

The gospel calls us to live an extreme paradox. As children of the light, we seek to live life in the light of God, but we are also to be astute in dealing with the world. These two things do not always seem compatible.

Today's gospel would make a good plot for a movie or tv series. We are not sure who the bad guy is and by the end we are not sure there is a bad guy. Both characters behave in reprehensible ways, but isn't life sometimes really complicated, and it is difficult or impossible to follow the expected norms of behavior? At the end the supposed good guy is commended for doing a bad thing, cheating his boss and sticking it to him. Let's look a little more carefully at this parable.

Jesus is not speaking to the crowds when he gives this parable, he is speaking to his circle of disciples. The teaching is intended for those who already know Jesus well. Unlike most other parables that are intended for farmers and fishermen, this parable is intended to make his disciples squirm a little. We begin with a rich man. In the world of storytelling, a rich man is assumed to be the bad guy. We also have a steward, the assumed good guy. Someone has told the rich man that the steward is squandering his property. We do not know if the report is true or not, but the original language implies that the report is false. The rich man calls in the steward and demands an account, but before the steward can say

anything, he is fired. At this point, the disciples may have been thinking, “Isn’t that the way it always is? The little guy gets the short end of the stick.” The steward is thrown into crisis. We hear his internal dialogue. He is honest with himself, he has become soft over the years, and he is too prideful to beg.

This self-honesty is a turning point for him. He must use all his potential; he must become creative to get out of this jam. He has a crafty, creative side that could be put to good use in this situation. Shrewdly, he does exactly what he was accused of, he squanders the rich man’s property. He does this in such a way that he draws others into his crime so that they will help him out when he is put out on the street. This was a really astute move, a clever move. The rich man is impressed and commends the crafty steward. We are left hanging; the story doesn’t really resolve.

We scratch our heads wondering, is Jesus recommending breaking the law? Was the rich man evil or good? Was the steward good or evil? Is this not like real life? As humans, we can get entangled in complex situations. What is good and what is evil is not always clear. Sometimes what is practical and responsible does not always fit with what is technically moral. When we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are not all good or all bad, we are a mix of potentials. This is how God created us, our faults and failures along with our strengths contribute to

our development, helping us to reach our highest potential our greatest capacity to love. Is this parable trying to draw us into a deeper self-honesty so that, drawing on all of our potentials, we can accomplish God's intended purpose for our lives?

Such a view of the life of the Reign of God is disturbing to puritanical minds and consciences that have for so long been pharisaic in their attitudes because it raises the question of the role of evil and the nature of sin. What is evil? What is sin? Jesus never summarized concisely his teaching about these questions. But that is a topic for another day. The gospel calls us to live an extreme paradox. As children of the light, we seek to live life in the light of God, but we are also to be astute in dealing with the world. These two things do not always seem compatible.