

PASS IT ON

One day I was retrieving the mail, and as I always do, I pawed through the envelopes to sort out the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff.

There was yet another catalog from *Land's End*. Into the recycle bin with that. I got excited about the large, padded envelope from Amazon. The book I ordered had arrived! But then, what's this? An envelope with a return address that said, *InterMed*. It was a bill from a doctor's appointment I'd been to a month or so before.

I immediately tensed up. My nerves tingled. And questions percolated through my mind. How much of the cost had been picked up by the insurance company? How much of what the insurance company paid went toward my deductible instead of the cost of the medical bill? And last, but certainly not least, what did I personally owe *InterMed* for my half-hour visit to the doctor? How much money was I going to have to pay out of my own pocket?

In other words, what was the bottom line for me?

I went in the house and dropped the envelope on the dining room table. I started to get a headache just imagining having to waste my time calling up my insurance company and arguing with them about why they should pay more than they did for a legitimate doctor's visit. I grabbed a letter opener and open the envelope. The bill came to around \$23.00.

I was overjoyed. It almost felt like I had won the lottery. I had imagined a worst case scenario of owing a hundred or more dollars. But there I was, holding a medical bill in my hand for about \$23.00. I was so happy that, if a billing agent from my insurance company had been with me when I opened that envelope, I might very well have given him or her a big hug!

That's how the individuals in Jesus' parable who owed money to the master must have felt when they met with the shady manager to pay off their debts. Amazed. Delighted. Very thankful for their unexpected good fortune.

So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

"Nine hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied.

The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?"

"A thousand bushels of wheat," he replied.

He told him, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred."

Talk about hitting the jackpot. It was like money in the bank. What an astonishing, delightful surprise they received. Christmas sure came early for those individuals! You might even call it a sudden, surprising gift that reflects God's divine grace, where we owe a large debt and, without any prior notice, God recalculates, shuffles the numbers around and drastically cuts the amount that's due on our bill. And God would mark the invoice, PAID IN FULL BY JESUS CHRIST.

If we look at Jesus' parable of the shrewd manager from the point of view of the individuals who benefited from the manager's shrewdness, and see it as a surprising gift that allows us a glimpse of God's divine grace toward us, that leads to all sorts of awesome possibilities. Not the least of which is, how God is able to use even a dishonest, self-serving, shady character like the shrewd manager to bless the lives of other people in unexpected and wonderful ways. And if God can use a disreputable, seedy character like him, who seems to have no redeeming qualities or morals at all, as a channel of grace, it indicates that there are no limits to the ways and means by which God can bless and grace our lives, and bless and grace the lives of others through us.

Now, I know that Jesus didn't actually intend his parable of the shrewd manager to be interpreted the way I'm interpreting it this morning; but on the other hand, Jesus was a very strong believer in and proponent of God's grace. He told many other parables promoting the idea that God was exceedingly gracious and merciful, and how God's people should be gracious and merciful to one another. And I'd like to think Jesus would be open to the interpretation of his story I'm holding up to you this morning.

So, what would happen if you and I lived by the idea that we're vessels of God's grace, like the shrewd manager was, even though he didn't realize it? What if we saw every moment of every day as an opportunity, a calling, a responsibility, to manifest God's grace and love in the world?

An unknown author wrote, "Live in such a way that those who meet you but haven't met God will come to meet God because they met you." Isn't that a wonderful quote? I would suggest that the characters in Jesus' parable who came before the shrewd manager owing a lot of money did unexpectedly meet God and experienced God's grace and love through the manager's dishonest act. So why shouldn't we do the same—in a less shady and dishonest way, of course—and help others experience God's grace and love in their lives?

Maybe that wouldn't even be a very difficult thing to do. Maybe it could be done by doing something as simple as smiling at and greeting the people we encounter as we go about our lives, to let them know we recognize and acknowledge their existence.

Richard Stanford wrote about such an unexpected and delightful experience of God's grace and love that he had one day.

The crisp February morning chilled the crowd that waited to catch the MARTA, Atlanta's public rail system. When the train arrived, I moved with the others toward vacant seats. Mechanical sounds punctuated the trip: the humming of electric motors and the loud bell before the doors slid shut.

As we settled into our parallel journeys, I looked around. I work at home, so I don't often take public transit at rush hour. This morning I was on my way into the city for a seminar. The size and diversity of the crowd on the train surprised me. In our single car there were African-Americans, European-Americans and Asians—a generous representation of world society. But there was no interaction. Business men and women had their briefcases open, poring over papers filled with charts and columns. Casually dressed students studied books. One young man had on earphones and swayed in a slow dance to his private music. I'm a fiction man, myself. I travel with a novel handy.

But today I didn't open it. I was too busy studying those around me. Something felt strange. I didn't realize what it was until I'd disembarked at Five Points, the connecting terminal for the east and west trains. In this cavernous space, I joined perhaps a thousand other commuters waiting for their rides. Here I realized what was so eerie: the total silence. One thousand people, packed cheek to jowl, looking straight ahead, pretending the others didn't exist. And I, a 50-year-old white man wearing a blue suit and glasses, was one of them. The only sound two stories under Atlanta's streets was the hum of the escalators.

And then came a woman's voice: "Good morning!" The greeting echoed through the station. A thousand heads snapped up in unison, scanning the space. The voice had come from a woman riding a descending escalator on the far side of the platform. "How y'all this morning?" She practically sang her words, punctuating her speech with long vowel extensions.

People began to turn toward her. The petite African-American woman reached the bottom of the escalator and walked purposefully to the edge of the throng. She grabbed a surprised businessman's hand, shook it and looked him in the eye. "Good morning! How ya doing this morning?" The man looked at the small woman who had him in her grip. He broke into a smile. "Fine, thank you."

Her clothes were a little ragged, but her purposeful smile overcame her stature and appearance as she moved through the crowd, shouting greetings, shaking hands and laughing freely. Finally, she looked across the tracks at the crowd on my side of the platform. "How y'all folks over there this morning?"

"Just fine!" I shouted back. Others answered with me. We surprised each

other so much that we broke out laughing.

“That’s good,” she said. She paused and looked around. Now everyone was listening. “God sent me here to cheer you up this morning. And that’s the God of the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims and any other religions y’all brought or didn’t bring along with you.” From where I stood, I could see a twinkle in her eye. Amazingly, the train station came alive with good-natured conversation. As we chatted with each other, few noticed the slight woman ascend the up escalator.

When the northbound train arrived, I squeezed into a car already stuffed with riders. I didn’t get much past the door and grabbed a chrome pole that had a good number of hands gripping it. My face looked straight into that of an African-American woman about my age. She wore a light yellow business suit. I sensed she didn’t like the press of people around us. Before I could stop myself I said, “Good morning.”

“What?” She seemed surprised.

“Good morning. How are you doing?” A few people watched us.

A smile overtook her. “Fine,” she chuckled. “You know, nobody’s asked me that this morning. Really, nobody ever says hello.”

I grinned and told her about the unexpected passenger back at Five Points, and wondered aloud if she might have been an angel. “Isn’t that what angels do? They’re messengers. That woman demonstrated the blessing of simply greeting each other and sharing our humanity rather than guarding it.” Others around the pole joined the discussion, and smiles spread through the car.

The woman across from me, now grinning, said, “If it weren’t so crowded in here, I’d give you a good hug. You’ve made my morning.”

When the train arrived at my stop, I moved toward the door. “I hope you have a good day!” I called back to my fellow traveler.

“I will, and thank you.”

As I looked back into the car, I saw lots of smiles. People were chatting. Someone else touched my shoulder and waved good-bye. I felt happy and alive.

Since then, I’ve often wondered who that woman was. She didn’t have wings; she ascended and descended on an escalator, and she spoke in a southern drawl. But silent people who were temporarily buried two stories below Atlanta began to talk and laugh. They came alive.

A chilly February day felt warmer, and ever since that encounter, a shy guy like me hasn’t been able to keep myself from greeting and talking with strangers on subway trains, elevators and airplanes. But isn’t that what a more famous angelic message proclaimed: “Good will to all”

Richard Stanford concluded his story by saying, "Good will is contagious. Pass it on."

Pass it on. Now there's a great suggestion.

What if those very fortunate businessmen in Jesus' parable, the ones who suddenly found themselves with an unexpected windfall of disposable money because an unscrupulous, shrewd manager, for no other reason than to save his own neck, cut them some slack; what if those guys, who, out of the blue, received an unforeseen blessing, a wonderful, surprising gift of grace; what if, instead of merely counting their blessings and the grace they were shown, they decided to pass it on?

And what if we did that too? Amen.