

Sermon preached at Eaglehawk Uniting Church
22nd September 2013
by Rev Ralph Clarke
Readings: 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

The story in Luke chapter 16 is often called "The unrighteous Steward" or, in the news sheet version, "The Crooked Manager". The emphasis is on the Real Estate agent and his wrongdoing. Along with Christians through the ages, I am amazed at how he can rip off his boss, reducing the rental fees owing to the landlord by 20-50%, and then be praised for being clever enough to do all that, as if cleverness is more important than honesty.

I suppose I am influenced by my parents and church telling me to be honest. I am also appalled by news reports of complaints about Real Estate agents, and of people who run companies, and who then lose money, and the penalties are often no more than a slap on the wrist, suggesting that what they did doesn't matter much.

The other character in this story is the landlord who seems to accept the loss of his rental fees and does nothing about the agents wrongdoing. Are we to link the landlord to courts that seem to go easy on penalties for wrongdoers, or to companies that go easy on their employees who lose other people's money? To me, heavy penalties seem to be handed out to some while others get off lightly. Or maybe, given the occasional concerns about unfair workplace dismissals in Australia, is this employer a real champion, giving people a real chance in life?

The really surprising thing is that Jesus PRAISES the agent. I know Jesus is forgiving but I would have thought he would require this agent to face some penalty. The boss in the story is called "lord" which I always associated with landlord. The Greek word for lord here (kurios) is the same word used for God and Jesus in the bible. It looks as if this landlord is called lord because he reflects God and Jesus in his attitude to the agent.

There are some links between this story and the previous one in Luke that we often call The Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son is a story about a father, and a son who misuses the family possessions. This story is about a boss whose employee misuses his boss's possessions. Both the Prodigal and the agent were accepted in spite of what they had done.

In the story of the Prodigal, the older son criticises his brother's wastefulness, and also his father for being too lenient. There's no older brother in today's story but suddenly I realise the CRITIC, is me. In this story, I'VE been drawn into the same role as the older brother in the Prodigal story. And then it dawned on me. The father in the Prodigal story and the landlord in today's story are both generous, merciful, accepting and forgiving. They are like God and Jesus. So that's why Jesus praises the agent.

But what about the wrongdoers in these 2 stories? They are both praised, not for their failings, but for taking their chance on the mercy and generosity of the father in one story, and the boss in the other.

What's important to Jesus is not the agent's failings, but his willingness to grab a small window of opportunity after his sacking, to secure his future. The agent had to entrust everything to the unfailing generosity of the landlord, who, he believed would willingly pay a price for his salvation rather than punish him. His trust in the landlord's mercy was vindicated, and he is declared wise. His wisdom is in knowing where his salvation lies. In the same way, we are encouraged to have faith in Jesus and not put off faith.

Maybe a couple more things can also be said about this story. Like the agent, we are to remember the grace of God that is greater than all our troubles. Like the agent, we would be much healthier if we focused on the grace in our life rather than anger or bitterness. Psychologists often advise people dealing with depression to focus on what they CAN do rather than of what they cannot do, and, to practice making positive responses to others at least once a day. Like the agent in this story, don't forget to look for the positives in your life, & expect that these will be there.

Some people refer to the agent as the "unrighteous steward", but in the original Greek it is the "steward of unrighteousness". That means, it's not only a story about one man who has faults, but about unrighteousness generally. Sometimes people excuse their bad behaviour by saying "Oh everyone does that". Here we have someone who realises he needs to take responsibility for his life. Jesus encourages us to see wisdom, but also to act on what we see. It is never too late to be God's people.