

I'll Gladly Pay You Tuesday...

Jerome Kerviel is a mid-level stock trader who nearly toppled the entire French economy. Well, one bank at least. Kerviel used his insider's knowledge of the computer security systems at the Societe Generale bank in Paris to set up a series of fraudulent transactions. A futures trader who hedged on the European markets, Kerviel bet wrong just before a big crash and the subsequent shortfall exposed his scheme. It was the biggest single stock scam ever, far bigger than a British boondoggle in 1995 that led to the collapse of an entire bank. Experts don't expect Societe Generale to flat-line but it will need an eight billion dollar cash transfusion to fight its way off life support.

The funny thing is that Kerviel doesn't seem to have profited personally from his perfidy. Evidently his only goal was to look good to his bosses. Good luck with that project!

But Kerviel is a piker compared to the Mad Embezzler of Matthew 18. This parable amounts to a biblical Dilbert cartoon, a tale of dishonesty and incompetence so absurd as to provoke uncontrollable laughter.

Jesus imagines a man who, by running two sets of books, managed to steal – and then spend – ten thousand talents. If you're not up on the exchange rates for ancient middle eastern currency, consider that one talent amounted to about fifteen years' pay for the average working man, meaning this guy had borrowed against his salary for the next hundred and fifty millennia! The Frenchman took his company for a year's profits, but Jesus' depicts a pirate who plundered his boss to the tune of one hundred and fifty thousand years wages!

And Jesus specifically tells us that this guy is a slave, so it isn't like he regularly had access to that kind of cash flow. Jesus pretty much says that the janitor had been boosting change from the vending machines to the tune of a bazillion dollars. And notice this – like Mr. Kerviel, apparently he doesn't have a dime of it left! It actually outdoes Dilbert. Even the pointy-haired boss couldn't have missed an amount this big. Not even Wally the slacker could have spent it all.

Next, this absurd story warps into funhouse mirror mode with two bewildering developments. First, the boss forgives the thief. He takes the whole thing as a write-down, bills the shortfall to petty cash and passes it off to his board as the cost of doing business. Next, the man who stole the national debt refuses to give a break to someone who lost a few bucks in the office March Madness pool.

With this sobering conclusion to a rollicking yarn, Jesus brings us face-to-face with the mathematics of forgiveness. What theologian could imagine a God who forgave on that scale? What madman could imagine an idiot who would in turn refuse forgiveness? Then as we stand stunned at this incalculable spiritual calculus, Jesus lands the knockout blow. "God," he says, "is the boss. You are the thief. Don't make the same mistake."

Pay Up!
Doug