

Christoph Keller, III  
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A man approaches Jesus, demanding justice.

*Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.*

Not having researched inheritance laws and customs for that place and time, I can't address the legal, social issues. Obviously, this man was cut from the will, feels aggrieved and wants relief.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.* Who here does not have a family story—the brother, sister, uncle, cousin—who got left out of their inheritance?

Let's admit that, as long as it has to do with someone else's family, these are juicy stories, great for gossip.

*Did you hear about Big Daddy? Dropped dead a week ago last Friday. He choked on an oyster is what I hear, bless his heart. You want to hear something funny? Friday morning, before the funeral, the family came together for the reading of the will. Brother Man didn't get a dime! Little Sister got the house, John Boy got the farm—and he left the Cadillac to Fanny Fox!*

So here down the road comes Brother Man, hair on fire, approaching Jesus. *Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.*

“Justice, Lord: all I want is what's rightly mine.” That's all that any of us wants, is justice, right? Durn straight. You go for it Brother Man: by-pass the probate judge, skip the federal courts, appeal your case to Jesus.

Jesus, however, declines jurisdiction. *Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?*

It is hard to know what to make of this development. “It's none of my business” wasn't the expected response. Some scholars have theorized that Jesus was, socio-economically, a member of the peasant class. On that basis, I suppose we might interpret this as one of the have-nots (Jesus) telling a member of the upper crust that he's not interested in their problems. The field hands don't really care who got the Big House—and by the way they'd been knowing all along about the boss and Fanny Fox.

The problem with that interpretation is that it fails to see that Jesus' demurral is ironic. In reading Scripture, we consider each part in relation to the whole. So lets imagine Jesus asking “Who made me judge or arbitrator over you?” and a bright third-grade Bible student in the crowd immediately throws up her hand. “I know professor, call on me!”

And Jesus, who as we know was fond of children, smiles and answers: “Yes Miss Granger?” And she replies: “You did, sir, in Matthew 25.” She reads the passage.

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. . . . Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come O blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the World.”*

Jesus says “touché.”

Remember that rule for reading Scripture: consider each part in relation to the whole. Karl Barth called the Bible the “organ of the Holy Spirit.” The prophets, poets, editors and writers are the Spirit’s keys, stops, pipes and pedals. The various stories and teachings, like this morning’s parable, are its chords and notes. The meaning isn’t in the chords and notes in isolation; it is in the chords and notes as they contribute to a beautiful, complex, compelling, piece of music.

Returning to our text, now Jesus turns the disappointed son’s complaint into a teaching moment. As usual, he tells a parable.

It is a story about rich man brought up short. He’d made his nut and now, with serene self-satisfaction, he contemplates a hard-earned, well-planned, comfortable retirement. *Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.* His mind drifts forward to long naps on hot summer afternoons, before dinner bourbon on the rocks, the Friday night drive down to New Orleans for oysters on the half-shell and a rendezvous with you know who.

Roll the drums, enter God, stage right: *You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*

For any who may have missed it the moral of the story, Jesus spells it out: *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

“Professor!” Again, the hand goes up. “Is God actually that rough?”

I can answer this one.

Actually, Hermione, life is that rough. That is why we parents worry about you children from day you are born, with the worries gathering weight and picking up momentum as you approach your sixteenth birthday and that first time you will head down the street, alone, driving the family car. It is why we warn you, beg you, threaten you: don’t drink, don’t answer calls, for the love of Christ, don’t text—and drive. We can lose you in a heartbeat.

But no, in answer to your question, “roughness” actually is not one of the attributes of God. Remember our rule: read the Bible as a whole, listen to the music. The meaning comes through that, although life is often difficult, and sometimes cruel, God is always kind, merciful, generous and good. That assurance comes with being Christian.

The assurance comes with this challenge: God wants the same from us. So, with his distinctive flair, Jesus tells us this story with its unmistakable message that God has made us to live for purposes beyond our own self-interest and amusement. Now, to the extent we may have been navigating through life by the star of our own self-interest and amusement, then that divine message may begin to sound troubling and fearsome. There are movements in Scripture that build toward an ominous, “sinners in the hands of an angry God” crescendo—and that is the moment when the trumpet sounds, and the crescendo breaks, and gospel music opens on love that overpowers human sin, foolishness and error.

*My song is love unknown, my savior’s love for me.  
Love to the loveless shown, that we might lovely be.*

Again, back to our text:

*You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*

Hypothetically, let’s pretend I am reading this parable as one of the world’s “haves,” a fortunate son of a family that had made a lot of money finding oil and making gasoline. For the sake of argument we will suppose that is true. For anyone in my shoes, this story is, of course, sobering.

The gospels have plenty more where this comes from, too—sayings about camels and needles and whatnot; warnings about rich, self-important men stepping over poor, unimportant beggars now, to their chagrin, regret and eternal sorrow later. As the rich man: I am the cat, Scripture is the hot tin roof.

Thank God. Not only does that keep me sober (mostly), it fills me with hope.

Two weeks ago, I drove out from Boston to see an old friend in Amherst, Massachusetts, which is where I went to school. Before I met up with my friend, I walked alone around the college. You know how that goes—at every spot little, lost bits of memory came floating to the top.

I walked out to the most scenic spot on campus, Memorial Hill, and stopped for a while to soak it in. There is a large, granite monument, inscribed with names of places: Normandy, the Ardennes, Arnhem, Guadalcanal and Coral Sea . . . and with the full roll of fallen soldiers and sailors and their respective classes: 1917, 1915, 1941, 1939. . . . Altogether, there must have been hundreds of names from the two world wars.

I ask you:

Who would want to live in a moral universe that had nothing beyond tributes carved in granite to offer in honor of the sacrifices of these young men, whose lives were demanded at such an early age?

That is the moral universe supposed in the expression, “relax, eat, drink, be merry (for tomorrow we die).” That motto is hopeless. The supposed truth it takes for real would give us a world unworthy even of the mother bear trying to feed and protect her cubs, much less the 22 year old ranger who lost his future off the beach at Normandy.

I don’t like that moral universe. Give me a moral universe that I can love and honor—a hot tin roof where I am answerable for how I live to a good and loving God.

Yes, the gospel warns against greed and selfish irresponsibility. Those warnings actually are promises, because they come with the wonderful assurance that this is in the end a good world, that life is in the end a great gift.

“Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are the poor,” and “the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are the persecuted righteous.” “Blessed are the pure in heart.” *Blessed are those soldiers whose names are carved in memorials throughout the world.* “Blessed are those who mourn.”

This is the moral universe I want. This is the moral universe we inhabit. This is the moral universe where Jesus Christ is Lord.

To him be ascribed all honor, glory, power and dominion, now and forever, Amen.