

## Stories of the Master

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### SM049 The Servant Who Tricked His Master

It had been a long evening for Jesus and his disciples. They had invited several people for dinner – new friends who had been restored from a reckless life. Their bad choices had alienated them from God and from their community, but now, through Jesus they were being restored and finding forgiveness, hope, and a new start. Among them were women who had sold their bodies for a few coins so they could eat and men who had cheated others out of hard earned money. But now, they were genuinely changed and grateful for the mercy shown to them.

At the banquet that Jesus prepared were many inhabitants from the village. Village life was lived in the open, in community, and when banquets were held, even when people were not invited to eat, observers would come and stand on the periphery of the meal to listen to the conversation, especially if important matters were discussed.

Among these observers were religious leaders who watched Jesus closely and listened to his words. They were offended by the way he so easily welcomed and enjoyed the company of questionable people. While it was good to be generous with those less fortunate, a noble man did not eat with them, he did not place himself on their level! And all this talk of forgiveness – were not people supposed to go to the temple and offer sacrifices? Yet, Jesus seemed to think that he had the authority to grant forgiveness without the temple. The Laws of Moses had prescribed that if a sinful person turned back to God, they must offer a sacrifice in Jerusalem for their sins, but Jesus seemed to think it was enough for them to be with him, as if he were replacing the temple.

The religious leaders watched and became angry as Jesus and his disciples served these sinners. They became angrier when they heard Jesus' stories. He told of a lost lamb and how a heroic shepherd had risked his life to find this one little lamb. He had told of a woman searching for a lost coin. And he had told the story of a lost son, lost because of his sin, lost because of his rebellion and selfishness, but who returned and was embraced by a forgiving and compassionate father.

The meal was over. The disciples were gathering the dishes and leftover food. Jesus turned to the people who had observed the meal and listened to his stories and said,

“There is something important you must understand about these stories and why I tell them. There is something you must understand about why I forgive and call people to follow me rather than go to the temple in Jerusalem. Until John the Baptist, the law of Moses and the messages of the prophets were your guides. But now, the Good News of the Kingdom of God is preached, and all kinds of people are eager to get in. These people that you see before you, that I have eaten with, have been eager to get in. They have received the life of the kingdom that even now is spreading in Israel.

“This does not mean that God's law has lost its force. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the smallest point of God's law to be overturned. But it does mean that God's law is finding its fulfillment, its true purpose in finding the lost and bringing them back to God. I am preaching and announcing the good news of the kingdom and of God's great mercy that he shows even to

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unrighteous people such as these. They have understood the times in which we live, and they have taken wise action to escape the coming judgment.

“Let me tell you another story to help you understand. Peter, James, John, all of you – stop your serving for the moment and sit down. I want you also to hear the story of a servant who tricked his master.”

Jesus stood and collected his thoughts. He looked at everyone and with a smile began.

There was a landowner who lived in a village. He was a good man, strict, and wealthy. He owned fig trees, olive groves, vineyards, wheat fields, and vast acreage for sheep to graze. He was indeed wealthy. He expected obedience from his servants and from the workers he hired to care for everything. He especially expected it from the man he hired to manage the rental of his property and the wealth created from it.

The landowner rented his land to villagers who agreed to pay fixed prices from the crops they raised. The manager arranged all contracts with the renters and kept them in a safe place so there would be no dispute about what was owed when the harvest came. He seemed to be a good manager, and the wealthy landowner entrusted all his resources to him for safekeeping. But what he did not know was that the manager was a shrewd fellow who was stealing and wasting his wealth.

One day, some of the servants of the wealthy landowner came to their master. They loved him because he was a merciful and kind man, and they hated to see him cheated.

They said, “Master, we have been watching the one who manages your estate. We are sorry to tell you, but he has been cheating you. He has been stealing your money, spending it on himself, and not giving full and honest reports.” The wealthy landowner was sorry to hear this. He did not want to believe it at first, but as he questioned his servants closely, he discovered they were telling the truth, and he sadly said, “Go, find him and bring him to me at once.”

The manager was in the village that day. He was enjoying himself. It was a beautiful day, and he was thinking how fortunate he was. He passed a group of men digging a ditch. Some were prisoners of war. Others were the unfortunate poor who had no other means to make a living. He noticed how they seemed so tired, how they could hardly lift their tools above their heads. What did they earn for this hard work? Barely enough to feed themselves and their families. How grateful he was he did not have to work like that.

He walked further into the village and saw an old lady holding out a cup begging for a few coins. The manager stopped, reached into his bag, dropped a coin into her cup, and then quickly walked away, grateful he did not have to endure the shame of begging for food.

Yes, how fortunate he was to have his position, and how clever he was in keeping the books for the landowner. The landowner was a good man and trusting, and he never suspected that the manager was cheating him and using his money for personal benefit. The manager was deep in these thoughts and enjoying himself immensely when suddenly two of the landowner’s servants

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appeared before him and with a smile said, “You had better come quickly. The master wants to see you, immediately.”

As the estate manager walked with them to the great house, concern rose within him. There was something about the smile on the faces of those servants and the way they said that the master wanted to see him that troubled his heart. When he tried to find out more, the servants only shook their heads and said gravely, “He must tell you himself.” Had he been discovered? Had his cheating been revealed?

When he arrived in the great room of the great house, he saw that the wealthy landowner had a stern look of anger and yet, sadness on his face. He said, “What is this I hear about you, that you have cheated me and have been wasting my wealth?” The landowner stopped. He purposely kept his statement vague. He wanted to see if he could scare the manager into a full confession.

The manager stood before him in silence, knowing that saying nothing, at least at first, was his best play. Yet, he also knew that something dreadful was likely to happen. What if he had been discovered? He would probably be arrested and sent to jail. He would have to pay back the money he had wasted. His good name would be ruined. No one in the community would hire him. His survival was in jeopardy.

The landowner, with sadness in his kind voice said, “I hired you to manage my wealth. I gave you a good wage. But you have turned away from me. Go. Get the books where you have recorded all the transactions. Bring them to me. Then prepare your belongings and leave my house. You are no longer to be one of my workers.” The landowner turned and left the great room.

The manager was finished, and as he walked toward his living quarters on the estate, a thousand thoughts flooded his mind. “What am I to do?” He thought on the men he had seen earlier in the day, exhausted, working in dirt, lifting heavy tools above their heads and barely bringing them down to the ground. “Please, no! I am not strong enough to dig. I cannot do that.” Then his mind thought on the old woman he had seen begging for a few coins. “Please, no! I cannot beg. It is shameful. Yet, word will get out about my crime. No one will hire me. I will be reduced to poverty.”

Then, the manager thought on the wealthy landowner and how good he had been. He had hired him at a generous wage. He had entrusted great wealth to him, and even when he fired him, he showed mercy. The landowner could have turned him over to the authorities. He could have arrested him. He could have sent him to jail. He could have forced him to pay back all his debt. But he did none of those things. And though he was angry, there was sadness in his voice and compassion in his eyes. As the manager thought on the landowner, how noble he was, and the good name he had in the community, a plan formed in his mind that might save his life.

### Interlude

The manager walked quickly to his office. He had a plan that just might work, a plan that would save his reputation, save his life, and honor his master all in one. But he had to work quickly. No one in the village knew that he had been fired. Not even the other servants knew that he had been fired for he spoke with the landowner alone.

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The manager would take a great risk, but he had nothing to lose. He summoned some of the servants and said, “Quickly, go into the village and find the man who is renting the olive groves and bring him here. You, go to the man who is renting the wheat fields and bring him here. You, go to man who is renting the fig groves. And the rest of you, find the shepherds of the flocks and bring the chief shepherd here as fast as you can. This is a matter of great urgency for our master.” And the servants, not knowing yet that the manager had been fired, went off at once and brought these men back while the manager retrieved the record books and the contracts they had signed.

When they entered, the manager greeted them and said to the man who was renting the olive fields, “My friend, it is so good to see you. How are the olive fields? We have heard that you have been having some trouble with pests that have threatened the yield of olives.”

“Yes, it has been a struggle. We fear that our yield of olives may not be as great as we had hoped when we signed the contract.”

“How much is it that you owe?” the manager asked.

“800 gallons we agreed to, I am afraid,” the olive grower replied.

“Yes, I see. That is a considerable amount. As you know, my master is a kind man. He is very generous. I was speaking with him the other day and we were talking about the olive grove. I told him how hard you work and that you have been having a great challenge with the pests that have threatened the crop. I told him about your family, your precious little ones.”

“Well, what did the master say?”

“Our master is beneficent and always kind, and when I told him it would be in everyone’s interest to lower the expectation, he gladly agreed.” Here is your contract. We will make a change to it. Instead of owing 800 gallons, we are reducing the expectation to 400 gallons this year. Is this acceptable to you?”

The olive grower could hardly believe his ears. His mouth opened, a big smile spread across his face and he said, “Yes, Yes, I agree. Oh, thank you, thank you.”

“Do not thank me,” the shrewd servant said. “Thank God, and when you return to the village tell as many people as you can about our master’s great mercy and generosity to you. And, remember me for perhaps you will be able to do a kindness for me some day.” And the olive grower went out, rejoicing, and spreading the word about the wealthy landowner’s great generosity to him and how he had reduced his bill.

Then, the shrewd servant called in the farmer who was growing wheat and said to him, “My friend, it has been such a dry year. I fear that the yield of wheat may not be as great as we had hoped.”

“Yes sir, it has been dry. We have been concerned that the wheat is not coming up as abundantly as in previous years.”

“How much is it that you agreed to pay my master?”

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“1000 bushels of wheat.”

“Yes, yes, you are right. I see that in the contract you have signed. My friend, I have such good news for you. Our kind and gracious master has authorized me to reduce your bill. I was talking with him recently about the lack of rain and urged him to consider reducing your bill, and he has magnanimously agreed. He also inquired about your welfare, now, if you will be so kind as to sign your initials right here we will reduce your bill from 1000 to 800 bushels of wheat. Is that acceptable to you?”

“Yes, yes, this is most unexpected.”

“Well, as you know, I am always looking out for you and putting in a good word with our kind and gracious master. I only ask one thing. When you return to the village and share with others how gracious our master is, tell as many as you can about him. Let his praises resound throughout the village, and if you ever think of me, remember me with kindness as the one who helped to arrange this reduction in your obligation.”

One by one, the workers came into the shrewd servant’s office, and one by one he reduced their bills speaking of the great grace of the wealthy landowner. Soon, the village was in an uproar. The people were shouting, but not with anger. They were shouts of joy as the people told their stories to one another of the wealthy landowner’s great generosity in reducing their obligations. They came to the gates of the landowner’s house and began exclaiming his virtue and grace.

When the landowner heard the commotion at his gates he called one of his servants and said, “What is that noise that I hear? Why are all these people at my gates?”

And when the servant found out he said, “Master, they are all praising you. When I asked further, they began to tell stories of how your manager reduced their bills . . . at your request! They are praising you for your great kindness. They are extolling your greatness and the wise stewardship of your manager who told them the good news.”

The wealthy landowner was astonished. His mouth opened, then, a smile spread across his face. He nodded his head as he realized what the manager had done. The manager had tricked him again. But this time, the manager did not waste his wealth on himself. This time, he had invested his wealth in his good name in the village. He had reduced everyone’s debts telling them it was because of the wealthy landowner’s generosity and mercy. And the manager made himself look good in the process.

Even though the landowner had not done this, what could he do? He could not tell the villagers that it was all a big mistake. That would cause him to lose face. The villagers would be angry with him for taking back his word. Nor could he let the manager go!

There was only one thing the landowner could do. He walked to the gates of his estate. There the manager stood basking in the praise of the people and encouraging the praise of the landowner. He took the manager by the hand and together they walked among the people receiving their praise for their goodness and kindness to all.

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The story was over. Jesus looked at the people who had eaten with him. He looked at his disciples. He looked at the religious leaders and he said, “The people of this world are wiser than the people of God. When the people of this world are in a crisis, they figure out a way to survive. They know how to work things that they might live. But my people are ignorant as to what is happening around them.

Jesus walked back to the table where he had eaten, reached out his hands and helped a tax collector to his feet, put his arm around him and said, “The kingdom of God is here. Until John the Baptist, the Law of Moses and the messages of the prophets were your guides. But now the Good News of the Kingdom of God is preached, and all kinds of people are eagerly entering. They are like the shrewd servant who was in a crisis because of his crime. But the shrewd servant realized that the master who had fired him for his crime was also merciful and he knew his last hope, his only hope to survive was to throw himself completely upon the reputation of the master’s mercy and his reputation in the village.

“These dear people with whom I have eaten, they have sinned greatly. It is as if they, like the shrewd manager in the story, have been fired. But they have thrown themselves upon the mercy of God in heaven and found his mercy to be more than enough for their sins, and he receives them into his love and care.

“And you religious leaders, with all your wealth. Do not let wealth keep you from God. Do not take the precious gifts of God and squander them upon yourself. Use the gifts God gives to bless others. Use them to honor the name of God for his great mercy. Use them to make friends for God. Then, if your earthly goods run out, others will take you into their care because you cared for them.”

And that, my friends, is the story of the manager who tricked his master. But as we bring this story to a close, I ask, what does this story mean for us?

You and I are like that dishonest manager. God has given us life and many treasures to manage for his glory. But you and I have wasted them. You and I have used them for ourselves, we have been brought to God, and he has said that we are fired and must leave him. We are under the judgment of God for our sins. We are under the judgment of God for our waste. We are under the judgment of God for our selfishness and making life about us rather than about him.

But in the story, the manager who had sinned against his master worked out a plan to elevate the master’s good name in the village. And by elevating his master’s good name, that rascal saved his life because he knew the master would do nothing to jeopardize his reputation in the village.

We are rascals also, and Jesus is telling us to do a similar thing. He is telling us that we who have been dishonest and selfish and sinful must use the gifts God has given us to bless others. We must use the gifts God has given to create good will among people and to bring people to worship and praise the one who is Lord over all. We must use the gifts God has given to cause people to honor God for his great mercy. We must use whatever wealth we own to bring praise and glory to our

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master, and in doing so, we will escape judgment, ensure eternal life, and store up treasure in heaven.

Yes, many in this world are very shrewd. They know how to survive. They do what it takes to make it through life. Do we who have heard the good news of Jesus know how to prepare ourselves for eternity?