



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago, when I was fresh out of law school, many years ago, one of my first cases was a rather complex contract dispute. And looking back, I was probably a bit over my head on that one. I was up against a big firm. They had lots of resources and staff. It was definitely a bit of a David and Goliath scenario. But on top of all that, that case became a crash course in something they didn't teach me in law school. And that is something called "sharp practices." Anybody in the room, any lawyers in the room know that term? Sharp practices are essentially those people who are so aggressive, so desperate to come out on top, that they will do almost anything to win. They will bend rules, cross ethical lines. They will twist the truth, and when they're called out on it, they deny it. Pretend they didn't know, blame somebody else. Oh, you never got that notice of the hearing? I know my secretary sent it.

We've all encountered people like that, have we not? They're the kinds of people who, they never give an inch, but always take a mile. And they seem to have a kind of shamelessness about them when they do it. They don't seem to care about what type of reputation they are building because, and I suspect, they know that there will always be people who want a lawyer like that. People who want their bulldog, as they call them. Of course, sharp practices don't just show up in the courtroom. It's a term that was born during the industrial revolution in the era of the robber barons, the industrialists who were famous for their ruthless tactics, exploiting workers, manipulating markets, building monopolies, crushing the competition.

Today, such modern day robber barons, however, seem to be everywhere. In our politics, finance, advertising, big tech. Every time I check the news it seems, it's basically the same story with a different headline. Leaders abusing their power, public officials lying without consequence, politicians ignoring the Constitution, CEOs moving stock values with tweets, cronyism, conflicts of interest being ignored. It just goes on. Stuff that used to be, you know, would get you arrested, impeached, maybe fired, today seems to be tolerated, even admired by some. I've even had people, reasonable people defend it. They say, you know, say what you want, Chris. Maybe some of that stuff is true, but at least people like that, they know how to play the game. They know how to win.

And I have to say, for those of us who still believe in the rule of law, it is exasperating because by the time any of that stuff ever gets in front of a judge, by the time the SEC gets involved, by the time the investigation is finally finished, these people are so good at muddying the waters, exploiting every loophole, delay and distraction, that the reckoning never seems to come. The clock runs out. The story is now yesterday's news. New scandals are now trending. New officials have been appointed and they just keep getting away with it.

And so when I hear this story this morning about a dishonest manager who gets rich, ripping off the very people who put their trust in him, and he not only gets away with it, but is actually commended for it, it's like this gospel is just falling right out of my daily newsfeed. So let's turn to this because aside from being timely, this gospel is renowned as one of the most perplexing in the Bible.

So let's start with some background. Wealthy landowners in those days would hire stewards, middlemen, or managers to manage all the transactions with their tenants and merchants, handling everything from grain sales to rent collection. These stewards or managers were charged with maximizing the owner's profits and they in turn, often padded the deals in order to get their cut, all of which was completely fine, so long as the landowner kept seeing steady profits.

But in our story today, we are told that this particular manager has been squandering them. He isn't maximizing the owner's profits at all. He's not stealing per se, but he's clearly been taking his cut and then some. Living it up on the owner's dime and doing so apparently a bit too conspicuously because word has gotten around. And when the owner gets wind of it, he quite naturally says, you're fired. But before he goes, he says, you know, first I need a full accounting so I can see what you've been up to, which is an odd request it seems to me, considering this guy's track record. You know, like what good is that accounting going to be?

But in any event, the point is the manager knows the gig is up. His reputation is shot. He will never work like that again. He's not one for manual labor. No surprise there. And he's too proud to beg. So in a world with no safety net, he is out of options. Time is running out. His adrenaline starts pumping. His mind is racing and suddenly our previously less than motivated manager, surprising probably even himself, comes up with a plan. He is going to use the time he has to ingratiate himself to those who can help him later on. So he offers to cut the debts of his master's tenants so drastically that they will happily take him in when he's fired, and at least he will have a roof over his head.

Okay, with me so far? Now, by the way, does that story sound familiar at all? Does it remind you of another gospel story by any chance? Because in the Gospel of Luke, the story we just heard comes right on the heels of the story of the prodigal son. And if you're not familiar with that one, it's the one where the kid takes the family inheritance and runs off to Vegas, if you will, where he parties like there is

no tomorrow. In other words, he squanders it just like our manager does, and he soon finds himself in the very same position: desperate, having burned all of his bridges, with no means to support himself facing life on the streets. So he too comes up with a plan, and that plan is to also ingratiate himself to someone to save his skin. In this case, his father. He's going to come up with a very sincere sounding apology that uses all the right religious language in the hopes that he will be so taken with it and with some luck, might be allowed to stay with his father's hired hands out in the barn somewhere where he will at least have a roof over his head.

Do you see some parallels there? Notice that in both of those stories, these people, these characters were so focused on chasing wealth that they did so at the expense of their relationships, their reputations, and they both learned the hard way that chasing the idols of this world will eventually leave you empty and alone. And notice too that both stories turn on a moment of desperation. Because in each story, that's the moment when each of these two characters who had previously had no real purpose or motivation, kind of just coasting through life, aimless, self-indulgent. That's the moment when they actually seem to come alive.

In recovery circles, in 12 steps spirituality, they call it the gift of desperation. Because it's the turning point where having exhausted all of our efforts to find happiness in every other thing than God, we realize the gig is finally up and we, for the first time, become open to a power outside of ourselves. And I think that that is one of the keys to this story. Jesus isn't commending the manager's ethics. He's commending his urgency, his desperation. What if, what if the children of light were just as shrewd as these guys? What if those who profess to follow me were just as desperate, just as clever, just as crafty, not for self preservation, not in order to get rich, not to win at any cost, but for the Kingdom of God, for the cause of mercy and justice.

Can you imagine what we could do? I wonder if that is one of the takeaways here. Being a disciple means living with a sense of urgency. Because we all need a wake-up call from time to time, don't we? I know I certainly do. It's so easy to fall into our routines, to just get busy all the time, to settle into a comfortable life and drift along, to let our faith become passive and polite, to keep the peace, to go along, to get along, to look the other way when things get messy, to allow other people, wait for them to speak up or to stand up when needed. Like the manager, we too, even without meaning it can find ourselves squandering our gifts, the gifts that God has given each and every one of us to manage on his behalf by healing and restoring his broken world.

What motivates you? What makes you desperate to make a difference? What's the cause? What's the injustice that gets your adrenaline pumping? What does your heart break for? What makes your faith come alive? And if you're not sure what that is, if you don't have something that comes to mind, you can find it. Sit with

someone who is suffering. Spend time, get to know people who live their daily life in fear. Learn their stories, hear their perspectives. Allow them to open your heart and then pray. Pray to God.

Pray dangerously. Ask God to show you what you've been avoiding, what you've been putting off, who you haven't noticed. Let God ignite your holy imagination and then let it run wild and see if God might help you become just as shrewd but on behalf of the poor, just as desperate to oppose injustice. Just as clever in devising ways to offer mercy. See if God might help you become just as shameless on behalf of the outcast and the scapegoated. Because while there are many in this world who seem to have given up, while there are many in this world who seem to resign themselves to despair, we the children of light cannot because God has not.

So no matter how dark it might seem, no matter how overwhelming it feels, let us, the children of light, let us not be afraid. Let us become so desperate that we too will make a difference. And make a difference, we will. Because hope goes with us. Love goes with us. God goes with us.

Amen.