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“How much do you owe my master?” (Luke 16:5).

In today’s Gospel Jesus tells a parable to his disciples about a steward who was reported to his master for squandering his property. What was the setting and purpose of this parable, and why was it directed to the disciples rather than to the crowds or to the scribes and Pharisees?

One interpretation is that Jesus’ disciples were hearing lots of criticism of Jesus for his extravagant message that God’s mercy was unconditional and unlimited. If Jesus was claiming to be God’s steward, then he was squandering God’s graces, literally “giving away the store.” The parable is sometimes called “The Dishonest Steward” in commentaries and in sermons mistakenly reduced to a lesson on the evils of bad business practices.

Yet, if we read it in the light of Jesus’ inaugural sermon delivered to his family and neighbors based on Isaiah 61 (see Luke 4), we recall that Jesus believed his anointed mission was to announce a year of favor from the Lord, a virtual Jubilee in which all debts were to be canceled in order to liberate the oppressed and imprisoned, give sight to the blind and bring good news to the poor.

Guilty as charged, Jesus was in fact a servant who was pouring out God’s favor on the indebted, just like the steward in the parable. The Master, when told of this shocking largesse with his property, praises the steward for being more enterprising than the so-called “children of light.” We may hear in this contrast the liberal attitudes and tolerance of secular humanists compared with the tight-fisted

judgment by religious people for the undeserving poor and other corner-cutting survivors.

What do you owe the Master? What penances and sacrifices are you amassing to pay down your sins? How would you feel if God cancelled everything and welcomed you with love, asking only that you forgive others their debts to you? We affirm this each time we pray the Our Father. This is the joy of the Good News.

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