

1) In novels, dramas, short stories, and operas, titles can be helpful.

The Count of Monte Cristo, The Merchant of Venice, The Marriage of Figaro—

Such titles serve as memory hooks.

They offer hints as to who's involved, what's in play.

They frame our expectations of what the narrative is "about".

Usually—appropriately—the one who give the work its title is the author.

In the parables, however, what one Bible scholar calls, *Short Stories by Jesus*,

the titles are affixed by much later editors, not by the Gospel Anthologizers—

and certainly not by the One who set forth those Parables in the first place.

(Hard to imagine Jesus saying, *I've got this really great story to tell you;*

the title of which is: The Good Samaritan.)

Parable titles do help jog our memories.

*(The Rich Fool, ah yes—that's the one about the guy who wanted to build bigger barns;
but somehow got distracted by his own death.)*

Frequently, however, parable titles can be somewhat misleading.

Take the two we heard last week—*The Lost Sheep*, and *The Lost Coin*.

Yes, the first is about a sheep, but it's much more about a shepherd—

an economically irresponsible shepherd who risks all 99 sheep to rescue only 1.

The second is about a coin, but only incidentally; it's much more about a searching woman—

one whose total fixation on sweeping seems obsessively-compulsive.

And then there's the parable we didn't hear last Sunday, but which directly follows those two:

The Prodigal Son. A story not about a single prodigal, but a family of three.

A son who squanders money—A son who lavishes resentment

And a dad who invests himself utterly in both his sons with no promise whatever of return.

2) And so, at last, to the Parable *du Jour*—the one we just heard.

It's usually titled: *The Unjust Steward* or *The Dishonest Manager*.

Both titles are true, as far as they go—which is just far enough to be seriously misleading.

If we must pin a title on this very odd story, it probably should be something like:

The Surprising Subversion of the Totally Dishonest, Hopelessly Dysfunctional,

Desperately Self-Destructive Social System. (Awkward, I grant you, but more accurate by far.)

This manager, summarily sacked by his boss, is emblematic of every single player in the game.

In brief, the scenario is a set of economic and social relationships where:

- Everyone is dependent on everybody else.
- Everybody hates everyone else.
- Everyone tries to cheat everybody else.
- Everyone uses everybody else, the better to cheat everyone else.

Just the kind of neighborhood in which you really want to live.

Think a Trade War on steroids—the steroids being the endemic, wholesale deception that everybody sees right through—but everyone keeps right on using anyway.

3) To be more specific:

- The land-owning master is a conspicuous big spender—it's how he shows his clout.
BUT he depends on rent from the produce of his land to feed his habit.
SO he bribes the manager to squeeze the wherewithal from the crop-raising peasants.
- The peasants work land they used to own; but had to sell to feed their starving families.
SO, they do their best to underpay their rent, and bribe the manager to cover for them.
BUT if their cover is blown, they'll be out on the street.
- The manager is in the middle—trying to please the owner and placate the peasants
BUT he can only make ends meet by taking the owner's bribes to jack the rents UP.
AND by collecting PAY OFFS from the peasants to keep the rents DOWN.
SO continually, surreptitiously he plays each side against the other.

In this economic system, everyone, as the saying goes, *is at the mercy* of everyone else.
And no matter where you look, there's not a modicum of mercy anywhere in sight.

4) Social arrangements such as these lack more than mercy—they lack STABILITY.

Sooner or later, one way or another, the house of cards collapses. And this one does.
The owner gets wise, perhaps because the peasants start rumors,
hoping to prod the manager into even further concessions.

Who knows what happened—it doesn't matter—the jig is up—the manager is out.
He's right to be worried: When word gets around, who's gonna hire him as manager?
If he gets a job tilling the soil, his white-collar hands won't be able to wield a pick and shovel.
Once he's on the street, who'll put pennies in his begging cup? He is TOAST.

So—he rotates the direction of his cheating by 180 degrees.

Rather than doing his best to exploit everyone, he cheats on the cheating game—
he cheats in a way that USES everyone to BENEFIT everyone.

He reduces rents—That makes the peasants happy with him, and happy with the landowner.
The owner won't dare raise rents again—he'd lose his newly gained good will, and face revolt.
That everybody profits from what the manager does is, of course, a good thing for him.
So what can the owner say to this manager, but:

Wow, You USED the system to SUBVERT the system—DUDE, You're really CLEVER!

5) And your POINT is, Jesus?

Maybe it's not a single point but a series of points that, taken together,
trace an interesting meaning trajectory regarding the essence of economics.

- Point 1: Cooperation can seem less than ideal as a strategy of self-interest;
but cut-throat competition can be far more dangerous and self-destructive.
Zero sum game economies can end up costing everyone dearly.
- Point 2: Suspicion and hostility can sometimes be combatted
by employing as a weapon a strategy of trust
- Point 3: Using relationships to make money may not be nearly as smart,
as using money to foster personal relationships.
- Point 4: Even dishonest wealth schemes depend on a tacit, deep-down longing,
not just for something more, but for something better—not just riches—but TRUE riches.

- Point 5: What, in desperation, the manager resorts to is not really that far from the seemingly foolish risks undertaken by that sheep-searching shepherd, that coin-seeking woman, and that all-forgiving father.
- Point 6: If even a self-serving manager finds altruism to be in his best interests, imagine what might happen in a world that was invaded by intentional followers of Jesus, whose love, greater than any other, led him to lay down his life for his friends?

6) A self-serving manager, driven by desperation to save his own skin, and a self-sacrificing Savior, driven by compassion to lay down his life—the meaning arc that flashes in this strange parabolic comparison invites us to reconsider what economics is ultimately about.

Economics has been described as “the dismal science”— a phrase coined by the Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, in a social/political setting where he was actually advocating human subjugation as a necessary means to protect the privilege of economically elites.

A social setting not that far from the one in which Jesus tells this Short Story.

Economics can—often does—devolve into mutually enslaving, eventually and inevitably self-destructing social arrangements.

The word “economy,” however, is derived comes from two ancient Greek words:

Eikos—household; and nomos—order.

In its first employment, then, “economy” did not designate facts and figures, charts and graphs, strategies and policies, conflicts and negotiations— contests and competitions—winners and losers.

An “economy” initially had to do with the ordering of households— with the healthy nurturing of one’s family intra-murally, and with the healthy extra-mural engaging of one’s community, society, and world.

Christian theologians in the Middle Ages picked up on this, and spoke of God’s “economies”— the myriad ways in which a caring, creating, compassionate God reaches out to the world and its inhabitants—investing in them totally— to shape them into a healthy, welcoming, mutually interdependent household.

7) God’s economies are investments God makes with no promise of return.

The Divine Economy is one in which all ARE at the mercy of God, and God is at OURS.

But, coming from God, there is mercy enough to go around, and around, and around.

The cost, for God, in such a mercy-driven economics is high.

High, as well, for those of us who sign on to share in that Divine Economy.

Why take such a risk? Why pay such a cost?

It’s the most irrational, impractical economy you could ever imagine.

Except when you stop and think about the other options.