Turning understanding on its head (Luke 16:1-13)

The inability to make sense of the parable of the unjust manager allows us to experience confusion similar to those first students of Jesus.

by Audrey West

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Why would Jesus tell the parable of the unjust manager, and why would Luke preserve it?

Despite centuries of interpretation, questions about the parable exceed answers. Today's interpreters are in good company. Even the disciples—the students who sat at Jesus' feet, listened to his teaching, watched his interactions, followed him around the countryside—were perplexed by some of his stories, despite being able to ask Jesus directly about the storyteller's intent.

If the disciples could not unravel the parables without direct assistance from Jesus, what hope is there for the rest of us?

There are just so many questions about this parable. Jesus in Luke has plenty to say about the dangers of wealth, and yet this parable trades on wealth gained by squandering another's property or negotiating with the "children of this age." Is dishonesty supposed to be a model for God's reign? Are any of the characters to be understood as "good"? What are we to make of the relationship between the parable and the maxims appended to its ending?

Perhaps our questions are the point. Luke reports (8:10) that Jesus spoke in parables so that “looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.” Could it be that Jesus’ intention is to turn understanding on its head and leave people pondering, requiring a return, again and again, to both story and story-teller?

Despite 2,000 years of interpretive history, the inability to make sense of the parable of the unjust manager allows us to experience confusion similar to those first students of Jesus.

I’ve had many fine teachers over the years, but one of my all-time favorites was Dr. George, who taught diagnostics at my alma mater’s veterinary school. I’ve often wondered whether Dr. George might have learned story-telling techniques from reading parables of Jesus.

I was not a vet student, but I learned a lot from Dr. George’s teaching methods. (Believe it or not, there are similarities between the study of biblical Greek and the identification of pathogens in pigs, not the least of which is a requirement for attention to detail.)

For the final exam, George told a story. The main character—a chicken, a horse, or a family’s beloved mutt—was suddenly stricken with an undetermined illness. A long list of symptoms and the results of a couple of lab tests were followed by two questions: What is the cause of this animal’s distress? and What is your treatment plan?

That is, How do you interpret the data? and What does it mean?

When papers were returned, most of the students received outstanding grades, although their answers differed. They demanded to know: What is the right answer?

Dr. George refused to be pinned down. “As long as you provided a diagnosis that made sense of the symptoms and a fitting rationale for your treatment plan, you received an A.”

Most students were unhappy with that response. They were determined to prove to the teacher and to each other that their own response was the correct one. They’d meet during office hours and argue their rationales, with reference to diagrams, diagnostic manuals, and real-life experiences in field work. With each conversation, the students encountered multiple possibilities, new understandings, and a push to

expand their diagnostic capabilities.

The final exam was doing its work. May it be so for the parables of Jesus.