

Thou shalt commit adultery. I repeat: Thou *shalt* commit adultery. That's what the Bible says. You can look it up. Of course, you'd have to look it up in the King James Version of 1631, in which the word "not" was accidentally omitted. This typo so infuriated King Charles that he commanded that all copies be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition. Because of the loss of a word, this version became known as "The Wicked Bible."

Unfortunately, it appears that more and more people today are leaving the "nots" out of their Ten Commandments. Either that, or they are simply ignoring them. Commandment number eight seems to be suffering the worst in our contemporary culture: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." That commandment demands that the truth be told, especially in a court of law, and it forbids anyone to tell a lie in order to gain an advantage over a neighbor. In the world of the Bible, justice can be done only if reality is not distorted by the telling of lies.

This seems like an increasingly quaint notion, especially in a society that often behaves like a Liars' Club. In his book *The Cheating Culture*, author David Callahan argues that cheating is no longer limited to the secretive, shady society of criminals, con artists, dealers, hustlers, and other low-life characters. Now, he says, everyone is doing it — and because everyone sees everyone else doing it, they keep on doing it.

Is this an overstatement? Perhaps... But consider the case assembled by Callahan. He says that the trouble begins in our brutally competitive economic climate which rewards bottom-line results and often allows winners to get away with ethical and criminal transgressions. Honesty might be a nice ideal, but it isn't always true that honest folks come out on top. Callahan argues that cheaters cheat because cheating can help a person to get ahead, especially as the chances of being

caught continue to shrink, along with the severity of the punishments that are handed out to offenders who get caught. For many people, the benefits of a successful cheat far outweigh any potential punishment.

Let me provide you with a brief example. On most interstates throughout the United States, there are a number of express lanes reserved for carpoolers, and these lanes cut a great deal of time off a person's daily commute. Solo drivers are prohibited from these lanes, and they face a stiff fine if they are caught. But many people cheat the system every day, figuring that an occasional fine is simply the cost of doing business. They have no problem being in the Liar's Club, as long as they reach their destination ahead of the competition.

The bottom line for Callahan is that upright folks are being drawn into cheating — drawn by the fear that they won't be able to make it in modern society otherwise. "Thou shalt not drive solo in the carpool lane" is being twisted by our brutally competitive climate into a wicked new commandment: "Thou shalt drive solo ... or else."

Ok, so in light of all this cheating, what are we to make of the message we observe in the parable of the dishonest manager this morning? At first glance, it seems to be an invitation to join the Liar's Club and "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." But a deeper examination of our story reveals that it is more about heavenly riches than it is about earthly wealth and property. Its focus is on preparing us for the next world, not getting ahead in this one. In fact, most of the Gospel stories we have heard and read these past several weeks have all been about, or have dealt with, preparing us for the Kingdom of God!

From the very beginning of Jesus parable, we know that the dishonest manager is a card-carrying member of the cheating culture — he is charged with squandering the property of his rich boss and is immediately given his two-weeks' notice. "You're fired!" his master bellows, causing the shady steward to ask

himself, “What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me?” He knows that he is not strong enough for manual labor, he is aware his previous work performance would make it rather difficult to get another job as a Steward (once people heard about his poor work performance), and after having such a prestigious job he is probably too ashamed to sit in the street with a beggar’s cup.

So, he comes up with a plan. In order to guarantee that he will have a safe place to land, that he would be welcomed into the homes of his former clients, he summons the master’s debtors and gives them some wonderfully deep discounts. To the one who owes 100 jugs of olive oil, the manager says that the debt is now just 50. To the one who is in debt for 100 containers of wheat, the manager announces, “You’re in luck — your bill is now 80!

This sounds pretty slippery, doesn’t it? On the surface, it appears to be unethical, and maybe even criminal. So not only has the steward squandered his master’s property, he goes on to cheat his boss out of goods and resources that were rightfully owed to him. Unfortunately for us, biblical scholars are unclear about the precise nature of these transactions, and so they suggest a couple of possibilities.

According to the first option, the manager is a crook, plain and simple, a man who dishonestly falsifies his accounts, and records, in order to gain the affection of the rich man’s debtors. In this case, he is cheating his master by reducing the size of their debts, and he is running the risk of being thrown in the slammer for stealing.

The problem with this interpretation is that it makes the master’s reaction sound rather odd. Why would he praise his soon to be x-employee for being so deceitful? The parable tells us that the rich man commends — *yes, commends* — the dishonest manager because he has acted shrewdly, but this is an unlikely

response from a wealthy man who apparently has just lost fifty jugs of olive oil and twenty containers of wheat. While we might expect the rich man to press charges, after all he is a victim of fraud; we certainly don't expect him to offer a commendation, or to compliment to his embezzler.

About a year ago when I was shopping at the grocery store I swiped my debit card to complete the transaction and it was declined! When I called my bank to find out why this happened, I was transferred to their fraud department and found out that my card number and pin had been stolen. Apparently, someone in New York had been using it to buy things at CVS, Mcdonalds, Chicken Lovers, and even spent two hundred dollars at a steak place in New Hyde Park. If that person is ever caught, I don't think I would find myself praising them with flattering remarks regarding their craftiness and ingenuity.

Going deeper in our story there is another way of looking at the rich man's reaction. There's a second option, one that sees the manager as a shrewd businessman, one who is willing to sacrifice short-term earnings for long-term security. In this interpretation, the manager simply cuts his own commission out of the amount that the debtors owe. The 100 jugs of olive oil can be broken down into 50 for the master, and 50 for the manager, and in the same way, the 100 containers of wheat can be itemized as 80 for the master and 20 for the manager. When the manager calls the debtors to settle their accounts, he simply eliminates his own commission, knowing that he will benefit in the long term from having a place to stay once he is out of work.

In this case, he's not a liar. He is simply taking the long view. This second interpretation helps us to make sense of the master's reaction, and it provides us with some clarification. The rich man commends the manager for acting shrewdly, because he knows that there are times in which it is beneficial to resist the lure of a quick buck and make a long-term investment. On top of this, the rich man knows

that he hasn't lost anything himself — he'll still get the olive oil and the wheat that the debtors owe him. What does he care if his former employee takes his commissions with him or not?

The point of the parable is this, according to Jesus: “No slave can serve two masters.” In other words, Jesus is talking about **commitment**. You cannot maintain a dual focus on short-term profits and long-term security. You have to pick one or the other, and give it your undivided attention. As is true in the story of the dishonest manager, there are times in which we have to sacrifice the commissions of this world, so that we'll have the eternal comforts of God's world. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today's passage by saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth”.

That's no lie. Problem is...our cheating culture encourages us to focus on earthly wealth, short-term profits, and worldly commissions. It tempts us to cut corners in pursuit of financial success and pushes us to twist the truth in order to beat the competition. Today's Scripture challenges us to resist this temptation, to focus on a higher calling, and to be willing to sacrifice some of our earthly commissions in order to gain heavenly wealth. It calls us to practice Christian stewardship and make sacrificial gifts in support of God's work in the world. When we do this, we are following the example of the steward in the parable, a person who shrewdly trades short-term profits for long-term security.

In his commentary on Luke, author Fred Craddock concludes his comments with, “The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. The one faithful in today's nickels and dimes is the one who is to be trusted with the big account, but it is easy to be indifferent toward small obligations, while quite sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters.” The realism of these sayings is simply that life consists of a series of seemingly small

opportunities. This week most of us will not christen a ship, write a book, end a war, dine with a King, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write an encouraging note, visit a nursing home, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, tie quilts with a quilting group, and feed the neighbor's cat!

Today's parable is also an invitation to **community**. As surprising as this sounds, take note of what the manager discovers soon after he loses his job: He needs friends. He realizes that his money can't save him, and so he uses his financial prowess to create a community of support. This is an odd way to build friendships, but it earns the approval of Jesus: "I tell you," he says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes".

So, is this an invitation for us to join the Liar's Club? Not at all. Of course not! Jesus isn't saying that we should be dishonest; instead, he's advising us to use whatever wealth we have — what he calls "dishonest wealth" — to build a community that can endure. None of us is meant to live a life of isolation, and none of us is designed to practice our faith apart from the Christian community. Like the dishonest steward, we need friends to help us through the tough times in life, and we need a community that we can serve through our own gifts of time and talent and treasure.

The commandments of this parable can be easily summarized: "Thou shalt invest in long-term savings — eternal savings," and "Thou shalt participate in community." And there's nothing dishonest about it. Thanks be to God! AMEN