

Pick one...

There is nothing shrewd about cheating the boss out of a portion of what he is owed. No one that I ever worked for would commend me for slashing invoices just to curry favour with customers. Money was owed - that money needs collecting; that was the rule of the jungle in which I worked. Never in my wildest dreams would I take a \$1000.00 invoice and declare that \$600 would do. And yet...there is a world that works like that. The underground economy - cash (unreported) for goods or services. It sounds harmless enough, and likely most of us have dabbled in it at some point in our lives...and thought ourselves pretty clever. Avoiding taxes on a big purchase - putting money 'straight into the pocket' of the painter, the roofer, the mechanic. Yet, in this ancient example of something that sounds surprisingly like an effort on everyone's part to 'cook the books' Jesus talks of shrewd dealings in dishonest wealth in a way that ought to have us asking questions.

I'm never sure how to approach these 'sarcastic Jesus' texts...though I am encouraged whenever I come across one. If you're uncomfortable with sarcastic, can we agree that Jesus is NOT encouraging this questionable behaviour in his followers, but he is laying out what he knows to be a way of working in the world; Jesus is letting his disciples know that 'he knows how it is.' And 'how it is' is troubling: fraud as a survival mechanism; favours for sale; and a wink and a smile from the boss when he learns that you've learned the way of the world. This parable seems to waver and wander through notions of faithfulness and trustworthiness, but in the end, Jesus tells us what we need to know - You cannot serve God AND wealth. This is not about trustworthiness, or faithfulness, or even about ethics in business. This is about modelling yourself after the way of God's promised reign.

This is not about forgiveness either - though I'm sure you noticed that the manager has gone from disgrace to what looks like getting his job back (what else can it mean to be commended by the person who has demanded an accounting...?)

Pick one...

Forgiveness requires something like an apology; this story ends with two crooked businessmen sharing drinks and cigars and chuckling about the way the world can be manipulated. And Jesus puts a choice before us. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Mammon is the word that Luke uses - a word that appears only four times in the New Testament (three of those in this passage) - a word that has ancient roots. Not just wealth, but the personification of wealth. Mammon is the 'thing that inspires confidence' - Bay street, or Wall street, or the oil patch, or the technology sector. Mammon is not money, so much as it is the thing that gives money its appeal. We still have a choice to make. Mammon is still an option.

He does - in other examples - talk about the difficulties that people of means might have when it comes to seeking the kingdom. The rich man who goes away in sadness when he learns that he has to give it all up to follow Jesus (Matthew 19); the famous 'camel through the eye of a needle' reference; all by way of saying that we must choose. We can choose to be devoted to the path of success that seems open to everyone with ambition and drive (The one who dies with the most toys, wins) or we can choose a different path; a path of compassion and generosity; of sacrifice and servanthood; a path that admits all who are eager to know more about our connections to one another and to creation.

These choices are playing themselves out in front of us every day. Governments, businesses, and individuals are all trying to find their way through the maze. Self-interest and self-preservation are powerful motivators which seem to make choosing easy. But we cannot ignore the consequences of our choices. Comfort and contentment are not always the same. Even when our minds are made up, our hearts can still be moved within us. We can desire change for the good of another. We understand the appeal of mercy, justice, peace and love. God asks something different of us than does the call of temporal success. God asks us to care beyond ourselves.