

Ransom  
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**1 Timothy 2:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. <sup>3</sup>This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup>For there is one God;

there is also one mediator between God and humankind,  
Christ Jesus, himself human,

<sup>6</sup> who gave himself a ransom for all

—this was attested at the right time. <sup>7</sup>For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

**Luke 16:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. <sup>2</sup>So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ <sup>3</sup>Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup>I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ <sup>5</sup>So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup>He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ <sup>7</sup>Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ <sup>8</sup>And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. <sup>9</sup>And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. <sup>11</sup>If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup>No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’

Wait! What? What did Jesus just encourage us to do? ‘Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.’ Again, I say, huh? This text has perplexed theologians throughout time, who have wished to know the day-to-day context in which it was spoken or anything else that might make these words make more sense. You can read four commentaries and get four different guesses, because that’s really what they are - educated guess, but guesses nonetheless - about what Jesus meant by this sentence and this parable. Jesus commended the steward through the voice of the master who commended him because he had

acted shrewdly. Among the interpretations I found, the one that makes the most sense to me is offered by Professor Scott Bader-Saye. He suggests:

Perhaps the Jesus who told this parable calls us to dissipate wealth as the steward did, but in order to be dispossessed of the desire that our gifting produce the benefit of indebting others to us – indeed, to be dispossessed of the illusion that wealth gives us security and stability. Only as we are freed by our holy squandering are we made able to live the pilgrim life of those nomads who have relinquished the possessions that possess them...If we read this way, the problem with the unjust steward is not that he “gifted” his master’s debtors (even his master commends him for this), but that his gifting was poisoned by the ulterior motive of receiving something back from those to whom he gave. Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the man’s scattering of wealth in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange – an “eternal” tenting in which one is received not into a settled domain but into a triune life that is eternally on the move.<sup>1</sup>

You may be wondering why he is talking about tents when we read about eternal homes. A funny nuance of the translation is that, while we read homes in both verse four and verse nine, the word in verse four is οἶκος and the word in verse nine is σκηνάς. The steward’s hope is that they will welcome him into their homes, οἶκος, but Jesus says they will welcome him into their tents, σκηνάς. Clear as mud, right?

Trusting that Bader-Saye is onto some truth about this text, I would suggest the steward’s holy squandering, the price he pays, for a reduction in any debt paid means a reduction in his percentage of the profit, this price he paid bought him something he wasn’t expecting. What was he trying to buy? From *The Parables for Today* study that the Wednesday Bible Study group took on in the spring, I can tell you that there is more meaning behind the manager’s statement, “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg,” than we might initially give thought to. As author Alyce McKenzie writes, “We might assume that he is whining here, selfishly unwilling to engage in honest labor. He is actually just stating the fact that he is not prepared, by physical training or by the habit of hardship, to compete with the peasant labor pool for the hardest, most menial of jobs: digging. With his strength gone, he would be reduced to begging, and in short order would die because of the malnutrition and disease that came with poverty.”<sup>2</sup> By making these deals with his master’s clients, he is trying to buy himself a shot at life. Jesus says he has gone beyond that and has, in a fashion, “bought” eternal life. By devaluing possessions, it is implied that the manager has received a sense of the greater importance of relationships over things. Granted, that feels like a stretch but a stretch is what I share with theologians for centuries before me, who worked to find the way this story made sense in the bigger story of the gospel, in the story of eternal life bought for us by Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Alyce M. McKenzie, *The Parables for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

In **this** overarching story, we turn easily to 1 Timothy, which won't leave us scratching our heads in puzzlement but perhaps, instead, leaves us agape with its simplicity and profundity. Here we have another form of buying; here we have a ransom paid. A ransom is paid to get back what is dear to a person. A ransom was paid that God might get us back. And not just us, those of us sitting in Presbyterian or even Christian pews. A ransom for all because God our Savior desires everyone to be saved. Christ gave himself in life, in death, and in the resurrection so that we all might be returned to God. Simple. Profound. And where we are left agape is at the urging of Paul that we pray for everyone. For all people. Not just the ones we like or the ones we know or the ones our friends know. We'll delve into prayer more during our Adult Education course which begins today but, if you can't make it, know that this is enough: Christ died for everyone – we are in no position to pick and choose when making our prayers. It's that simple.

On the heels of our summer lessons on the Lord's Prayer, we know that our prayers are serious business. If we have faith in the profound truth that God desires **everyone** back to God's self, then we rightly heed Paul's urging to Timothy, and to us, to pray for everyone. Professor Stephanie Mar Smith reminds us that all of our prayers are "an act of participation with the salvific will of God on behalf of all persons."<sup>3</sup> Remember, **Our** Father. And if we make others part of our prayer lives, especially those we would rather not, we will be changed. As Pastor Jane Anne Ferguson puts it: "if we are fervent in our prayers we will be called to see that person as a child of God, a person created in God's own image just as we are, a person God desires to save. Our prayers will change us."<sup>4</sup>

We say our prayers, for those we love and for those whom we believe God alone loves. We do so to connect God to these people. Maybe it's for healing. Maybe it's for peace. Maybe it's for comfort. Maybe it's so they will change their horrible ways. We pray that they might feel God, see God, recognize God, know God. We pray, thinking we are doing so to return others to God, trusting that somehow God receives our prayers as part of God's acts of salvation. The more we do this, the more we sense a partnership with God - creator and created in relationship. And our prayers become more than our requests for God to touch others. Our prayers change us. Our prayers for others, especially the ones for whom we would rather not pray, as well as those offered from the depths of our love for another, they change us. They bring **us** back to God.

Christ who taught us to pray, **not** as a to-do item to guide us toward the straight and narrow, is the same Christ who gave himself a ransom for all, a ransom paid so we might be returned to God. Our prayers, like the ones taught by Christ and encouraged by the apostle Paul are one way, a huge way, in

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 90.

which we return to God. Like the dishonest steward who thought he was doing one thing and found his actions had much bigger implications, we thought our prayers were for one reason but Christ knew all along that our prayers to God reveal our own paths to God, trails blazed by none other than Christ. We pray because we trust that Jesus has cleared any obstacles between us and God. In proclaiming our faith in Jesus' saving acts, which we do every time we pray, we are changed. To that, I say "Amen."

Let us pray: O Lord, we humbly offer our prayers to you. We lift up those who are so near to our hearts. We lift up those who fill us with anger, those whom we do not understand, and those who have hurt us. Holy God, we offer our prayers for all your children, every one. Amen.