



Then the manager rushes off to Sam Shapiro's grain farm. He offers him a similar, one-time, once in a lifetime deal to cut his debt by 20%. The wheat farmer jumps at the chance. Now both the olive oil king and the wheat farmer are grateful to the rich landowner for his generosity, and the manager has a place to land when he gets summarily canned.

Expecting the landowner to throw a major fit when he finds out about how the books have been cooked and discounts were given, imagine the surprise of the dishonest manager when his boss praises him. "Your plan was absolutely genius," he hears. And now he can't fire him because he would look bad to those other two business men who view him as very fair and generous in dealing with people.

Alright, so what do we make of this story? Is Jesus commending dishonesty, deceit and shrewdness as business and accounting practices? My guess is that you've heard very few sermons on this parable. It is considered one of the most perplexing stories in all of scripture.

Even major Biblical scholars don't agree on how to interpret it. Some try to soften the problematic moral character by suggesting that the manager was simply eliminating his own commission from the bill and that's how he could reduce each so drastically. Others contend that he is simply subtracting the interest charged by the owner, interest which, according to the Torah, should not have been charged in the first place. One scholar even went so far as to suggest that maybe these debtors were deadbeats. Rubin and Sam were always slow in paying their bills. Maybe what the business owner was praising in his manager was being able to collect as much as he did before he left.

Well, the truth is there is no agreement on what this parable means. Every commentary I consulted gave a different twist, spin, or conjecture on the story's meaning.

So, we're still left with the problem of how to understand this enigmatic and troubling story? Well, I'm going to offer three possibilities – think of them as coats on a 3-hook coat rack. We'll try each one on. They're different; they aren't necessarily connected to each other. But let's try them on and see which one fits today.

To grasp coat number 1 we need to remember the context for this parable in Luke's account. Jesus had just finished telling one of the most popular and remembered parables we have in scripture – the Parable of the Prodigal Son, probably better named the Parable of the Forgiving Father. You remember the tale – about that willful child who demanded his share of the family inheritance, and then runs off to squander it. When he "comes to himself," that wonderful phrase of self-enlightenment, he goes home and is surprisingly welcomed back by good old forgiving dad.

The people that would have originally heard that story, just like those who heard the story we are struggling with today, had inflated notions of the importance of money. Consequently, these folks would have been aghast at the way that Prodigal had treated his inheritance. To them, wasting money on fast living was unforgivable. Money was almost a minor deity in their worldly pantheon.

So, the parable today could be seen as speaking directly to that issue. Money is not sacred; it is not a holy icon. It is a tool. Money is to be used to accomplish worthwhile

things. It is not to be put on an altar and bowed down to. Money is a resource for use in the Kingdom. So, those who heard this story with this coat wrapped around them heard Jesus' admonition on not being able to serve both God and money very clearly. "Hey, it's only money," Jesus is saying. The unjust manager used it wisely to produce a good result – the reestablishment of business relations with his boss and creditors, and with himself and the creditors, and even, as it turned out, with himself and his boss. Everybody won.

The second coat is ready to be tried on and, in fact, we just put one arm in the sleeve when we moved past the money talk and began to focus on the relationships that were re-established by the actions, however shrewd, of the manager. By the way the wealthy landowner acted upon hearing of what the manager did it would be easy to draw the conclusion that, for him anyway, relationships with his clients and the reputation he had in the community for fairness were more valuable commodities than gallons of olive oil, bushels of wheat or stacks of money. The redefined accounting practices of his manager saved everyone much frustration, embarrassment and hand-wringing.

There is an historical example of this principle that dates back to the late 1800's. One morning in 1888, a man named Alfred, one of the world's leading industrialists, opened a French newspaper and was shocked to see his own obituary printed there. It was a mistake, of course. It was Alfred's brother who had died. However, Alfred had a rare opportunity to read about how other people saw him. The obituary simply called him "The Dynamite King." You see, he had made his fortune manufacturing and selling explosives. But it rankled him to be thought of that way.

So, he decided, like the manager in our story, to use wealth to change his reputation and how he was viewed. He arranged his estate to establish a special prize, to be given each year to the person or persons who do the most for the cause of world peace. To this day, the Nobel Peace Prize is one of the most coveted and distinguished awards any world leader can receive. Nobel once meant "The Dynamite King." Now the name is synonymous with world peace. Money can be used wisely to make this a better world and to establish relationships that are vital and important and life-altering.

Last coat, and the one I like the best actually. It is possible, I think, to hear this story of praise being heaped on that less-than-perfect manager and to hear it as encouragement for our very own less-than-perfect lives. "If that rascal manager could do something worthy of praise, perhaps there is hope for me," we can rightly conclude.

I think ordinary folks like us identify with the imperfections of others. That is why some Biblical stories strike a cord within us. Some of the greatest heroes of the Bible were always shown to be frail, flawed, fractured human beings. Jacob, the patriarch, deceived his father, cheated his own brother, and scammed his father-in-law out of most of his flock. Great King David lusted after his beautiful neighbor, committed adultery with her, and then plotted to kill her husband. The apostle that Jesus chose to head the church denied even knowing the Lord three times on the night of Jesus' arrest.

Don't these stories give us a little hope? If God can use those folks for good, maybe he can use me and you. It may not be the central theme of the story, but the coat does feel good on.

So, walking up to the parable we find a coat hanger with three coats. Coat one: it's only money. It is a renewable resource, and not a holy object. Don't worship it. Use it as a tool for good.

Coat two: friendship and relationships count more than money. Wise is the person who uses their resources to foster relationships that help build and nurture the Kingdom of God on this earth.

And coat three: even less-than-perfect folks like you and me can be used by God for good in this world. And for that we say, "Thanks be to God."

Three coats; three interpretations among a myriad more. Which one fits you this Lord's Day?

AMEN.