

A cheating culture?

Luke 16, 1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer

About 6 months ago, Elaine and I were mulling over investing in some green energy options at home – solar panels and the like. Elaine made the cardinal error one evening of answering the phone to a sales call and, as they were trying to sell green energy systems, and as we had been talking about it, engaging in conversation. The net result of this was that about a week later, a chap arrived to give us the hard sell.

My suspicions were initially raised when I mentioned to him that one of our problems was that our roofs didn't really face South – something that you ideally need for solar panels. He and I then stood on School Lane looking at the main roof of our house (and the one where you could stick the most panels) with him telling me that they were South facing.

Now geography was never my strongest point but I did point out to him that we were standing parallel to the A49 and looking in the direction of Warrington which was, the last time I looked significantly to the north of Bunbury.

These suspicions were reinforced when I asked him for references and contact details of other satisfied customers, which he said they would be happy to supply.

However, he said, they couldn't give us contact details as that would be unfair to the customers who would be inundated with unwanted phone calls but he'd be happy to get one or two of them to ring me and sing the praises of his company. I then pointed out that there was a minor flaw in this approach in that the person phoning me could be anyone, his brother for example or even him putting on a funny voice. At this point we concluded our meeting and, funnily enough we never heard from him again.

It did get me thinking that there are probably thousands of unscrupulous people out there only too willing to take advantage of people and relieve them of their hard earned cash. You hear stories on TV and in the papers every week of vulnerable people being taken for a ride by unscrupulous businesses and traders.

Do we now live in a cheating culture? One that encourages us to focus on earthly wealth, short-term profits and worldly commissions. Sometimes I wonder. I talked a few weeks ago about The Apprentice, the TV show that pits aggressive young so called business people against each other. The implication behind much of the programme is that we live in a dog eat dog culture and that the only way

to rise up is by standing on other people – that our gain needs to be someone else's loss.

So what are we to make of the parable of the dishonest manager – almost a biblical edition of *The Apprentice*, which seems to endorse some rather devious dealings?

Thou shalt commit adultery. 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 nine seems to be suffering the worst in our contemporary culture: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20:16, KJV).

This 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 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 meted out to offenders who get caught.

Many people see this cheating happening at a mega scale and think, well they get away with it why shouldn't I? The banking crisis has shown in stark reality, the scale of some of the blatant cheating that was going on within the global banking system as very clever people found very clever ways to circumvent the rules and line their own pockets.

I use the past tense more in hope than anticipation as I suspect the remnants of that culture are still just as prevalent but the rules are newer and they're still learning the cheats. If ordinary people see the mega cheats getting away with it, then they start to think what's good for the goose is good for the gander and they start their own low key cheating and a culture is reinforced.

The word 'cheat' is no longer considered as a negative – just look at the world of computer games. I'm sure many of you were queuing up outside your favourite games store this week to get your hands on a copy of the new Grand Theft Auto 5 – the newest and biggest computer game release this year. Within hours of the launch, the internet was full of sites selling 'cheats' for the game. These are special instructions that allow you to avoid ploughing through all the game to get to certain parts of it – instead you can use these 'cheats' to enhance your gaming pleasure.

So, in light of all this cheating, what's the message of the parable of the dishonest manager? 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" (Luke 16:9). But a deeper examination reveals that this story is more about heavenly riches than it is about earthly wealth. Its focus is on preparing for the next world, not getting ahead in this one.

From the start of the story, 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!" he bellows, sounding like a first-century Alan Sugar. "What will I do," the shady steward says to himself, "now that my master is taking the position away from me?" (v. 3). He knows that he is not strong enough for manual labor, and he is 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 in 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. 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 the records in order to gain the affection of the debtors. In this case, he is cheating his master by reducing the size of the 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. 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 rich man who has just lost 50 jugs of olive oil and 20 containers of wheat. While we might not expect the rich man to press charges, we certainly don't expect him to offer a commendation.

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. Here 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." So Jesus here 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" (v. 13). That's no lie. The 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 gospel 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. The passage is a call for 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. The 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" (v. 9). Is this an invitation to join the Liar's Club? Not at all. 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." There's nothing dishonest about it.

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