

Sermon for Pentecost XV Year C 2025
Accounting and Grace

The parable at the heart of today's gospel is, well, a head-scratcher and of (but certainly not the only) puzzling of Jesus' parables in the New Testament.

A business manager—which translates from the original Greek of *oikonomos* of steward or perhaps better, manager of the house finances, engages in questionable conduct that damages his “boss” or “master” financially and yet, nevertheless, garners praise.

Some of us may say, well, okay.

But maybe most of us may say to ourselves, really??

Immediately following the 15th chapter of Luke which is all about the disturbing scandal of God's grace as outlined in three “lost and found” parables, now Luke presents two challenging parables of Jesus dealing with financial relationships—the first starring today's “dishonest” steward and the other depicting the gap between the fortunes of the wealthy and the poor (but that is a sermon for next week).

Is Luke, in his wise and subtle way continuing the theme of lost and found by now focusing on how we relate to money and wealth?

That said, this parable doesn't seem to make sense.

A dishonest employee is commended by his boss?

That's not how we want the world to be.

That's certainly not how I taught my daughter nor would I teach my granddaughter to be.

That's not what we expect Jesus to say or encourage.

So where do we begin?

Do we begin with something, that, while not necessarily easier, is a bit more understandable and familiar?

“Give me an accounting of your management,”
the master says to his manager.
We’ve all heard these words at time or in one form or another before.
It may not have been those exact words
yet at some time in our life—perhaps many times—
an accounting has been demanded—either from others or ourselves.

Perhaps it has come in form of the IRS who asks us to bring our papers
and account for the numbers of our tax return.
Maybe we were called into the principal’s office
for some reason or another.
Or you may have sat down with a therapist or spiritual director,
and they say, “So tell me about your life. What’s going on?”
The boss says she wants to see you in her office.
Or you come home and your spouse speaks the dreaded words,
“We need to talk.”
Perhaps its each Sunday when we begin the worship service with the
invitation to confess our sins against Go9d and our neighbor.

In all those situations,
an accounting of our management is being demanded.
It’s not easy.
It’s not comfortable.
Giving an accounting can be a very uncomfortable and even fearful
experience.
We review our words and actions wondering, “What have I done?
What have I left undone? What will happen to me? What will I do?”

Now no one truly likes to have to give an accounting.
We are all fairly private about our books.
Not only do we not want others to see the balance, sometimes we
ourselves do not want to see the balance!
We do not want to face and deal with that reality.
But that is what this accounting asks of us.

You see the accounting demanded of this manager,
just like the ones demanded of us,
is really an accounting of his life.

It asks us to open the books of our life and examine and audit what we
are doing with our life and who we are serving.

It raises important questions.

What are we doing with the resources, assets and gifts entrusted to us?
(And this is a question that is asked not just of us individually but also
asked of us as a congregation, a community, a state and a country,
as a citizen of the earth.)

Think about all we have been given.

Time. Talent. Treasure.

Not to mention ideas, dreams, hopes, passions and concerns.

People and relationships.

Love and compassion, forgiveness and mercy.

Talents and abilities.

Questions and curiosities.

What if we were to give an accounting of our management of these?

What would our books look like?

What would they reveal about us?

Where, how, in what ways, or on whom are we spending and investing
all these assets, all these blessings, all these gifts?

Or do we see these as something we alone have somehow generated and
earned?

These aren't just questions to be answered individually.

There is always a communal or corporate accounting of our management
to be given.

What would it look like for our nation to account for its management?

What would the books and balances say about our national life together?

What about globally and internationally?

What do the world's books say about humanity?

At every level people are trying to serve two masters.
And, my beloved sisters and brothers, this just does not work.
Some decry globalism . . . and yet, how is any nation to thrive without navigating and embracing interdependence?
God has ordained that “humanity cannot live alone.”
We are gifted to and for each other.
We cannot continue as St. Paul writes to “consume one another” by heedless competition and consumption.
Something has to change.

Today’s gospel calls us to account for our management of all that we are and all that we have.
The demand for an accounting often sounds like someone is in trouble.
That is how today’s parable begins after all.
The manager has been charged with squandering his master’s property.
He is going to be fired; he will lose his job, income, reputation and status. A part of him is dying.
At some level he will lose his life as he now knows it.

Whether we’ve lived it, heard it from a friend or colleague or read it on the news, it is a familiar story.
Someone has been a poor or even bad steward.
They have been caught.
Now they are going to get what they deserve.
That’s how the world works.
That’s what we expect.

And yet . . . that’s not how the kingdom of God works.
And when has any of the parables Jesus tells give us what we expect?
The kingdom of God and the parables of Jesus rarely give what we expect or . . . dare I say what we deserve.
So we should not be too quick to come to a final or definitive interpretation of this parable . . . or any parable for that matter.
We cannot with ease or confidence declare who, if any one in particular, each character represents—God, Jesus, or even us.

The parable offers ambiguity and tension.
Not a neat resolution.
And, when you come to think of it, that feels a lot like real life.

Perhaps this story in general and the manager in particular
is simply a portrait of that ambiguity and tension.
Perhaps it is a picture that somehow looks very familiar to most of us,
a picture of the tension and ambiguity
in our own lives, struggles and decisions.
There is even some ambiguity—a kind of “lostness” in labeling this man
as the dishonest manger.
What does that mean, “dishonest manager?”

Maybe the label of dishonest isn’t what we think it is.
Maybe it is less a declaration about the manager and more a description
of his relationship to his master.
After all, we have no details of what this man did or did not do to be
charged with squandering and to be fired.
Also, while the word that is translated as “dishonest” can refer to a
particular action or wrongdoing,
it can also mean a quality of unrighteousness—
in the sense that the relationship between the manager and the master
is broken, impaired, out of sync.
Perhaps the manager has chosen
self-interest, self-loyalty, and self-serving over interest in, loyalty to, and
service to his master.
Now, I think we can all agree that that can happen
quickly and easily to any of us.
This manager is the face and image of Jesus’ words,
“You cannot serve two masters.”

What if in demanding an accounting of this manager, the master brought
about a starting point for a new life, new relationships, a new home?
Grace was hiding in the demand for an accounting, waiting to be
discovered and claimed.

The accounting demanded of this manager was both an ending but also a new beginning, a death and a resurrection.

New life it seems would be seen only in looking forward.

New life would be found only by being and doing differently.

Just as the manager claimed for himself the grace hidden in his master's demand for an accounting . . . why not you and me?

Here's a kind of crazy idea.

What if the accounting asked of us is never complete,
the books are never closed and the bottom line is never tallied
until there is new life, until there is a commendation?

What if the accounting is not about finding wrongdoing but new life?

What if it's about grace rather than punishment?

That certainly changes out usual understanding of an accounting
but . . . isn't that what parables are supposed to do?

They change the way we see and understand.

If a parable makes sense, perhaps

and most probably we've missed the point!

The accounting of our management

isn't about numbers, wrongdoing, or punishment

but about helping us to see and orient our lives in a new direction.

It opens us to new possibilities; it points us to the reign of God.

Give me an accounting of your management.

What are you doing with you life?

Who are you serving . . . and who are you not serving?

Remember, you cannot serve two masters.

You cannot serve God and wealth.

Amen.