

*The Dishonest Manager*

It's hard to reference a movie in a sermon these days. Even the tamest films usually have enough violence, sex, and foul language in them to offend someone. Still, I'll mention a 1979 movie called "Being There" starring Peter Sellers, Jack Warden, and Shirley McClain. "Being There" was based on a best selling novel by Jerzy Kosinski. The main character is a man named Chance who may have been learning disabled. At the very least, his social development had been severely stunted. Apparently he had spent all his life on the estate of a wealthy Washington, D.C., denizen, working as the gardener. This man, only called Chance --he didn't even have a last name -- was cared for by the maid, named Louise. Chance is the epitome of child-like innocence. When the estate owner, whom Chance referred to as "the Old Man," died, Chance was turned out homeless onto the streets of Washington.

As luck would have it, on his first night away from the estate, Chance was struck by an automobile, driven by a presidential advisor, but not seriously injured. The presidential advisor takes Chance to his home. When asked his name, Chance merely says, "Chance the gardener" which is misinterpreted as "Chauncey Gardiner." When asked why he was out on the streets on a wintry night, he replied, "The Old Man died, Louise left, and the lawyers took the house" which everyone takes to mean his father died, and his wife divorced him, taking him to the cleaners financially in the process.

In conversation, Chauncey talks about the only thing he knows: gardening. But the presidential advisor thinks he is speaking in analogies about politics and the economy when he makes statements like, “Sometimes you have to prune things to make them grow” and “growth will come in the spring.” Thinking Chauncey to be a wise formerly wealthy man down on his luck, the presidential advisor took him in to live with him and his wife.

In no time Chauncey became a confidant to the president and a wildly popular overnight media sensation, as everyone took his simple-minded gardening advice as profound homespun wisdom. As the film nears its end, Chauncey Gardiner was being considered by the nation’s political insiders as a presidential candidate himself. And then, as the film actually ends, Chauncey walks off across a lake. Just what the author intended by having Chauncey do something so Christ-like in that last scene is not quite clear.

I bring up “Being There” because I think it illustrates at least two truths. 1.) We human beings naturally look for meaning in events and stories, and sometimes we assign meanings and significance to details and actions that were not intended. In other words, we sometimes see metaphors where there are none. 2.) Even in a well told story, the exact meaning the author intends may not be clearly expressed or easily perceived. That is to say, communication is an imprecise science, and often more subjective than objective.

When it comes to “The Hard Sayings of Jesus,” in my opinion none is harder than the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. I try to not complain about biblical texts, but when I saw that I had assigned myself this one, I said to

myself, “What were you thinking!” There have been various interpretations of this parable attempted from a variety of perspectives. One scholar is certain he understands it perfectly, and another scholar says the exact opposite with equal confidence. What I hope to offer you this evening is a commentary with the best understandings I can muster, interpretations that I hope will be both practical advice for your daily walk with the Lord and edifying to your spirit.

The first thing we hear in the parable is that a certain rich man learns that one of his managers is squandering his possessions. No compelling evidence of this presented, but it appears that in the story the accusation is true. The rich man tells the manager to get his accounts in order because he is going to be dismissed from his employment. There is pressure on the manager to find a creative solution for his impending personal financial crisis. It is unlikely anyone else would hire him as a manager after being fired for dishonesty previously. “I am not able to dig, and I am ashamed to beg,” may have been a cliché at the time. But it also may have been literally true that the Dishonest Manager may have gotten soft, having worked a white collar job as he did, and that his enormous pride – perhaps the motivation for his theft -- made begging especially repulsive to him. So far, the story’s pretty clear; but what follows gets a little murkier.

The Dishonest Manager then comes up with a creative solution to make his master’s debtors obligated, or at least grateful, to him, so that they will take care of him once he is unemployed. The Dishonest manager called in his master’s debtors and renegotiated the terms of their loans with them. (Doesn’t this all sound extremely contemporary?) For instance, he takes

someone who owes his master about 900 gallons of olive oil and has him re-write the paperwork to make him owe only 450 gallons.

There are a couple different things that could be going on here. Perhaps the Dishonest Manager was simply stealing from his master when he reduced what the debtors owed. From what little we can ascertain about his character, that's certainly a possibility. Or perhaps he was simply canceling his own commission on the loan, thus decreasing the debt and making a friend. Cutting his own commission, or even paying off a portion of the loan out of his own pocket, may or may not be technically illegal, that's debatable. Jesus doesn't give us enough details, and we don't know enough about the financial industry in the first century to say for sure. Regardless, whatever the Dishonest Manager did certainly was sly and crafty, and apparently it was going to work.

The rich man's reaction to the Dishonest Manager's subterfuge is even more puzzling – he praised the Dishonest Manager for acting shrewdly and prudently. Why would he do that? If the Dishonest Manager had cut his own commission, and not adversely affected that rich man's profits, we could understand how the rich man might not be too upset. And even if the Dishonest Manager had taken money out of the rich man's pockets, the rich man could have just been impressed by someone who played the game so well. Maybe the rich man accumulated his wealth in a similar way. Maybe he was so rich that being cheated out a trivial amount by his standards was funny to him rather than tragic.

Most puzzling of all Jesus is commentary on all this. Jesus seems to concur with the rich man's praise of the Dishonest Manager. He says that "the sons of this age are shrewder and more prudent, and wiser in their own generation than are the sons of light." Meaning what exactly? I take that as encouragement from Jesus for the church, the sons of light, to bring all the wisdom and learning that they can to bear on their task of spreading the gospel and serving the needy. Evangelism is not marketing, but there may be things we can learn from the science of marketing to help us spread the Christian message. Stewardship is not merely fundraising, but there may be things we can learn from secular finances and the money management sciences that will help us maximize our resources for mission. The church can use the latest and best technologies to further its ministries. There is nothing essentially holy about spurning progress and advancements. We don't have to be like the Amish.

The final verse of this parable, the "moral" of the story, is another "head-scratcher." Jesus said, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may receive and welcome you into the everlasting habitations." Again, what does that mean? Some commentators think Jesus is being ironic. Jesus' ironic, almost sarcastic, point is that the kind of friends you can make with money cannot influence your entry into heaven, which should be your real concern. So why concern yourself with money and temporal things, set your heart and mind on things eternal and divine. That's a good message, but I'm not convinced that's what Jesus meant, although it could be.

I am more persuaded that Jesus is telling us to put our earthly wealth and possessions to work here on earth, in serving the poor and spreading the good news, so that we will be welcomed into heaven. I don't mean that in a "works righteous," earn your way into heaven kind of way. Rather what I mean is that the true followers of Christ will respond to God's grace with generosity and compassion, making friends of those they help, friends who may be waiting there in heaven to welcome them when they die.

That's the opinion of F.F. Bruce, who points to the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man in regards to the Dishonest Manager's theme. The Rich Man had more than ample opportunity to, out of his abundance, assist poor Lazarus who died of neglect at his gate. In the afterlife, the Rich Man had no one who was grateful for largess because he never helped anyone. There was no one to offer him comfort in his torment in Hades because he had never comforted anyone on earth.

It's not the money that is unrighteous by its nature, it's what we do with money that's either righteous or unrighteous based on the disposition of our hearts. It's not money that is the cause of evil, but the love of money, the unnatural love of money, that is the root of all evil. How different things might have been had Lazarus been able to stand up and say to Abraham, "That man was kind to me when we were on earth. Please let me go and return the favor." Now how are you going to spend your money?

A good parable probably raises as many questions as it answers. This one about the Dishonest Manger leaves us with much to ponder. May God bless your ruminations. Amen.

