

Front Porch Tales:
Blessed Are The Conniving
For They Shall Have A Home With God

I came across a website that was entitled: Borrow Don't Buy These 14 Things. Okay, so maybe it was click-bait, but being raised a cheapskate I couldn't resist clicking through the entire list.

14. A Truck. You might need to haul some things every now and then, but it's a big investment if that's all you need it for. Borrow it from a family member or friend.
13. Luggage. I guess this is for folks who don't travel very often and don't have a lot of storage space.
12. Baby Gear. Some things you've got to have new, but as the parents of twins I must admit we borrowed a lot when our boys were born.
11. Items for a Wedding. I think they're thinking of a 'do-it- yourself kind of wedding here. Decorations and whatnot.
10. Books. Yes, I support this, even though I have loaned out about \$1,000 worth of books that have never made it back.
9. Outdoor Sporting Equipment. Skis, inner tubes, and parachutes? Just depends, I would think. Me, I'd want a new parachute.
8. Specialized Tools. This makes sense to pool with these with your neighbors.
7. Formal Wear. They mean rent, not borrow.
6. Tents and Camping Gear. To see if it's your thing, I suppose.
5. Tables and Chairs.
4. Paint Sprayer.
3. Carpet Cleaning Machines.
2. Chainsaws. Yes, but again who doesn't really want a tree to fall down on their property just for the chance to rev up their chainsaw?
- #1 Item to borrow? Extension Ladders. I think every neighborhood should have to chip in and buy a community extension ladder.

Who was it? Polonius in Shakespeare's Hamlet? Who was it that said: "Neither a borrower or lender be." In today's gospel passage and in today's world, generous lending can make a huge difference, as we shall soon see.

Today's scripture is often described as the most confusing story Jesus ever told. Partly because it's too scandalous to think that Jesus is going to tell a story in which the hero is a dishonest but brilliant Manager who cheats his boss and then cons his way out of being fired for it.

I'm here to tell you that this story *is* scandalous, because scandal caught the attention of Jesus' listeners and put them at the edge of their seats. And no, Jesus does not endorse dishonesty, just quick decisive action for strategic purposes which includes furthering God's Kingdom. Let me walk you through this tale with the help of a couple of wise authors I'm going to lean on for insight.

Get this. The very wealthy owner of several large farms hears rumors that his Manager is cooking the books—skimming a little off the top for himself and therefore calls him in to give account. It was well within the Master's rights to have the Manager thrown in jail, and that is probably what most would have done. But this Master is a gracious guy who lives in a culture that is all about honor and shame. He sees no reason to bring unnecessary shame to someone who up to this point had been his righthand man. So he says, get your accounts together, bring in the books, and then you can go your own way—no fuss, no press, just nice and quiet.

Now the Manager isn't cut out for manual labor and he isn't about to get another one like this one. So, before the Master's tenants know that he's been fired, he goes to them and has them write down or eliminate a good chunk of their in-kind rent to the Master. Some have suggested that he was only cutting out his personal commission, others have said that he was cutting out the interest payments, but the point is that the tenants believe that the Master himself has decided to take less for himself of what they bring in.

As you can imagine they are ecstatic. Now understand this: they give praise to the Master—because the only way this can take place legally is if the steward is still believed to be doing his Master's bidding. Oh, I'm sure they're pretty happy with the messenger too. Surely, he tries to lap up his share of the gratitude one way or another, but it's the Master here who is perceived to be extraordinarily generous with his tenants.

Now the word gets back to the Master what the Manager has done. Now remember, this is an honor vs. shame culture. Actually, let me have the Middle Eastern scholar, Ken Bailey, tell it for me:

The master knows full well that in the local village there has already started a great round of celebration in praise of him, the master, as the most noble and most generous man that ever rented land in their district. He has two alternatives.

He can go back to the debtors and explain that it was all a mistake, that the steward had been dismissed, and thus his actions were null and void. But if the master does this *now*, the villagers' joy will turn to anger, and he will be cursed for his stinginess.

Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise that is even now being showered on him, and allow the clever steward to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm. This master *is* a generous man. He did not jail the steward earlier. To be generous is a primary quality of a nobleman in the East. He reflects for a moment and then turns to the steward and says, 'You are a very wise fellow.' One of the Old Testament definitions of 'wisdom' is an instinct for self-preservation.

The amounts owed by the tenants reveal that this is an enormously wealthy Master. And though generous by nature, maybe he hasn't shown that generosity in public for a while. Though he has lost a chunk of money, his reputation has never been more highly honored. The Master can't really fire his Manager, after that. If he does it will wipe out all the good will he's just gotten. He is stuck keeping this Manager on—though one would imagine with a considerably shorter leash moving forward.

Let's be clear: it's the Manager who has done this. He's taken a Catch-22 situation and found a Solomon like solution—a solution that makes it incredibly costly for his Master to fire him. You can see why this dishonest rascal is admired for being so shrewd. Though his actions are conniving and self-serving they are also brilliant.

'So imagine,' Jesus asks, 'if the people of God acted that decisively and that brilliantly to build the kind of personal friendships in which the extraordinary generosity of God would become obvious.'

Preacher, John Killinger, took the parables of Jesus and put them in a Christmas context—probably for an Advent sermon series—but I love how he translates this parable. He captures the scheming Manager perfectly, but in his story, she's the cook to a very prominent and wealthy woman in the community. See if you can hear the parallels. He calls it the Parable of the Smart Cook.

There was a certain rich woman who discovered, shortly before Christmas, that her cook was carrying off food from the kitchen.

And she called the cook in and said to her, "After the party next week, I shall not require your services any longer."

The cook was distressed, and thought, "Whatever shall I do? I cannot find another job like this one, and I am getting too old to do institutional cooking. I am

ashamed to go on unemployment. I know I will make friends with those who can take care of me when I leave.”

So, on an afternoon when she knew her mistress would be out, the cook threw a lavish party in the mistress’s house, to which she invited many of the mistress’s friends. She prepared the best foods from the pantry and served them in elegant style. The guests were so impressed that they began to ask her if she would not come and work for them.

When the mistress heard what had happened and after so many of her friends told her how impressed they were with the surprise holiday event as well as the incredible talents of her cook, the Mistress of the house complimented the cook and said she could stay on indefinitely, for as many Christmases as she would. For people who have to get along in the world are often more resourceful than those sheltered in religious faith.

Yes, the cook has been stealing food, but evidently, she’s capable of doing marvelous things in the kitchen. In this retelling she plays upon her Mistress’ pride. Who doesn’t want to be envied as *thee* hostess who sets the best table in the city? It guarantees her invitations will be accepted and that all her parties will be well attended. It adds considerably to her social prominence. Oh, and it supplies job security if you’re the cook behind it all. Devious? Yes. Clever? Most definitely.

Imagine if we followers of Jesus were as clever and motivated as she in setting up our Master, Jesus, for praise and prominence among our circle of friends and family.

Let me shift gears for a moment.

There was a time when our daughter Abby was down at IU in Bloomington that she seemed to be driving her friends all over the place: up to Indianapolis, over to West Lafayette, down to Louisville. As a parent you wonder, are your friends taking advantage of you? Are they at least helping pay for gas or offering to? You don’t have to say yes, every time one of your close friends wants to go somewhere out of town.

Now, what if it wasn’t our car or Abby’s car? Let’s say Abby has a rich Uncle who’s got more cars than he knows what to do with and has loaned Abby one of his lesser cars. She’s been given carte blanche from her IU alumni Uncle who just wants little Subaru to get a good college workout. Now, that changes how Sue and I respond to where and how much Abby drives it—even if she decides to loan it to her roommate

or best friend. With the ever-present cautiousness of parents, still, Easy Come, Easy Go.

Your grandfather buys a lottery ticket right before he heads to Arizona for the winter. He hands it to you and says, keep an eye on the numbers. If you win big, you can pay off the rest of our RV down in Flagstaff, the rest you do with as you see fit. Just do some good with it. You laugh. Right, you say, will do. You win big. You take home 12 million dollars. Your grandfather refuses anything more than \$100,000 which is more than he needed anyway.

You somehow manage to keep it quiet—out of the papers. But you keep running into situations in which people need to borrow some money or their lives will be thrown into disaster. Big amounts and small amounts. This really isn't *your* money—you did nothing to earn it, you didn't even buy the ticket. How generous are you with what essentially belongs to someone else? Freely given, freely shared after all.

In the end, this is what Jesus is trying to get at through this funny, ironic and scandalous story. The gallons upon gallons of olive oil and the bushels upon bushels of wheat were not the Manager's to give away or reduce, but by doing so he not only won the friendship of the tenants he was helping, but he also added prestige and increased the honor given to his Master. He used what his Master put at his disposal to build good will with others and he did strategically and wisely. That's the behavior that Jesus wants to commend to his disciples.

Jesus summarizes by saying in verse 9: "Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home."

Here's how I would put it:

What if we used our stuff and our money—all that has been entrusted to us—to make friends and through those friendships give God the glory and make an introduction to Jesus? What if we did it with the same drive, urgency and ingenuity as the Manager in the story Jesus told?

The article I read online about *What To Borrow and What to Buy*—the one that went on about extension ladders, trucks, baby gear and chainsaws also had several important rules to obey when it comes to borrowing. It's the last one of those rules that struck home to me both important as well as somehow familiar:

*If you treat other people (and their stuff)
the way you want to be treated,
you have nothing to worry about.*

I suppose we can call it *the golden rule* of borrowing.

But for those of us who love God and follow Jesus there is something of greater importance. If we *are* going to be borrowers then we'd better be prepared to also be lenders—extravagantly generous lenders after the example of our Master or at least after the example of an ingenious, conniving Manager who shall forever remain nameless. And yet always have a place to call home.