

18 September 2022

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1  
1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

The film *Mary Poppins*, which is just about as old as I am, is much-loved by many. But who is it really about?

On the one hand we have the title character herself, the firm-but-kind, strangely-magical nanny, hired to bring the rebellious Banks children into line. It is a great character, engagingly portrayed by Julie Andrews; but it is a character that really doesn't undergo any movement or change through the course of the film – she remains from beginning to end “practically perfect in every way”.

On the other hand we have the children's father, George Banks. He is a banker, a driven and disciplined man totally dedicated to his work at the expense of his relationship with his children. In an effort to build the relationship, the children are taken to visit the bank one day. Young Michael is pressured to invest his tuppence in the “Dawes, Tomes, Mousely, Grubbs Fidelity Fiduciary Bank”, the bankers espousing the benefits of compound interest. From the small investment of tuppence as the principal sum, compounding interest presents visions of it blooming “into credit of a generous amount, semi-annually”.

But at the end of the film the formerly up-tight Banks is dancing around a park with the children, singing “Let's go fly a kite”. It is a story of transformation in the man and redemption in his relationship with his children. The 2013 film *Saving Mr Banks*, starring Emma Thompson as author P L Travers and Tom Hanks as Walt Disney, while only loosely biographical, does rather suggest that this redemptive theme lay behind Travers' original story, having its root in her deeply conflicted relationship with the father she lost in childhood.

The parable of the shrewd manager or steward of Luke 16 presents us with a conundrum of interpretation. In part this is because of the distance between our time and that of Jesus, meaning that we have difficulty entering into the world of the story Jesus tells. We also struggle because the parable is silent on some details that would enormously help our interpretation. And then, rather like the question around the interpretation of *Mary Poppins*, we face the problem of correctly identifying the key character. Who do we see as the “master” in the parable – is this character

intended to represent God? The interpretation problems are especially acute when we get to verse 8: who is it that commends the dishonest steward's actions – is it the parable's "master", or is it Jesus, the master? The same Greek word *kyrios* is variously translated "master" and "lord".

English Bible scholar Tom Wright suggests that the master in the story had been acting in an underhand way. "Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got around this by lending in kind, with oil and wheat being easy commodities to use for this purpose. It is likely that what the steward deducted from the bill was the interest that the master had been charging.... If he reduced the bill in each case to the principal, the simple amount that had been lent, the debtors would have been delighted, but the master couldn't lay a charge against the steward without owning up to his own shady business practices." Wright believes that the master in verse 8 is the master within the story, not Jesus, and that his response to the steward's clever approach could only be admiration<sup>1</sup> (perhaps begrudgingly given).

Wright sees the message of the parable being addressed to the situation of Israel: "the master is God, the steward is Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property-manager, the light of God's world, responsible to God and set over his possessions. But Israel ... has failed in the task, and is under threat of imminent dismissal. What then ought Israel do? The Pharisees' answer was to pull the regulations of the law even tighter, to try to make Israel more holy. This ... had the effect that they were excluding the very people that Jesus was reaching out to. Jesus, in this parable, indicates that if Israel is facing a major crisis the answer is rather to throw caution to the winds, to forget the extra bits and pieces of law which the Pharisees have heaped up, and to make friends as and where they can."<sup>2</sup>

In his application, Wright emphasises that the parable has nothing to do with "commending sharp practice in business or personal finance. Rather, it advises us

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, *Luke*, 193-194

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Luke*, 194

to sit light to the extra regulations which we impose on one another, not least in the church, which are over and above the gospel itself.”<sup>3</sup>

If you’ll excuse the pun, in this parable we are challenged to hold fast to the *principle* at stake (the gospel) and to not chase after things that may merely be of *interest*.

Kenneth Bailey is a scholar who has long experience of the culture of the Middle East. Like Wright, he sees the parable’s master as representing God, and believes that the commendation for the steward’s actions comes from the story’s master rather than Jesus. However, Bailey’s interpretation of the parable is quite different to Wright’s. For Bailey the key point lies in the master’s decision to dismiss the dishonest servant rather than sell or imprison him for his thefts. This is a parable of the mercy of God. This mercy is shown too in the master’s willingness to accept the reduced income, effectively paying the price for the servant’s salvation.

“The coming of the kingdom brings a crisis. The steward’s sins are exposed. Because of the master’s nature, excuses for failure will not avail and the steward offers none. He is condemned as a ‘son of the world/age’ because of his lies and his deceptions.

“The steward is not commended for this ethics ... but for his accurate perception of his master’s nature. He correctly reads his master. The steward experiences extraordinary mercy at the beginning of the story. He opts to risk everything in the confidence that this mercy and generosity are at the core of his master’s identity. ... Jesus longs for his disciples to have the same informed perception of God.”<sup>4</sup>

The point of the parable, we could say then, is that the disciples are challenged to recognise, hold fast to, and respond to the *principle* of God’s nature of mercy and grace, and not to chase after worthless worldly *interests*.

American Bible professor David Garland sees the parable quite differently. The “master” in the parable should not be identified with God, he argues, but at the end

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Luke*, 195

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *Jesus*, pp.341-342 summarising an extensive analysis 332-342.

of the story it is indeed Jesus who comments favourably on the steward's actions. But "Jesus passes no moral judgment on the steward's actions; he simply uses those actions as a foil to challenge his disciples. Given the end-time crisis facing everyone ... disciples should prepare for the future reckoning by employing their material possessions shrewdly. What Jesus regards as "shrewd," however, differs from how the world defines it. Jesus has warned that those who do not renounce all that they possess are not able to be his disciples (14:33). He has told them to store up treasures with God by selling their possessions and giving alms (12:21, 33). ... The story, though addressed to the disciples, applies to everyone. Let them follow the example of the steward, a typical son of this age. His sights are set on only on this world, but he recognised the critical nature of his situation and took bold steps to make entry into his new life as easy as possible. ... If worldlings such as this fellow act so astutely to protect their ephemeral self-interests in this world, should not disciples seize the moment and act astutely to ensure their interests in the world to come, which is eternal? ... Jesus also laments that the children of this world show more concern for the security of their earthly existence and act more decisively to guarantee it than the children of light do in securing their eternal existence. The disciples are therefore told to imitate the steward by dissociating themselves from wealth. ... Disciples are to exploit wisely the money at their disposal by disposing of it to benefit others."<sup>5</sup>

Garland quotes another professor Robert Gagnon who concludes: " ... the people of God too often succumb to the allure of money and material possessions, treating them as ends in themselves and as objects that bring security by the very possession of them. More precisely, they can find themselves caught between two different systems and two different ends: claiming attachment to the world above and the age to come, but in their 'Mammon' working to secure their life in this world below and this present age. If their end is consonant with their status as 'children of the light,' then money and resources must be viewed as objects to serve that end and contribute to its attainment."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Garland, *Luke*, p.650 within a full exegesis of the passage pp.637-655. For the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion for people listening to this sermon, I have replaced Garland's "agent" with "steward" throughout.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A Gagnon, "A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables: Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan," *HBT 20* [1998] p.4, cited in Garland, *Luke*, p. 654.

Again we could summarise by noting that this is all about distinguishing the matter that is *principal* (eternal life) from what is incidental and merely of *interest* (worldly wealth).

In *Mary Poppins* the redemption for Mr Banks comes from his eventual realisation that his life, tied up in the values and mechanics of money and compound interest, was not focussed on what was most important, his principal duty, his family.

For us as disciples we need to be clear about the evaluations we make in our own lives. End the end, while quite different in their interpretations of the parable, the three scholars I have quoted are all correct in the principles they ultimately derive. And those three principles have a coherence to them:

- The church needs to focus on boldly proclaiming and living the gospel, and not get distracted by things that don't ultimately matter;
- We disciples need to focus on working for what is of eternal worth, and not get tied up money and wealth for itself;
- And, the foundation of all of this comes from the nature of God, gracious and merciful, who is at work in and through us bringing about the redemption and reconciliation of all to himself.

All our evaluations of what is of importance in life and what is secondary must derive from our understanding of God in Jesus Christ and his purpose for us in the world.

*Mary Poppins* ends with Mr Banks flying a kite with his children, released from the chains of careerism and workaholism. There is freedom for us too when we focus our attention and efforts on what is most important to God, set free from things that tend to get too much of our interest but are of no ultimate worth.

*Let's go fly a kite*

*Up to the highest height*

*Let's go fly a kite*

*And send it soaring  
Up through the atmosphere  
Up where the air is clear  
Oh, let's go fly a kite!*

**Sources:**

- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK 2001/2004
- Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural studies in the Gospels*, Inter-Varsity, 2008
- David E Garland, *Luke* [Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament], Zondervan, 2011