

TCC Sunday 1st December 2013 – Luke 16v1-15 – The Rascal

Title: “The Rascal”

Purpose:

To address the issue of proper stewardship and a proper spiritual future focus.

Introduction

The “Flaming Ron”

I want to start this morning by introducing you to the “**Flaming Ron**”.

It is, unofficially, the hottest pie in the world – in fact it is SO HOT – that the owner of the pie shop – (pieman Ron Bruns) – makes everyone who eats the pie sign **a full disclaimer document**.

The Flaming Ron used to be packed full of Naga Jolokia (or "viper" chillies) until they were superseded by the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T pepper.

Apparently – one single seed from a Trinidad Scorpion pepper, if you put it in perspective, can produce pain for a full 30 minutes and is 300 times hotter than a Jalapeno.

It is probably the only pie in the world where the baker has to wear protective gloves, eyewear and a chemical mask to ward off fumes during the cooking process.

Rather you than me!

Now I don't know about you – but I seriously don't think that I would entertain having a go at a pie for which you had first to sign **a full blown disclaimer document**.

Our passage

The truth is that the one thing that virtually all commentaries, that I have read over this past week on these verses in front of us this morning, have in common is that they all begin with a disclaimer.

Many people have suggested that this is the most difficult of all the parables in the gospels and way back in church history Julian the Apostate – used this parable in order to try and add weight to the idea that Christianity was very inferior.

An orderly account

I think we do well to remember how Luke himself started his gospel:

1v3-4 “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed

good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

What are the issues?

Q. So what are some of the issues here?

Let me try to outline them and then as we ourselves go through hopefully the problems will have some answers put alongside them:

- Well I guess the major one concerns the fact, that on the surface, Jesus here seems to tell a story where dishonesty, being crooked, appears to gain some sort of respectability or seal of approval.

Well as one writer put it: “there is a world of difference between: ‘I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly’ and ‘I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly’.

We always need to be careful in reading a parable that we pay good attention to detail so that we don’t miss something that is really quite crucial in a proper understanding of the parable.

Yet having done this it is all too easy to start to get bogged down in all the details that we have carefully collected in our basket and then FAIL TO SEE THE WOOD FOR THE TREES!!

When this happens we lose sight of the main focus of the parable and get side-tracked into some aspect of the parable that is not really ever meant to be in focus – something that is plainly not the point of the parable at all.

And this is particularly true here regarding the crooked operation of the steward – yes, it is a fact and this explains why he cannot continue in his present responsible position – but having established that fact, we now move on and see that this parable is all about how this man, this very typical worldly man responds to the SUDDEN AND CLEAR RECOGNITION THAT HE HAS A CRISIS IN HIS LIFE – and the reality is that this CRISIS (as I’m going to call it) is one that we also (as people of the light – or as other-worldly people) also have.

- Also people struggle to reconstruct the cultural background of what is going on in the parable.

Is the rich man essentially a money lender who is following some well understood practices of dodging the laws of Moses that prohibited charging interest to your fellow Jews.

The normal way to get around this was either to confine this law to those who were “poor Jews” and to then lend money but then liquidate the cash debt whilst reinstating it in the form of agricultural produce.

Perhaps the rich man is simply the owner of a large estate and he is renting out sections of the land to rental farmers who are to pay him back by way of either a fixed amount of produce or perhaps a percentage of the harvest.

- Another problem, that people have difficulty in agreeing about is whether or not our rich man is himself an honest man or whether he is basically a “partner-in-crime” and hence it is not so surprising that he could commend the dishonest manager so easily.

So as you can see, there are quite a few sides to the parable that have made it more difficult than most – but that does not at all mean that we cannot make reasonably good sense of it. It simply does mean that we have to take extra care and pay, perhaps, extra attention to the details.

Our structure

In terms of approaching these 15 verses I want to split it up in the most obvious way and take it under three headings:

#1 – THE PARABLE – Verses 1 thru to 8a and then

#2 – THE PARALLEL – Verses 8b thru to 15

#3 – THE POINT – The conclusion

Just so your expectations are right – I’m going to spend relatively a lot of time in point 1 (looking at the parable), a lot less in point 2 and then the last point will be simply summarising things and hopefully bringing things through to a clear conclusion.

OK – so #1

1. THE PARABLE (Verses 1-8a)

The original audience

Now, as always, we notice the original audience to whom this parable appears to be directed and the opening verse informs us that “Jesus told his disciples...” – so this is very definitely a passage in the form of a story, a parable, that is going to have some very strong cross-over with us.

We certainly cannot assume or take any refuge in the fact that this story has a crook at its centre to somehow distance ourselves from the scene that it begins to paint.

The Pharisees too

It is also worth observing – at the other end of this section that the Pharisees are also still listening in:

Verse 14 “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus...”

So it is helpful to recognise their presence as Jesus tells this story – Q. Why is this perhaps helpful?

- FIRSTLY because this means that Jesus may have inserted certain things that are particularly aimed at the Pharisees and those who have that strong tendency to be self-righteous.
- BUT NOT ONLY THAT – the fact that the Pharisees are still around helps us to NOT LOSE SIGHT OF the episode that came immediately before:

See how they are “**sneering at Jesus**” in **Verse 14** and in the **previous chapter and Verse 2** they were “**muttering**” about the fact that Jesus seems to keep company with the “less-than-respectable” end of society (tax-collectors and sinners).

It is very common that the gospel writers would keep together sections of teaching that had some sort of natural cross-over or affinity.

So this simply tells us to keep one eye upon the previous parable to see whether, in some way or another, it informs or shines light on the present parable.

Just to show that this is *NOT* all pretty fanciful and irrelevant (“So why don’t we just get on with the parable in hand!!”). Recall the we often call the previous parable “the parable of the prodigal son” – why? Well because he was very prodigal, he was very wasteful and reckless with his Father’s property.

Straightaway now in **Verse 1** of our present parable we read: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of **wasting (cf Luke 15v13 ‘squandered’ Gk diaskorpizo) his possessions.**”

So immediately we have a parable about **another man who is also PRODIGAL.**

Do you remember last time we talked about **Shrek** and **layers** – the fact that sometimes passages have layers that we need to slowly peel them off one by one and you find that what you first thought might not actually be the whole story.

Do you remember that we later on we asked:

Q. So who, actually, was the most PRODIGAL PERSON?

And it became quite evident that the Father was a very good contender for title of “**most prodigal**” – he does all sorts of reckless things by way of generosity and showering redeeming love in the direction of his wayward and previously lost son.

So we are learning to be more flexible and circumspect in our thinking. Perhaps our rich man here is not necessarily going to turn out as we begin looking at him – first impressions can be deceiving and we should therefore avoid being overly “rapid” in making our judgements.

A crisis

Now I think the first thing that greets us in this parable is that our PRODIGAL MANAGER has suddenly woken up one day to a CRISIS.

One day he was happily wheeling and dealing, in some way playing fast and loose with his master's possessions. The very next day EVERYTHING has changed – he gets a message that the master wants to see him:

Verse 2 “So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’”

*** There really is nothing like a **CRISIS** to make anyone stop and re-evaluate things.***

This is a good prayer

This is really quite a good prayer. We should pray that we might ourselves be jolted into seeing certain really crucial things. And here I think that Jesus is using this sudden and shocking news, that the crooked manager gets, to perhaps send a bit of a sober shock across to us too.

It makes us ask the question: Q. How well are we, how well am I managing the things of God that are entrusted into my care?

Not redundancy

Now this is not a situation of redundancy – the dishonest manager (and other bible versions may well have the word steward) he is not going to walk away from this job with a lump sum and a decent job reference!! This truly is a very shocking CRISIS and he mind is rapidly thrust into a very focussed mode.

A problem presented

His master presents him a humongous problem on a plate: “Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer” in modern day parlance – the master says to him:

“You know what – you’re fired!! Get all the paperwork together, clear your desk and don’t come back!!”

A clear pattern is visible

Now at this point, I could simply keep stepping through the parable verse by verse, which I don’t want to do – now this doesn’t of course mean that I am going to skip over great chunks of it – rather what I want to do is to shed some light on the framework upon which this parable is built around.

It is rather like a modern day building structure where, hidden under the brickwork, is a complete structure of supporting steel girders.

I don’t know if you remember that for the parable of the prodigal son we said that it followed an ABCDCBA structure upon which the main topics were all held in place and also by means of which the

topics were reinforced.

So it went:

And so in our parable here we see that the opening sequence goes:

Sheep Lost – Sheep Found – Man Rejoicing – Man (+ Sheep) back at Home

Then there is a closing sequence which reverses back the sequence:

Being at home – Man rejoices with his neighbours because – Sheep is Found though previously – Sheep was Lost

So in KEYWORD form that is: **LOST > FOUND>JOY>HOME>JOY>FOUND>LOST hence we get a kind of STEREO EFFECT**

Here too we have a “STEEL FRAMEWORK” beneath the brickwork of our present parable which goes:

RICH MAN & CONDEMNED MANAGER

> PROBLEM STATED >PROBLEM RESTATED

>IDEA

>SOLUTION STATED>SOLUTION RESTATED

>RICH MAN & COMMENDED MANAGER

Let me rehearse that

Let me just rehearse that so you can see it clearly – it’s pretty obvious when you work it through:

RICH MAN & CONDEMNED MANAGER (that is the start of the story verses 1&2)

> PROBLEM STATED (v2 “you cannot be manager any longer”)

>PROBLEM RESTATED (v3 “My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to do digging and I simply can’t bring myself to do begging!”)

>AN IDEA (v4 “I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.”)

(2nd aorist active indicative tense of the verb “to know”) Now let me just make a comment about how Verse 4 starts “I know” – Reading it in the original Greek it does carry with it somewhat more force than it does in straight English. Let me read a paragraph from AT Robertson, the NT Greek Scholar:

Egnon - Second aorist active indicative of *ginōskō*. A difficult tense to reproduce in English. “I knew”, “I know”, “I have known”, all miss it a bit. It is - a burst of daylight to the puzzled, darkened man: **“I’ve got it”, “I see into it now”, “a sudden solution”!**

So the presence of this sudden crisis has brought this PRODIGAL around AND NOT ONLY THAT brought him to a sudden REALISATION

to a sudden REVELATION

So we come to the solution part now the

>SOLUTION STATED (v5-6 *READ*)

>SOLUTION RESTATED (v7 *READ*)

So he quickly puts in place a rapid discount scheme and feathers his own nest for the FUTURE. And finally we are back to the

>RICH MAN & now a COMMENDED MANAGER (and *not* a CONDEMNED MANAGER) the end of the story.

A big question

OK – so hopefully, now you have been able to see the steel work which I’ll squeeze down even more tightly and restate it one more time – so we really get it:

#1 - A SUPRISINGLY BAD INTERVIEW (Master & Manager)

#2 - ATERRIBLE PROBLEM

#3 – AN INSPIRED IDEA (which you might call a “Remarkable Revelation”)

#4 – A TERRIFIC SOLUTION

#5 - A SUPRISINGLY GOOD INTERVIEW (Master & Manager)

Now these sorts of structures are very common in ancient writing and they crop up hundreds of times in the bible. And one of the features of these structures is that they tend to place emphasis on what is at the centre – rather like what we might call “the eye of the storm” or the “epicentre of an earthquake” – this is where the eye is drawn.

So we ask how exactly does this idea work, in what way was this idea “inspired” (OR was it just common sense – is that what this man was being commended for?).

Do a MONK act again

Ok let’s try and do our OCD detective MONK act again – try and enter into the scene – IMAGINE that you were there when a servant when over to the estate manager’s office and knocked on his door and said

“The boss wants to see you – I don’t think he’s very happy – HE KNOWS!!!”

Q. What do you think the dishonest manager, this crooked PRODIGAL steward, was expecting?

Clearly he knew the game was up – as **Numbers 32v23 says “Be sure your sins will find you out.”** – and so he was thinking I AM IN SOOO MUCH TROUBLE – Q. How am I going to even start to pay back what I have spent? Q. I can never get that money back and it been years I’ve been siphoning off a bit on the side – a bit here a bit there?

Q. So what then does he get?

- Q. Does he lose his job – does he get the sack? YES – plain and simple – he has had a responsible job – he has failed in that trust and so there is an accounting – HE MUST GO
- Q. Does he get a full dose of the master’s fury? Q. Is there an angry tirade from the master whose money he has squandered away? NO – just a plain statement of his wrongdoing and that he must go
- Q. Must he leave the premises immediately and not even return to clear his desk? NO – notice the future tense used in verses 3 & 4:

“My master **is taking away** my job...”

“I know what I’ll do so that, **when** I lose my job...”

- Beyond losing his job – Q. Is there any punishment for his wrongdoing? Q. Does he get jailed, for example? NO

So imagine now that you are walking away from the master’s office with the dishonest manager and that you can enter into his thoughts - Q. what sort of things might he be saying to himself under his breath?:

- I suppose it was inevitable that one day I would get caught
- But actually my master really surprised me -He knows I’ve been squandering his possessions

and he didn’t beat me, in fact, he didn’t even raise his voice and there was no mention of jail and even now I can go back to my desk with some time to sort out the loose ends – really it’s quite UNBELIEVABLE - AMAZING!!!

- Well I knew he was a generous man – but he seems to be a lot more than that – I can see that he is **not simply generous he is also deeply merciful as well**

The genius of the plan

Let’s look for a moment at the genius of the plan for a moment.

And to do this I want to read a couple of paragraphs from **Craig Keener – in the IVP Bible Background Commentary** – which expresses what’s going on here quite concisely:

These tenants may owe the landowner fixed amounts of their crops. They were not required to pay the sum until harvest.

The measure of olive oil (100 baths, about 850 gallons) represented the yield of nearly 150 trees and was worth about 1,000 denarii, no small sum. The measure of wheat (100 cors, about 1,000 bushels) represented the yield of about 100 acres and was worth about 2,500 denarii. The percentages of debt forgiven differ (so in one case it was half the debt, in the other it was a fifth), but roughly the same amount of money is forgiven in each of the sample transactions (about 500 denarii) (so given a Roman denarius was one days wage this means that each debtor might be willing to put the man up for perhaps a year and still be quids in at the end). These renters are all relatively well-to-do in their own right, and thus might make use of a manager themselves in the future.

In hard times, masters would sometimes forgive part of the debt, writing it off as a loss, in return for being considered benevolent.

Verse 8 All these changes of paperwork required only small marks made by the clients themselves; and if the projected income thereby appears less, it will be harder to recognize that the master's profits affected by the manager's embezzlements are really diminished.

*More important, the manager has gained public favour for himself and for the master as a generous benefactor; if the master punishes the manager now, it would appear to the public that he were doing so because of the manager's benevolent act. The criminal manager could be jailed, but **he wisely stakes everything on his master's honour as a generous man.***

Note that final statement: **he wisely stakes everything on his master's honour as a generous man.**

2 Certain things

Let me try and nail this down by way of "2 certain things" which are these:

- #1 CERTAIN THING – there is a JUDGEMENT TO COME
- #2 CERTAIN THING – there is MERCY TO BE HAD

A crisis – being called to the manager's office – jolted the manager into realising that there was such a thing as a DAY OF RECKONING.

That day had arrived, unannounced and largely unexpected.

HOWEVER – the redeeming facet here is that this DAY OF RECKONING spawned another "Day of Reckoning" whereby the man began to RECKON on something NEW – to RECKON on the MERCY OF THE MASTER.

Let me just finally point out to other things before we come to the concluding part.

2 Certain focuses

What I will call "2 certain focuses" – and this is where he begins with:

- a very clear PRESENT FOCUS – all his thoughts, prior to this fateful day, have been fixed and focused on everything to do with TODAY and what PROFIT can be had RIGHT NOW
- however he goes on to NOW
- a very clear FUTURE FOCUS – all his thoughts are now finely focused on what will help and furnish TOMORROW

Q. It leaves us with the question – where are all my thoughts focused?

Let's go on, and this next section will be fairly brief, from the PARABLE to the PARALLEL (Verses 8b-15):

2. THE PARALLEL

(Verses 8b-15)

It is important for us in our understanding of the parable that we are able to see clearly which parts and aspects of the parable are being paralleled and which are not.

It stands to reason that Jesus will not be telling a story about a dishonest manager and make a direct parallel to us and say – therefore, you too, become dishonest like this man because if you do you too will get the same commendation that he did!!

Let me note just 3 points that have direct parallels for us:

1. **#1 His shrewdness** – it seems that the dishonest manager was quick witted and made much of the brief opportunity and the resources that were temporarily before him.

Jesus suggests that children of the light would do well to learn a lesson from that and themselves become more thinking, more calculating and less passive about using what God has put in their hands or within their reach.

2. **#2 His wealth** – Verse 9 tells us that we too are to make use of worldly wealth to similarly make friends – eternal friends, friends in heaven.

We should not be of the mindset that suggests that worldly assets and resources (our time, our money, our contacts, our talents) are all earth-bound and therefore are of little consequence in the spiritual realm.

To the contrary Jesus says we too can deploy what is in our hands today for clear benefit tomorrow (i.e. in eternity).

3. **#3 His untrustworthiness** – Verse 11 explains a simple and fairly obvious reality (what we might call a truism) – that if we cannot be trustworthy with just worldly wealth – we then prove ourselves to be unfitted for being given true (eternal) riches.

The manager was untrustworthy with the master's wealth and so his services were terminated.

Not only this, in a similar way – given the manager was not able to be trustworthy with someone else's property – he also demonstrated that he could not be entrusted with property of his own.

So these are the points of cross-over that Jesus carefully brings out in the proverb-like sayings that come right after the parable.

I did say that this section would be much briefer.

I want finally to bring us to our 3rd point – 1) The Parable, 2) The Parallel – now #3:

3. THE POINT

The parable we have covered shows us essentially one day in the life of a dishonest manager.

But this one day became a turning point in that man's life.

He started off living IN THE PRESENT, FOR THE PRESENT

He ended it living IN THE PRESENT, FOR THE FUTURE

The day incorporated a CRISIS

a CRISIS which yielded up a DOUBLE REVELATION:

- i) he was facing a fast approaching judgement &
- ii) he was facing a man who had a lot more mercy and grace than he had ever reckoned upon

We too are in a somewhat parallel situation and these are the points that Jesus would have us draw:

- we face judgement too because God, our master, expects from every single one of us a trustworthy handling of his estate assets and shortly he is going to announce a day of reckoning
- we know too that we have a merciful and generous God and we too can cast all upon his merciful and gracious nature.

We too can use his resources that are still within our grasp to make eternal friends who will in time be part of the welcoming party into heaven.

I wonder if there has ever been a CRISIS day in your life which made you INVEST all of your focus on TOMORROW and *NOT* on TODAY.

Let us pray that God might grant us truly a CRISIS, a REVELATION *AND* a FUTURE SHREWDNESS to go with it.

In Jesus Name - Amen