



### **THE CANNY CON-MAN**

People love hoaxers and hustlers – unless they're on the receiving end, of course. But generally speaking, we love stories of hustles and heists. You can see it in the movies we watch (the *Now You See Me* franchise), the books we read (that classic kid's book *The Gruffalo*), and the folk-tales that have been passed down to us over the centuries (*Robin Hood*).

But why do we love these characters?

- **They're 'smart'** (how did they think of that?!).
- **They're 'brave'** (I'd never have the guts to do that!).
- **They're 'right'** (at last, someone's evened the odds!).

In a nutshell, these characters, although they're dishonest, appeal to an innate sense of justice. And the Jesus-story we're going to look at today would have had a similar impact on the people who first heard it, 2000 years ago.

It's the Mysterious Story of the Canny Con-Man.

### **Luke 16:1-15**

Now this is a tricky parable to interpret, which might be why some pastors never preach on it. So if you disagree with my take on this, that's OK – give me a week and I'll probably disagree with myself (it has been known to happen, sometimes!).

But the story goes like this: there's this fat-cat business-man - the Donald Trump of his day - and he's got this financial manager. And the manager is making a poor fist of things, so the businessman says, "You're fired," and tells him to get his accounts in order.

That means no job; no home; no future.

What is he going to do? He's not particularly practical, and he doesn't want to beg. So he hits upon an idea. In order to guarantee some friends for life, the manager contacts all his boss's debtors, and cuts the interest on their loans. Now technically, Jews were forbidden from charging interest of their fellow Jews, but businessmen would sometimes get round it by demanding payment in commodities such as oil and wheat, rather than cash. The manager, then, is merely cutting what his boss should never have charged in the first place - and it's a *lot* (50%, 20%, and so on).

By the end of the day the whole community is singing *Hava Nagila* (not surprisingly!), and once the boss finds out, it's too late. If he tries to change things he'll become public enemy no.1. And so, to save face, he goes along with it. And, through gritted teeth, he compliments the manager on what is, essentially, a clever hustle.

Which is all well and good, but what's the point? That it's OK to cheat people if it's in our best interests? That's how the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate interpreted it (what a church growth strategy! Con the unconverted!). Given what Jesus has to say about 'truth', that can't be it, can it?

What *is* He saying, then? In vs9, Jesus unpacks it for us: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." The word for 'wealth' or 'money' here is this word: *mammon*. It's the Aramaic word for riches, and it comes from a verb meaning 'to trust.' I.e. Jesus is talking about taking the things that make you feel safe, secure, comfortable -

And using them to make forever-friends for the Gospel.

So what does that look like? Let's mind-map the word *mammon*. What is *mammon*? Money? House? Food? Wheels? Luxuries? All of the above!

How can we use these things for the Kingdom?

**Money.** All that we have has been entrusted to us, but it's up to us how we spend it, save it - and share it. It can be easy to forget that last one. 21<sup>st</sup> century western society says, "What matters most is your standard of living." Jesus says, "No. What matters most is your standard of *giving*."

**House.** In the Bible, hospitality is a command, not a request, and in the Middle Eastern failure to open your home is still seen as an insult (hence hospitality is one of the qualities required of a NT leader). What might your sofa or dining-room table say to someone about the grace of God?

**Food.** We're not just talking an open-house policy here, but an open-fridge policy. To share a meal with someone is one of the easiest things to do - one

of the most 'Jesus' things to do. What if we were to see every meal as a picture of the coming Kingdom? Even if it's just a tin of soup?!

**Wheels.** There's been a lot of negative stuff said about the humble automobile in recent years, particularly on an ecological level. But there are positives, too: you can offer lifts with it, you can even loan it to someone (yes, I know that's risky – but so is faith, if you put it into action).

**Luxuries.** From household appliances to power tools, Blu-rays and Netflix subscriptions to favourite books, we each possess things that can be given, or at least shared. By all means ask people to look after them, but know that what you have is not just *your* blessing, but someone else's, too.

### **The Moral Of The Story ...**

What's the moral here? Well, Jesus is not saying, "See that manager's dishonesty? That's the way to be." What He's saying is, "See that manager's vision / drive / initiative / creativity? *That's* the way to be. Now use it. For the single mum. For the widowed neighbour. For the hurting friend. For the Kingdom of God."

I.e. be shrewd; be clever; be savvy – for Jesus.

And He ends with a word of warning – for the Pharisees, and for all of us (vs10-12). The things we own are a test of what matters most to us, a dummy-run for eternity. If we can't be faithful to God with the things that *won't* last, how can we be faithful to God with the things that *will*? And if wealth becomes more important to us than what God says, how can we claim that God is truly no.1 in our lives?

As Jesus says in vs13, "You cannot serve both God and *mammon*" (Matthew 6:24).

To end on, do you remember the points I made about con-artists at the beginning?

- **They're 'smart'** (how did they think of that?!).
- **They're 'brave'** (I'd never have the guts to do that!).
- **They're 'right'** (at last, someone's evened the odds!).

Wouldn't it be great if people were to see Christians in the same way? Some people have good business-brains, the kind of brains that can kick-start relief agencies and para-church organisations. But not all of us. However, we all have *something* of this world's riches, and we all have the potential to do something good with it.

So ... let's do it!