

## *Total Fraud Gets Blessing!*

Genesis 27: 18-29    Luke 16: 1-13

We like our stories reasonably clear and unambiguous, particularly coming out of the Bible. We like the story of Noah and the flood – we get it. We like Abraham, except for that crazy stuff with almost sacrificing Isaac. We like Moses versus Pharaoh. We like David versus Goliath. We like the white hat versus the black hat. Nice and simple.

We like to know the lesson in candid, meaningful terms. We don't want to get left scratching our heads, saying, "What was *that* all about?" We certainly don't expect the guy in the black hat to get what he wants and the guy in the white hat to end up the loser. That would be an awful story! Yet they happen.

In our idyllic worldview, our stories reinforce our basic values. Good triumphs over evil. The underdog comes out on top, The crude, nasty, and ugly ways of the world get knocked out as the worthy, righteous, and moral emerge victorious.

Then there are today's scriptures. At best, we can call them challenging. As the sermon title say: Total fraud gets blessing! It is like any day of the week's headline story in our newspaper or news feed. These are not the popular stories of scripture, but the ones we would prefer to pass over. They grind against our accepted values, like fingernails on a chalkboard.

There is no lack of truly amazing contortions in thinking to explain them. These gymnastics of logic seek to redeem these stories from their obvious conclusions. The stories cannot possibly mean that the fraud gains a blessing. Yet it seems so.

In Genesis, Jacob proves himself to be quite the scoundrel more than once in his early years. You'll recall the story of how he got his brother Esau to give up his birthright as first born – primogeniture! – for the sake of a bowl of porridge. But it gives us early insight into Jacob's shady, manipulative character. Bible readers may want to make apologies for Jacob's behavior, but let's face it – Jacob is a weasel.

Bible students will also recall that God had a clear preference for the second born of the twins. From the beginning of the tale of the twin brothers, at their birth, God has declared a willingness to upset the traditional rules, to do what would be considered unacceptable to God's people. The **first born** gets the birthright, *not* the second born, says the tradition of primogeniture, except God has decided it should be otherwise. All that follows is based on that premise, that primogeniture will be overturned by God when the covenant itself is at stake.

In the beginning of the chapter, prior to our reading, we find an old man, Isaac, having gone blind at this point, thinking his death is near. He instructs his eldest son Esau to hunt and bring back game as a kind of last supper for father Isaac who will then seal the blessing on his eldest son. Their planning together is simply the fulfillment of expectations that everyone has about Esau receiving Isaac's blessing. They have no

suspicion anything could possibly go wrong. They have no inkling of a massive fraud and deception. Primogeniture was a given; nothing could change that, right?

But mother Rebekah overhears what's afoot and plots with her other son Jacob.

After Esau has been gone for a while, Jacob prepares some tasty meat, dons his brother's clothes, and puts goatskins on his arms to simulate the hairy arms of his brother. He comes to his father Isaac in total deceit, seeking to trick him into believing it is elder twin Esau who is before him. The scam works with a full and generous blessing conferred upon Jacob by his blind, unsuspecting father. We sense Isaac has suspicions – perhaps portrayed in the anguished image of the artist who created the graphic on the bulletin cover. Would his own family connive against his wishes? The blessing comes to Jacob, not the eldest. It comes to him by trickery and deceit.

The story continues as Esau returns almost as soon as Jacob has departed Isaac – a nice dramatic flair in the storytelling. Both Esau and father Isaac are shocked, appalled, and broken when they realize the deception that's occurred. Esau is left pleading, "Bless me – me, too – my father!" He manages to get a blessing from Isaac, but it is puny in comparison, a weak gift for the one who was entitled.

God's will is fulfilled, and the accepted, traditional, and expected is denied value and importance. To the reader, the blessing seems to go to the one who is **un**deserving. And this sentiment may easily have been shared by both Isaac and Esau, but the blessing went to the one who *God* chose to receive it. Still, our sense of justice, fairness, and righteousness is violated. Our resentment of the outcome reflects our resentment toward the God who acts as God will act, blessing whom God will bless, and raising up whom God will raise up. Further, we don't like when our traditions are made irrelevant. We like our traditions, and our traditions expect that God is **just** like we're **just**, and God upholds our cherished views. Guess what? That's a really flawed way of thinking.

Jesus is going to take us down a similar path with the parable of the dishonest steward. This parable is another disruption of our sense of justice and fairness.

Let's set some context in Luke's storytelling. The stories before and after this one also dealt with wealth; the story of the prodigal son comes first, and then after our parable comes the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Wealth and stewardship are easily identifiable as the thread of this teaching. Let's also be mindful that the messages in these stories are not simply about wealth and stewardship. For Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of God must remain the primary filter for any understanding.

Finally, let's understand the literary type known as a parable, a favorite teaching tool by Jesus and others of that era. Parables are simple stories designed to present realities in simple, although sometimes jarring ways.

One source of confusion in the gospels is when the editor explains (or sometimes has Jesus explaining) what the parable means. Being simple stories, parables need no explanation. That is the editor explaining, not Jesus.

Further, the editor's explanation of a parable can sometimes be allegorical. Allegory takes elements of a story and treats them as symbols to be interpreted. The parable of the sower who throws seed on rock, on the path, and in good soil is followed by an allegorical interpretation that explains what each really mean. No, a parable is a simple story; adding allegory makes it a confusing muddle.

In the case of the shrewd or wicked steward, the story hardly seems to connect to what Jesus is all about. Yet there it is. With this account, there has also been very creative contortions performed to make it more appealing, just like the story of Jacob defrauding Esau of his blessing. Scholars are almost universally clear that they have no good answer.

Even *Luke* wasn't sure about the story. He, and maybe later editors, appended several explanations. The first question is where does the parable end and when do the explanations begin. Most scholars agree that it ends: *The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.* End of story.

Yet, the first explanation seems integral to how Luke received it: *For 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.* The language and style of these verses denote that it was unlikely from Jesus, but also unlikely from Luke. Luke received it this way probably, but appended other explanations to try to make it work better.

Let's look at the story. The manager or steward for a rich man is accused of squandering the rich man's possessions – "squandering" here is the same word used in the prodigal son story where the son *squanders* his inheritance.

The steward can see the handwriting on the wall; he's going to lose his job. Knowing that his reputation will be trashed, and being unfit for manual labor or begging, the steward sets out to complete a self-serving scheme.

He goes to his master's debtors, shows them their bills, and tells them to change their bills to lesser amounts. One debtor gets cut by 50% and the other by 20%. It seems odd and very unlikely that the rich man is going to commend the dishonest steward if the money is coming out of the rich man's pocket; that *was* the master's complaint, right? Tantalizing explanations have been posed, like the steward cutting off his own commission, but the amounts seem out of line and inconsistent. Again, sticking with the simplicity of the parable, the steward simply cheated **more** in order to gain himself some favors for when he gets fired. He is a fraud, gets caught, and does more fraud.

The jarring end of the story is: *The master **commended** the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*

Let's try to make sense of this not only as a teaching of Jesus, but also as a piece in Luke's narrative. We should remember that this story is sandwiched between two

familiar stories, first, the prodigal son, then this story of the shrewd or wicked steward, and finally the rich man and Lazarus. All three stories deal with wealth and how it is used, but they aren't about personal financial management. They are about the Kingdom and each provides a lesson in the ways of the Kingdom in contrast to the world's ways.

The problem with our story is that it highlights the worst ways of the world with the master commending fraud. It seems to say nothing about the Kingdom. The sense of Luke's first (and probably best) explanation may be preferred: *For 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.*

We can fine-tune this a bit. The steward knew the time of his fraudulent dealing had caught up with him. It was time to do *whatever* to secure the best possible outcome. The best move was to improve his soon-to-be dire situation. He uses his master's wealth to buy up some future favors. The master views this *objectively, in worldly terms*, as a shrewd maneuver and commends him for it.

As God sought deliberately to overturn the order of the tradition of primogeniture in the story of a Jacob's fraud, here we find Jesus sharing a story that suggests the urgency of the Kingdom, that its time has come, that the faithful must act decisively to secure their future, to secure the blessings that God wants them to have. God's people need to be shrewd in understanding that the time of the Kingdom is here, and then act shrewdly to ensure a good outcome for themselves.

Fraudulence does not get an endorsement in these stories. Scheming for personal advantage also fails to get a thumbs-up. However, taking advantage of opportunities that will advance the Kingdom, using a combined shrewdness and stewardship, is (I believe) along the lines of what both stories are teaching.

Do we miss opportunities because of risk? Well, that's what faith is for. Faith is to keep us moving forward in a determined manner.

Are we committed in our endeavor? Can we seize the opportunity that presents itself and turn it into a blessing for us and for the Kingdom?

May we have the faith and the shrewdness to act when the time demands it, always seeking to advance the Kingdom and its blessings for all.