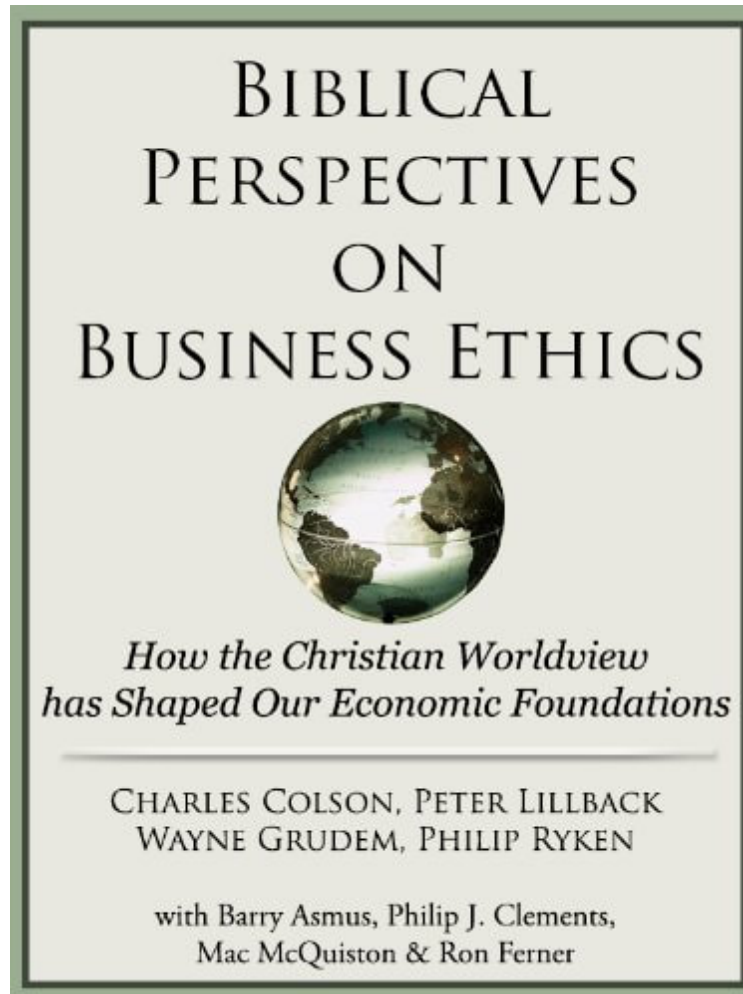


# Swindlers for Jesus

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Preaching on:

Luke 16:1–13

Once, in college, I willingly attended a conference called *Business Ethics for Christians*. The general thrust of this event was to try and convince us Christian young people that as we left college and entered the business world, we had a responsibility to God to be the most upstanding and shining examples imaginable of honesty, diligence, and industry in our respective fields. We had to make Jesus look good out there!

The lecturer spoke about ten standard, yawn-inducing business principles and after each he provided <sup>a</sup> short quote from scripture to show us that these were, in fact, Christian principles and they represented how followers of Jesus should behave on the job. Unfortunately, our scripture reading

from this morning did not make his list! Now that would have been an interesting lecture! Because (just in case you didn't believe your ears and your eyes this morning) in our reading Jesus praises a swindler. Instead of praising the rich man who succeeded in business (we must assume) through the application of virtue and hard work, Jesus praises the poor man—a poor man who falls right into the worst stereotypes about poor people. This manager is a lazy, incompetent, selfish, liar. And Jesus holds this poor, broken swindler up! He holds him up while he's in the act of defrauding his master for his own personal gain and points to him as an example of moral clarity for all of us to follow and learn from. Now, how can that be?

Also in my college years, I worked for a brief time in sales at an outdoor kiosk at Park Street Station on the Boston Red Line right across the street from the church where I heard that lecture on Christian business ethics. There was a man named Sam who sat on an old milk crate at the entrance to the station and sold the Boston Globe and the New York Times and Wall Street Journal to the business people commuting in and out of the city. Sam was a little grizzled, he had a very small limp—barely noticeable, and he had a pretty brisk trade selling these papers. When he'd run out of papers for the day, Sam would take off his clean sweatshirt and he'd replace it with this tattered old thing. He'd walk into the Boston Common and with each step toward the park his limp would get more and more pronounced. In the park he'd beg from the tourists and stuff their bills into the pouch full of the wads of money he'd made that day selling his papers.

Riding home from work on the subway one day, a man, presumably homeless, asked me for a dollar. I just turned my head away. He went down the car and I saw someone give him a five-dollar bill. It was Sam.

Now, I was friendly with Sam. People called him the mayor of Park Street Station, so it was hard not to be friendly with him. But every time he'd wave goodbye to me and head off to the Common, I judged him. I knew—for certain—that I was better person than Sam. But now look at us. The kid who sat through *Business Ethics for Christians* was being given a lesson in the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Sam the swindler. To put it in the language of Jesus from our scripture reading this morning: Sam was faithful with his dishonest wealth and I was faithless with my "honest" wealth.

Well, if you're anything like me, you don't plan on robbing or conning anyone and that's not likely to change no matter what even Jesus says. So, what can these swindlers teach us about Jesus and what he's actually asking of us non-embezzling types?

First, the parable of the dishonest manager teaches us that Jesus is skeptical of a world divided between a few rich people and the vast majority of poor people who work for them or are indebted to them or both. This reality is not compatible with the values Jesus preaches, teaches, or lives. It is not compatible with the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaims.

Second, Jesus is skeptical of the pious, the righteous, the devout, and the goody two-shoes of this world. He's skeptical that the people who sit through lectures entitled *Business Ethics for Christians* and the people who think their goodness and rule-following makes them better than other people will actually, ever—despite talking a big game and loads of good intentions—that they will actually ever do anything for their themselves or for their neighbors that will address the broken and anti-Kingdom-of-God nature of our social-political-religious-economic structure. Because when you buy into this world, according to Jesus, when you benefit from the rules and norms of this world, you are not preparing yourself for the world yet to come, the Kingdom of God.

This is how the swindler becomes the unwitting hero of Jesus' parable. The swindler (although acting without any lofty intentions) accidentally proclaims the Kingdom of God by forgiving the debts of his master's debtors. And although the swindler is clearly acting purely out of a need for self-preservation, he still acts with respect to one of the great Biblical truths—that I am my brother's keeper, that I cannot survive without a community, that we do not belong to ourselves alone, that we are one body of Christ, and we all belong to one another. As Jesus says in our reading this morning, "If you haven't been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?" The dishonest manager is faithless to his master's wealth and to the rules that protect it, but he is faithful to his master's debtors, and that, says Jesus, (although achieved accidentally) is the proper loyalty—not to money and to power and to the rules that enforce them, but to God and to people and to the good news.

We also learn again that for Jesus our intentions and our appearances and good social standing and other's high opinions of us don't matter. If you think very highly of yourself indeed, and intend to change the world for the better one day, and devote yourself to proper moral reasoning, and have years of theological training, but you don't have a dollar to spare on the subway, you will never be the hero in one of Jesus' parables. And if you intend nothing but a bit swindling to save your own behind, but in the process you forgive debts, show mercy, and make friends, then you may be closer to the Kingdom of God than all the Children of Light. That is how Jesus sees us. That is how Jesus sees the world.

Jesus' parables always bring us good news and this one especially is good news for all of us. Have you failed? Have you lost? Have you squandered? Have you been caught? Are you a rascal? A swindler? A liar? A cheat? Do you think you'll never be able to fix it? Are you afraid that you'll never find forgiveness or peace? Jesus has a way out: love your neighbors, forgive your debtors, show mercy to those like yourself. Starting right now, right in the middle of the mess and the stress and the chaos, be faithful to other people and you will begin to discover the true riches of Jesus' way.