

Who here prefers eating dessert over vegetables? Me too. Lately, I've been making these big chocolate chip cookies in an iron skillet. Hot out of the oven, I cut myself a slice of cookie, and top it with ice cream and caramel sauce. Now, I like vegetables too, but come on? What's better? Dessert is better. Luke 15 from last week was dessert—we saw that God will go to any length to bring us home. It was a message of unconditional, relentless divine love, that ends with dancing. Erin has these stickers of Jesus dabbing, and as ridiculous as they are, they rightly convey that when God sees you, it makes God want to dance. That's how God feels about you, and I love preaching sermons about that. Dessert is the best part of the meal, while Luke 16, is our vegetables. Can't we just have the dessert all the time? Well, yes and no. The relentless God of grace from Luke 15 is the same God who makes it clear that we cannot serve both God and money. We need our vegetables too. Perhaps the key is to remember dessert comes first.

If you recall, Luke 15 begins with the religious leaders resentful that Jesus would welcome sinners and eat with them. In response, Jesus tells 5 stories in a row. Like a great stand-up comedian, he hits you with one bit after another, and they all build to a big finale, which we'll hear in a couple weeks. But we must remember that all five stories are rooted in the religious leaders resentment that Jesus would associate with sinners—tax collectors and sex workers. Jesus stands in the lowly place and invites us to join him there. That's what the vegetables of Luke 16 are all about. Will we stand with Jesus in the lowly place, or will we stand with the wealthy and powerful who can't abide being near such filth? We can't have it both ways.

Now, this parable of Jesus is often called the unjust steward, and it's universally regarded as Jesus' hardest parable. Why? Because nobody knows what it means. If hearing it a moment ago, you had a question or two, then know that I'm right there with you. It almost sounds like Jesus is saying, "Blessed are you who cook the books to save your bacon," but that doesn't seem right. So, what does it mean? Let's be honest and say, we don't know for sure. I don't think anyone does, but I am going to present you with a reading that makes sense to me. I invite you to try it on and see how it fits.

Most often when we come to a parable like this, we hear there's a wealthy landowner, and we immediately assume that character must represent God. God is powerful, so we automatically assume the powerful character must represent God. Let's not assume that for just a minute and see what happens. **The setting of the parable begins**, "A certain rich man heard that his household manager was wasting his estate." Now rich people in the first century often lived in the southern part of Israel, in Judea near the big city of Jerusalem. The way people became wealthy was through real estate. They would buy plots of land up in the northern country like Galilee, where family farmers couldn't pay their taxes to Rome. So, these rich people from Jerusalem would say to the farmers in the north, "You know I'll take care of your taxes for you. All you have to do is give me your land, but don't worry, I'll still let you farm it still and pay tribute to me. In business school we call that a win-win!"

Is it a win-win? Not really. It's a win for the rich person, but for the farmer who loses their land, it's a system rigged against them. That's how wealth worked in the first century. Those who had it, leveraged it against those who didn't have it. So unlike today, right? The wealthy didn't become wealthy by being generous and benevolent but by being shrewd and

opportunistic. The gap between the rich and poor at that time was so great that there was virtually no movement between the two. The wealthy people who made these land deals with the poor farmers didn't move up north where the farms were. They stayed in their cosmopolitan city and would hire managers to oversee their estates. The managers were similar perhaps to our middle class. Most people at the time were poor. A very few were very wealthy and there was this small group who were stuck in the middle. They worked on behalf of the wealthy to make them even wealthier at the expense of the working poor. That was their job, and this guy wasn't doing a good enough job extracting as much wealth as the rich man thought he should. So, the rich man decides he'll fire his manager and find someone as ruthless as he is.

The turn comes when the manager has a conversion of sorts. He realizes this rich guy doesn't care about me. He never has. He says to himself, "What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager? I'm not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I'll do so that, when I am removed from my management position, people will welcome me into their houses." The manager, apparently not a fan of the Temptations, comes up with this idea that will ingratiate himself to the people he had been previously trying to exploit. In other words, he changes his loyalty. Instead of working to build wealth for the wealthy, he takes the last bit of power he has to help those below him.

He forgives half of one farmer's debt and 20 percent of another, and to everyone's surprise, the master is impressed with his manager. The manager figured out a different way to play the game. By working on behalf of those on the bottom, he has used his position to help himself and his neighbors instead of hoping to gain a morsel from the rich man's table. **Then comes verse 9**, what is perhaps the most confounding of all, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it's gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes." What on earth does that mean? Like the manager in this story, we are all stuck in the middle of a system of wealth and power that we did not create, and Jesus is inviting us to stop wasting our time courting the favor of people who don't care about us. **He's inviting use our money for people instead of using people for money**, to forgive whatever debts are in our power to forgive, because one day the money will run out, and all that will be left is how we've treated those around us, particularly the lowest and the least. Do we look at them with disdain like the religious leaders of Jesus' time, or will we welcome them and identify with them, as Jesus did?

The truth is that money makes a good servant, and a terrible master. And we can't serve both. We've tried, God bless us we've tried, but it doesn't work. In various ways I'm still trying. How often do I think, if only I had a little more money, then I'd be free. But it's a lie, and the lie is killing us. It's been said we write in God we trust upon the God in which we trust. But the god of money is not worthy of our trust. The Pharisees and the religious leaders of Jesus' time weren't uniquely greedy people. They were like us, caught in the middle of system they didn't create, just trying to get by. They heard this story of Jesus and probably felt what some of you are feeling—it sounds nice but it's neither realistic, nor fair. Maybe it's not. But our current path of wealth accumulation, systemic debt and consumption isn't realistic or fair either. It's destroying the only planet we have and people that God cherishes. We must find a better way.

The radical message of Jesus Christ is not that Jesus was nice to the poor, so you go be nice too. The radical message of Jesus is that he made himself one with the poor. He ensured there was no separation between him and the sinners with whom he eats. That's a radical message that will get you killed because the powers of this world are utterly dependent on keeping us all separate. Don't eat with them or touch them or be associated with them. The powers of this world need our resentments to burn if they are to stay in control. But Jesus doesn't play the game of resentment and separation. He's playing a different game, and he invites us to join him at the table where we are all one.

Serving the god of money has made us sick, bloated, and separate, while God wants us to flourish together. That's what vegetables do. They strengthen our body and allow us to see past the illusion of our separateness. Jesus never used people to gain wealth. Instead, he renounced his wealth for the sake of people. The Apostle Paul says, although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty. That's dessert. That's the gospel, and it's the only treasure worth living for.