

# JESUS' "BALMY" PARABLE

## Sermon, September 18, 2016

### Texts: Jeremiah 8:18 - 19:1; Luke 16:1-13

I like the story out of Montana about an enterprising young man who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer told him, "I'm afraid the horse has died." The young man said, "Well, then give me my money back." The farmer said, "Can't. I spent it already." The young man thought for a moment and said, "OK, then, just bring me the dead horse." The farmer asked, "What are you going to do with a dead horse?" The young man said, "Just bring it to me. I paid for it, didn't I?" And so the farmer gave him the dead horse. A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, "Whatever happened with that dead horse?" The young man said, "I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece." The farmer said, "Didn't anyone complain?" The young man said, "Just the guy who won. I told him, 'I didn't say it was a live horse, but since you didn't seem to know that, I'll be generous; I'll give you your two dollars back.' So that \$2 minus the original \$100 I paid you in the first place left me a net gain of \$898." Now, there's an enterprising young man! A borderline crook, maybe, but an enterprising young man!

At first reading, that young man sounds something like the manager in the parable this morning. You remember the story: There was a rich man who had a manager for his estate. This manager, unfortunately, was a bit lax in his oversight of his master's affairs. The master finally decided he had had enough. This manager really deserved to go. The master called this manager in, and told him to provide an accounting of his work, pretty much guaranteeing that his job was finished. It's important to note, though, the manager was apparently given a grace period to sort things out; he wasn't fired on the spot by the master as he deserved. The manager was beside himself. "What shall I do now?" he wondered to himself. "My master is taking away my job. Now I'll have to get a REAL job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg." So, he hatched a plan, taking advantage of this grace period he's been given to try and put things in order. He called in each of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil," the first debtor replied. The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "One thousand bushels of wheat," he replied. The manager said, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred."

So, before the word got out he was being fired, he used his privileged position and this short window of opportunity to buy himself some good will so he would have somewhere to turn when he was out of a job. Now, remember how Jesus ended this little tale: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

Now, we know this is Jesus' parable, and we know that sometimes Jesus thought outside the box, but did we hear this right? The master *commended* the dishonest manager for his scheme ... is something wrong, here? Is Jesus commending this "ends justifies the means" approach? For more than 2,000 years earnest scholars, industrious Bible study leaders and brave preachers have struggled with this parable. I'll admit, I really haven't fallen into that last category ... I've only preached on this once in 32 years of ordained ministry (well, twice if you count the early service this morning). This is arguably the strangest story Jesus ever told! I mean, it sure sounds like Jesus is pointing to this apparent scoundrel and saying to His disciples, "Here's somebody you need to emulate!" What are we missing?

I've entitled this sermon "Jesus' Balm Parable." As you know, "balmy" is an adjective, and at the root of "balmy" we find the noun "balm," a fragrant ointment or preparation used to heal or soothe the skin. Historically, balm was specifically defined as "an aromatic substance, consisting of resin mixed with volatile oils, exuding naturally from trees of the genus *Balsamodendron*, prized for its fragrance and medicinal properties." An area of Israel east of the Jordan River called Gilead was well known for exporting this balm (as well as spices); this is referred to four times in Scripture ... Genesis, Ezekiel and twice in Jeremiah. Healing balm would go out from this region of Israel to the nations by export. (A mixture of balm and spices was also used for many centuries to preserve the bodies of the dead, from which we get the English word "embalm.") The adjective "balmy" took on the figurative meaning of anything that is "soothing" ... e.g., balmy weather is mild, soothing weather. Sometime in the 1850s, "balmy" also came to mean crazy or foolish. Most likely, "balmy" in this sense comes from the vague, tuned-out, "mild" manner of an afflicted person who may have had too much "balm." People who are "balmy" in this sense tend to be quietly loopy, out of it, a bit touched, eccentric, crazy.

So, is Jesus parable here "balmy" in the sense of soothing? Or is it "balmy" in the sense of ... loopy? Again, this is arguably the strangest story Jesus ever told! There is one interesting and very plausible explanation that really does make for something of a "soothing" application of this parable, but it's not readily observable without knowing some of the historical context. Note the contract for eight hundred gallons of olive oil is cut in half; the bill for a thousand bushels of wheat is reduced by two hundred. Scholars tell us these aren't random reductions. Each of these reductions has roughly the same *monetary* value: about five hundred denarii. In other words, two hundred bushels of wheat is worth five hundred denarii and four hundred gallons of olive oil is also worth five hundred

denarii on the market. One more thing: it's quite possible five hundred denarii would have been the manager's combined commission had the manager stayed on the job for the duration of the loan contracts involved. If this is the case, then he just lopped off what would have been his commission, five hundred denarii's worth from each settlement package that would have been his salary. In the eyes of the debtors the manager looks good, and the master looks good ... everybody thinks they are both wonderful ... and the master really doesn't lose anything. Everyone is happy! What a story!

I really don't know if that's the right explanation, but it makes more sense to me than anything else I've read in commentaries on this parable ... and believe me, I've read a lot! In this interpretation, the bottom line is that this man knew he was about to face an accounting, and he prepared for it in the time he had by banking on the mercy and generosity of the master and acting the best he knew how. He knew he deserved to lose his job. The master was merciful, though, in not firing him on the spot and giving him time to prepare for the accounting. (*Remember the words to our Assurance of Pardon: "May Almighty God have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, and give you time to amend your life."*) The manager took advantage of the time he had, he took advantage of the time he had to prepare for the accounting ... and he took action the best he legally knew how ... and Jesus praised him for it! Jesus *liked* people who took action. The manager knew judgment was coming, and he acted the best he knew how, which included availing himself of what he knew about his master's generosity. The master's generosity had given this incompetent manager time to put his affairs in order. The master apparently had a reputation for generosity, because the debtors readily believed the manager changed the terms of the bills in their favor with the master's approval. They probably said to themselves, "*Well, how about that. Isn't that like Mr. Master! He's a generous man, all right!*"

Now, due to time constraints there's so much I haven't touched on in this parable or its application(s), other than to underscore Jesus liked people of action, but it IS an important point. Lord knows we have enough hand-wringers in the world! You know who I'm talking about: people of *in*-action who look at problems around them or at impending disasters and say, "*Dear me, isn't it awful, somebody ought to do something.*" Well, yes; somebody *should* do something. WE should do something! We should do what we can in the time we have and with the means we have to try and set things right ... if nothing else, we should make certain we are doing what is right as much as it is in our power to do so. In a nutshell, I think this is what the prophet Jeremiah was trying to get the people to do.

Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet. Jeremiah's career spanned more than four decades. Four decades he could see how his people were abandoning God and godly living, and with a prophet's eye he could see the day of reckoning coming and throughout it all, though, Jeremiah did what he could to prepare for the "accounting;" he spoke up and spoke out, hoping that some would hear, that some would take action and do something to change their ways before it was too late. He was one of the most colorful of the Old Testament prophets, often using vivid and unique visual aids to reinforce his messages; for example (*and this example was left out of the spoken sermon due to time constraints ... slc*), in Jeremiah 3:3, Jeremiah tells the people "*You have the brazen look of a prostitute.*" The RSV translates it, "*You have the forehead of a harlot.*" What is meant by that imagery? In short, it means the people have been doing wrong for so long they have lost the capacity to blush. It means nothing seems to embarrass or shame them anymore; nothing is too shocking for them! As we looked at last week in Jeremiah 4, God says: "*My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.*"<sup>1</sup> These people got so skilled at doing evil that they forget how to do good and even forgot how to blush, how to be ashamed of what they've done wrong! The people would not listen to Jeremiah, many of his own townspeople, even some of his family, opposed him and tried to shut him up. Jeremiah asks, "*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?*"

Of course there is a balm in Gilead ... as mentioned, Gilead was world renowned in that day as an exporter of balm and spices! To be healed and soothed by the balm, however, one has to apply it! The prophetic imagery here is of people who are morally and spiritually diseased and they need healing. The balm in Gilead, by the way, is also a prophetic image of what is to come ... as balm was exported from this region of Israel for the "healing of the nations," so One who will come out of Israel to bring healing to the nations. In this specific historical context, though, the people are being warned by Jeremiah to repent and turn to the divine Physician to heal their sin sick soul while they still had time. But they refused, and judgment came ... in the form of the invading Babylonians.

In the few moments I have let me try to tie these two rather disparate stories from our readings together: *Is there no balm in Gilead?* Of course there is. But people who are sick need to apply that balm to their person. In Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician is ever present as a healing presence ... awaiting that moment when we recognize just how wrong things are, repent, and decide to take action to set things right the best we know how in whatever time we have remaining. Let us come to Him in the time we have, and find soothing healing for our sin-sick souls. Let us receive the healing balm of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and take action the best we know how, based on what we know of our Master's gracious generosity.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/hot-something-you-want-to-get-good-at1.pdf>