

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 16:1-9, “Stories Jesus Told: Parable of the Rascal”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/23/2026

I’m willing to bet that the vast majority of you
have never heard a sermon on this parable. Am I right?
Well I’m here to change that.

This parable isn’t hiding anywhere.
It’s not in some obscure location or of questionable provenance.
In fact, it follows the most popular parable in the whole Bible –
the Prodigal Son which Pastor Steve shared with you last week.

But it does appear to contain a message that grates against our sensibilities.
It sounds like someone cheats his master,
and is commended for being a liar and a cheat,
and then the listeners are told to go and do likewise.

This was the perspective of the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate
who ruled in the era following his uncle, Constantine.
You may know that it was Constantine
who declared Christianity to be an accepted religion.
Well Julian didn’t like that, and he wanted to return Rome to a pagan empire.
So he used this parable as his proof text – look, this Jesus
is someone who encourages his people to be liars and thieves.
We can’t let the message of someone like that
polluting the minds of our young people.

You can probably guess that’s not the best interpretation of Jesus’ message.
But what *is* Jesus trying to say here?
What does Jesus see beneath the surface
with this unusual piece of metaphorical theology?

As Jesus lays out parable to his disciples,

there was a rich master who received news
that his manager was being wasteful.
But we need to consider here, who gives him this news?
Who is telling on the manager?
It could be other servants, but that would be very dangerous for them.

Kenneth Bailey suggests it is more likely people who the manager is working with,
and so he emphasizes that the community is telling the rich man
about the manager's bad habits.

He also notes that the master is a farm owner, not a banker.
The master runs a landed estate in which he rented farmland to others,
and then was paid for the land usage
through a portion of the crops that were produced.

The master calls in his manager and says, "What is this I hear about you?"

Now that's a great line.
It gives away nothing and invites the person being asked
to become incredibly paranoid.

I have found that this line is very revealing when used in parenting.
"Why don't you tell me why your brother's so upset?"
Sometimes that question has revealed two or three
prior incidents I didn't even know had taken place!

But the manager isn't spooked. We don't get any response out of him at all.

And so the master says "Give an *account* of your management"
which means, "Turn in your books."
There were very specific rabbinical laws dealing with this kind of matter.
If someone was alerted that they were being removed as an agent,
anything they did after that moment was invalid.
The law declares that any further activity by the manager is not legally binding.

The manager knows this, and he keeps his thoughts to himself,
apparently leaving the rich man without saying a word,
which is highly unusual.

The listeners expected the manager to defend himself – his long service,
his dedication, or point at the other people who have failed him, and so on.
But the manager in Jesus' parable doesn't do any of that.

He accepts the reality of his guilt, and ruminates on his options.
He's not strong enough for labor. He's too proud to beg.
Instead, he's going to prepare an escape for himself into a new job.
The phrase "welcome me into their houses," was common in the ancient world
and it means, "get another job for another master."

What he does is *summon* the master's debtors one by one. He doesn't go find them.
He summons them.

Which means he is continuing to act under the rich master's authority,
so that the people he deals with *come to him*
with an assumption that he still has a job.

He asks each person what they owe. When they answer,
he tells *them* to write down a new amount that is much lower.
Why have them write it down? This keeps the manager's handwriting
off the altered documents and shows the involvement
of the master's business partners.

He's a cheat, but he's shrewd. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it,
he's a rascal.

Now, we know that the master had asked for the accounts.

So when the manager gives him the account books with slashed debts
for all these accounts and the signatures of the people
who owe the master money, the master finds himself in a bind.

Legally, he could go to each one and say,

“This isn’t right, my manager had been fired
when he gave you all such a good deal.”

But then he would be bringing bad news to all his partners
and leave with the reputation of being stingy.

While if he forgives the manager, then the people whose debt
has been reduced will all honor the master and speak well of him.

And so the manager is throwing himself at his boss’s mercy,
in much the same way that the prodigal son threw himself
at the mercy of his father.

Eugene Peterson writes, **“Both son and manager
have nothing to show for themselves except
their wasted and misspent lives.**

**Neither prodigal nor rascal offers an excuse ...
but they both experience “amazing grace.”**

They do not reap what they sowed.

They do not get what they deserve.

And after a lifetime of doing it wrong, they finally get it right.”

The manager tests the generosity of his master, and the generosity proves out:
the master chooses to pay the price for his manager’s salvation,
and retains his valued reputation in the community
as a generous person.

Then Jesus says to his disciples,

**“the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing
with their own kind than are the people of the light.**

**I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves,
so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”**

What’s he seeing beneath the surface?

I think he’s saying that playing by the rules doesn’t always pay off –
especially when the deck is stacked against you.

So be a rascal if you have to. Take some risks. Do what you’re good at.
Find the unexpected pathway.
Be a reckless and unaccountable gift giver to others.

One example of this is the way the Community Dinner
gets good deals on chicken or turkey.
In the infinite wisdom of our federal government,
the USDA no longer subsidizes protein for food banks
in anywhere near a sufficient measure to support the needs
of people who are food insecure.

So that means meal providers like our congregation need to get creative.
Every once in a while a grocery store has a huge sale on chicken or turkey,
but they limit it to two packs per customer. Well guess what?
We’ve got a bunch of rascals around here who all go separately,
get the max discounted meat, turn it in to the church kitchen,
and then get reimbursed. (Or maybe they don’t—but they could!)

Are we breaking the rules by collecting much more of the super good deal
than we’re supposed to? Probably. But are we worried about that?
No, because we serve a generous master.

At the higher end of the economic scale there's a guy named Chuck Feeney.
You've probably never heard of Chuck Feeney,
but I bet you've heard of the business model he invented in the 1960s:
Duty Free Shoppers at the airport.

Yeah – he started that. And he made a fortune. Literally \$8 billion dollars.
But guess what? He was a rascal.

He created a foundation called Atlantic Philanthropies to give it all away.
Atlantic Philanthropies was both wide ranging and very private.
The organization often refused to let the people receiving funds
to know where the money was ultimately coming from.
In 2020, the philanthropy was dissolved because they had given it all away
and Chuck died in 2023.

We're talking about \$270 million in grants to improve public healthcare
in Vietnam, \$62 million to causes working to abolish the death penalty
in the U.S., and \$76 million for grassroots campaigns
supporting the passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Feeney's example inspired other billionaires like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett
to also give away substantial amounts of their fortunes.

Now I don't think we need billionaires in this world (let alone trillionaires),
but if we're going to have them, I prefer them to be rascals.

Then, of course, there's the rascal known as John Lewis.
John Lewis was a young man when he marched
with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and 600 peaceful protesters
across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Alabama in March of 1965.
Newly deputized officers on horseback plowed through the crowd,
attacking them with bullwhips, batons, and tear gas,
sending 50 of them to the hospital – including John Lewis.

In March of 2020, US Representative John Lewis stood on the bridge again,
and said, “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble,
and redeem the soul of America.”

20 students from the McMinnville Youth Collective followed in his footsteps
and heard his message on the Service Learning Trip back in July.
Here’s a photo of them the Edmond Pettus Bridge.

What this parable brings forward is that whoever you are,
and whatever you’ve got,
whether it’s a lot or a little, don’t apologize for what you’re good at.
Use your gifts, your imagination, your talents, your humor,
your creativity.
If the rules prevent you from loving your neighbor, then break the rules.
Jesus did it all the time!

Followers of Jesus should be as savvy and crafty with what we do
as the people who are seeking power and money for their own benefit.

And at the end of it all, cast yourself on the mercy of God
who is the most generous master any of us could ever hope to serve.
Jesus knows that the cost of our salvation has been paid in full,
and if we test the mercy of our Father in Heaven
we will not be turned away.