoccupied with the cleanliness of cups and dishes, but inside they are filthy: they are full of greed and wickedness. He has rebuked the rich man of the parable who built new barns for his bumper crop, "Fool!" (12:20). It is foolish or unwise to lay up treasure for oneself and not be rich toward God.

In the parable the master promotes his faithful servant to be over all his possessions. In this master's household his possessions are not for hoarding but for giving away. Unlike the rich fool who tried to hoard his possessions, the faithful steward is to give away his master's riches. Earlier in the sermon Jesus warned, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (12:15). Instead, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy" (12:33). It is because faithful stewards have access to the riches of God, who knows what we need, that we can heed Jesus' call to not be anxious about our life (12:22).

Jesus has not answered Peter's question. Or perhaps he has. Perhaps he has seen into Peter's heart and seen the stumbling block behind the question. Peter has divided the world into *us* and *them*, and wants to maintain the distinction. The disciples are prone to viewing their status as close to Jesus as opportunity for self-advancement, arguing over who is the greatest. But the two parables destroy the distinction between *us* and *them*. The master serves his servants. The steward feeds those under his care and is then entrusted with stewarding all the master's possessions. Jesus shows that any position within God's kingdom is to be used in service of others. *We* are for the benefit of *them*. We have available for dispensing the full riches of God's possessions.

At the end of the parable Jesus adds a moral, a proverbial saying, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" (12:48). What is given is a stewardship, an appointment to give away the master's resources for the good of others. What is required is wise faithfulness, where wisdom is the opposite of the folly rebuked earlier in the chapter, folly that hoards possessions for one's own purposes.

Paul saw himself as a steward entrusted with a stewardship, to give away what God had given him. He regarded himself and his fellow workers "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," and "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy [faithful]" (1 Cor 4:1-2). He told the Corinthians, "I am entrusted with a stewardship" (1 Cor 9:17), which was to preach the gospel free of charge. He told the Ephesians about "the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you" (Eph 3:2). He told the Colossians, "I became a minister (*diakonos*) according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known" (Col 1:25). Paul understood that appointment as a steward was a call to give in service of others; what he had to give was what God had given him.

Other leaders are stewards: an overseer (*episkopos*) is "God's steward" (Tit 1:7). Indeed, we are all stewards:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace. (1 Pet 4:10)

Fourteen years ago we established the office of deacon. After we did so we wondered why it had taken so long to realize we should do this. We have been blessed by godly men and women who have given of themselves, their time, abilities and resources in the service of others. They have drawn on the help of many of you who make your services available. They draw on the need fund to which many of you contribute. Office in the church is not something to be sought for one's own purposes. Office is about stewardship, and stewardship is about serving others. Today we are going to take some time to honor our deacons and give thanks to God for the ministry of these servants among us.

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10-11)

1. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 14, 31.

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