

Sermon: Dishonestly Faithful

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 21, 2025)

I don't know if you have been following the news lately, the saga of the plight of Air Canada's flight attendants continues. What started out as a fairly normal contractual negotiation between an employer and a group of employees, is turning out to be somewhat protracted with no definite end in sight, and no clear hero emerging.

I don't know why anyone would want to run in an airline business—its cyclical, unpredictable, low margin and high risk. A host of factors outside of one's control can completely derail its business model—including extreme weather, terrorism, hijacking, accidental downing by surface-to-air missile, aircraft design flaws, maintenance trouble, global pandemic, and of course strike. There is a saying in the airline business: if you want to make a million bucks, start with ten...and a million is what you will end up with.

So I have some sympathy for the airline company trying to keep a tighter grip on cost. Nevertheless, how could they justify not paying the flight attendants at all for the hours they work while on the ground?

I have sympathy for flight attendants feeling underpaid, especially coming out of the previously ten-year contract where they were getting 2% annual raises. That is hardly keeping up with the rate of inflation which had massively spiked to the high of 8% only a few years back. Nevertheless, by first defying a back-to-work order, then by rejecting the latest contract offer, painstakingly negotiated by their own union, could the flight attendants be asking perhaps a tad bit too much?

I have sympathy for the Federal Government, in trying to minimize disruption a prolong strike has on the general public—Air Canada after all was a crown corporation, and still is somewhat protected by legislation from open foreign competition. Nevertheless, by prematurely ordering the flight attendants back to work, using the controversial section 107 of the Canadian Labor Code, the Minister of Labour has clearly overreached and needlessly interfered with the bargaining process.

Meanwhile, I believe this whole thing is now in the hand of an arbitrator at this point, seeing that mediation has thus far failed to produce a desired result. The public is left scratching our collective head, really unsure who to side with, what to cheer for, or if anyone should be flying with Air Canada at all?

I suspect, at the end of this ordeal, no one will be satisfied and no clear winner, ethically, morally, or financially will emerge. It occurs to me that in the Parable of the Dishonest Manager told by Jesus in Luke 16, we have a comparable situation.

In this parable, a dishonest manager was accused of squandering the property entrusted to him by his master, a very rich man. He was called to account for his managerial action, and was promptly fired when unable to do so. Instead of licking his wound and departing in disgrace, this dishonest manager devised a scheme, by reducing outstanding debts owe to his master from various debtors.

To one owing one hundred jugs of olive oil, he marked it down to fifty; to another owing one hundred containers of wheat, he took it down to eighty. He did so, not out of grace to the debtors, but purely out of his own self interest, thinking it would net him personal favours from those debtors somewhere down the road.

It is a scheme that, from a legalistic point of view, rightly put both the dishonest manager and the debtors in the wrong. However, instead of exposing this scheme for what it is, a fraud, the master commended the dishonest manager for acting 'shrewdly', with a puzzling explanation about children of this age in contrast to children of light. Wait a minute! What is going on here? Had Jesus got his story wrong?

There is something about the parables of Jesus that often confound us. This word 'parable' in Greek is a construct word of two parts: 'para' and 'baleen'. 'Para' means 'aside', 'baleen' means 'to throw', so 'parabaleen' literally means 'throwing aside', or figuratively speaking 'throwing a curveball'. Jesus seems to delight in throwing curveballs at his disciples and at us.

Early in his ministry, as is recorded in Mark 4, disciples got a bit flustered and questioned why Jesus spoke in parables (as I recalled it was right after the Parable of the Sower). This is how Jesus responded in verse 11-12, by throwing yet another curveball: *"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that (listen carefully to this:) 'they may **indeed** look but not perceive, and may **indeed** hear but not understand; so that they may **not** turn again and be forgiven.'*"

Of course Jesus was quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10, in yet another baffling passage where God seemed to have commissioned Isaiah as prophet, to speak words in order to intentionally confused the hearers, so

they would not perceive nor understand, lest they repent. And in case this point is not made clear enough, the prophet asked: “How long, O Lord?” (Perhaps thinking the confusing part was only temporary, then God will make all things clear subsequently.) Well, God responded in no uncertain term: *“until cities lie waste, without inhabitant...until the Lord sends everyone far away...[until] even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again...[until] the holy seed is its stump.”*

By invoking this passage in Isaiah, Jesus seems to saying this terrible unease we feel when hearing his parables, this terrible confusion we sense, is not an unfortunate byproduct of his words, it is the main feature. Parables are spoken, in order for us to question, to search, to ponder anew, to look inward until we arrive at our own core, and perhaps we find a tiny spark of faith.

Not all parables of Jesus are completely baffling. Some are self-explanatory, such as the kingdom of heaven being compared to a mustard seed. It is the smallest seed in the garden, but growing up to become the tallest shrub, offering shade to birds in the air. It is a parable cautioning us not to overlook the nascent nature of the kingdom of God, for it may be small in its beginning, but will grow organically to become mighty indeed.

There are also those parables that Jesus himself offers insightful explanations, first to his disciples, then made available to us in the Gospel accounts. Parable of the Sower is one such, the sower sows the word, the various terrains where seeds fall describe the different conditions of our hearts. Some reject the word, some fall away due to opposition, some are lured by desire for worldly things. Yet, some bear fruit, in thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. The explanation makes sense, the parable now clear.

Then there are those parables that Jesus would not necessarily explain clearly, but will offer an one liner, a maxim at the end to point us to a nugget of theological truth. So the maxim of ‘joy and celebration over one sinner who repents’, is repeated in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, all neatly packaged together in Luke 15. The parables and the maxim reinforce one other to paint a picture of how God truly desire all sinners to repent, and to reconcile with the Father in Heaven.

However, coming back this Parable of the Dishonest Manager where it comes not with one maxim, but four. First, in verse 9, *“make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”* Is Jesus seriously counselling us to

make friends by all means necessary, even through dishonest wealth? Second, in verse 10, *“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”* How does that explain the dishonest manager? Was he faithful or faithless? Third, in verse 11, *“If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”* Does that mean the master now cheated twice, will entrust more riches to this dishonest manager? And finally in verse 13, *“No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon (or wealth).”* Was this wily manager serving his master or wealth, or serving himself?

With these four somewhat unrelated and somewhat contradictory maxims, serving to explain a story that seems to not just tolerate but praise an unethical behaviour, one can see why after two thousands years, biblical commentators and preachers alike are still scratching their collective heads.

Far be it for me to help make sense of what Jesus intentionally obfuscates, I shall nevertheless offer my own two cents worth. To me, this story hinges on the grace offered by the master, in two separate occasions. First by not punishing the dishonest manager when he was called to give account, then by not pursuing a recovery of debt when the unlawful scheme was uncovered. On both occasions, the master had the full right to seek recompense but chose not to, which had undoubtedly embolden the willy manager.

It would seem that in the Kingdom of God, relationship matters so much more than money. Money may be necessary in trade, and critical in the functioning of an economy, but in the Kingdom of God the real currency of exchange is forgiveness and grace. As Jesus has taught us to pray, our father in heaven, hallow be thy name...forgive our debt as we forgive our debtors, or in another version, forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Perhaps the real purpose of this Parable of Dishonest Manager, is to envision a world where God's people live up to that ideal in which we pray. By praying and paying it forward the grace and forgiveness we have received from on high, until the whole world is unexpectedly filled with God's love, as the kingdom of heaven comes, and the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven, and the people of God say Amen! Amen!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**