Normally when I am looking at the lectionary readings for the day I know that if one of them is going to be odd or incendiary it is generally going to come from the Old Testament. These readings will have things like God wiping out a half of million people because they wore white slacks after Labor Day or guys getting into arguments with livestock. Today, however, the Old Testament is pretty tame, basically telling us not to be jerks to the poor. The Epistle is pretty safe too; it just urges us to pray for people regardless of their station in life; however it is the Gospel that might make us take a little pause. Jesus tells us a parable that starts off like many of his parables with a situation that would have been fairly commonplace at the time in which he was telling it. A wealthy man has a manager and the manager appears to be have been using some creative accounting methods by which to enrich himself -- so far so good. From the pattern of Jesus’ previous parables you would probably expect the point of it to be something like an indictment of the religious leaders of the day whom God had entrusted his treasure – the wealthy landowner is God, the corrupt manager is the Pharisees or some such thing. But that is not where Jesus goes with this parable.

The manager get’s caught with his hand in the cookie jar and in an effort to save his own skin he goes out and loses even more money by collecting less than what he was owed to his boss. For example, he asks one of the men who owes his master money, “’How much do you owe my master?' He answered, `A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, `Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'” And even at this point I think Jesus could turn this parable into something pretty straightforward, perhaps about not making a bad situation worse and then we could maybe share it with the Prime Minister of Canada (I mean it couldn’t hurt). But still this is not the direction in which Jesus goes. After the manager has lost his boss this second round of money Jesus ends the parable by saying, “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” So the moral of this story seems to be that if you get caught cheating, cheat a little more egregiously and Jesus will be happy with you. At least that is the interpretation that I assume Bernie Madoff and most of the governors of Illinois are banking on. But in all seriousness what is it that we are supposed to learn from this parable?

I have read interpretations that go to great lengths to say that what we read in the actual words of the text are not what the text is actually saying. To reach such conclusions people generally need to add bits of information that are not in the story. One such interpretation states that this man’s boss was the one who was actually corrupt and was overcharging those with whom he did business so when the manger was writing down their bills he was writing them down to what they should have actually paid. Well, maybe but if we are going to add things that are not in the actual story we might as well make them a little more interesting than that. I might suggest that we add a group of groovy teenagers who drive around in a van and solve mysteries or a wise-cracking chimpanzee who helps fight crime. But here is the thing, I really don’t think you need to go that far. I think we can actually just use the text that is there in the Bible and come up with a pretty straightforward interpretation that does not promote stealing or any other vices.

To do this we need to think about the narrative in general and not get too bogged down in specifics. The dishonest steward is going to lose his job and he realizes that he will be in very bad straits if he does. So he sets about finding a way that will allow for him to live in a way that is similar to the way he lives at present. His plan appears to be to ingratiate himself with as many people in the community as possible by lowering their bills. The thinking seems to be that by relieving some of their financial burden those people will help him when he is no longer employed with his current boss. Put succinctly, he is desperate and so he pulls out all stops to try and ensure that he is able to maintain what he had before. Now look how Jesus explains what this man did. He says, “for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Jesus is basically saying to look to the extremes that people will go through over something as pedestrian as the type of employment they have and then contrast this with how little people will do in terms of the eternal relationship that they are to have with God. We pull out all the stops when something earthly goes wrong, but don’t worry so much if something eternal goes wrong. The point I believe that Jesus is making is that we are to approach our relationship with God with the same desperation that this man has when he tries to preserve his lifestyle. And this is a lesson just as needed today as it was when Jesus told it.

Just as a quick example a Pew study in 2017 found that 53% of Americans say that religion is very important in their life but a Pew study also found that 36% of Americans attended worship services regularly. Meaning that one third of those who find religion very important do not find church attendance even moderately important. Now lets contrast this with something more pedestrian. I don’t think that this study has ever been conducted but I am guessing if there was one which asked roughly the same questions about the Green Bay Packers there would not be the disparity between those who found the Packers very important and those who watched their games. I mean go to the grocery store before the Packers are playing and see the lengths people are going to, to prepare for a football game. In secular terms it shows the kind of commitment that Jesus is addressing today. Perhaps, if church involved more beer and processed meats people might get more enthused, but I am not so sure. Today Jesus is using this very extreme example to point out our complacency when it comes to our pursuit of God. And the question in all of this is why. Why does God almost always come in second or third? Why is going to Church the first thing that gets dropped off the calendar if there is a scheduling conflict?

I had a woman at my last parish who once came to my office one day to explain that because of her family’s financial situation they would not be able to give any money to the church that year. A few months later she was again in my office but this time asking me to pray that her facelift surgery would go well. There was plenty of money for cosmetic surgery but when it came to God things were a little strapped.

What would the Church look like if people were willing to pull out all stops in their pursuit of God and a relationship with him? I was reading the other day that the new stadium for the Los Angeles Rams is set to cost five billion dollars. To paraphrase the movie *A Man for all Seasons* -- It profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world ... but for the Rams? What would the world look like if we spent such lavish sums on the kingdom of God? How would the world be different if we worked first to please God? If the pursuit of God is truly the most important thing in this world we should act like it, giving all that we have in our love and service of him both this day and forevermore.