

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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*The Parable of the Shrewd Manager* is among the most difficult of all the parables to decode. It is also known as the *Parable of the Unjust Steward*, or the *Dishonest Steward*, so you can see what some of the difficulties are. It frequently raises more questions than it seems to answer which leaves congregations confused and guessing. In fact, it has led to a “bewildering number of explanations” in the history of the church. So, it is a challenging parable to figure out, but let’s try to take it apart and see where it leads us in finding out what Jesus was attempting to convey in this short illustration.

First, the parable itself offers four different messages: the children of light need to act more shrewdly; Christians should make friends by ‘dishonest wealth;’ if you’re not faithful with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with the true riches?; you cannot serve two masters.

It is helpful to recall that in Luke, the proper use of wealth is a primary theme. He uses “every literary vehicle available to him” to achieve this, including many familiar narratives: the song of Mary; the sermons of John the Baptist; the prophecy of Isaiah; blessings and woes; and the parable of the rich fool, to name just a few examples. But it isn’t simply the use of wealth. Luke is interested in “our relationship to wealth and how that affects our relationships with others.” And we see this perhaps most clearly in his treatment of the steward or manager: while he once acted in a dishonest way to enrich himself, he now acts to enrich others and thereby establish “a relationship of mutual benefit.”

Luke seems intent on challenging some of the stereotypes most people associate with Christians. For example, a vow of poverty which has characterized so many historical movements in the church (a vow which has little real meaning for most people). Or the naïve view that an ethic of wealth equality is a reasonable or achievable goal. Instead, Jesus in Luke’s account seems to be offering a profound teaching to guide people of faith in their views of money and how they are called to relate to it. The parable seems to be saying that “it is possible to manage possessions and money in ways that can lead us into life with God.” And, again, the perspective of Jesus on these matters is not simple. After all, even if we can grasp the notion of being shrewd in our handling of money, even if we avoid squandering

out wealth, even if we wish to serve God in our relationship to possessions, how we do that on a daily basis is very, very challenging.

The cultural context tells us how to place the story in the time and place of its telling. One hundred *baths* of oil (a unit of measurement) would be “equivalent to about 800 or 900 gallons, the yield of possibly 150 olive trees and ...the wages of about three years for the average worker.” One hundred *kor* of wheat would be almost 1100 bushels, probably enough to feed 150 people for a year, the product of 100 acres, and equivalent to seven and 1/2 years of labor for the average worker.” So, we’re dealing with fairly large business dealings involving largely people of means. The man is almost certainly an agent rather than a slave. A slave would not be simply dismissed but would have received an additional, harsher penalty.

And then we should look at how this story is working. The master of the household appears to have been “acting in an underhanded way.” Jews were not permitted to lend money at interest, but people usually manage to get around a prohibition that does not work in their favor, so people figured out how to escape the financial consequences of the prohibition by lending *in kind* – that is, in wheat or wool or oil or the like, rather than cash. It is likely that the steward “from the bill deducted the interest the master had been charging. If he did this, the lenders were pleased, but the master couldn’t lay a charge against the steward without owning up to his own shady business practices.” Nevertheless, he could only have admired the steward’s clever approach.

All of this is conveyed through a parable, a literary form with its own particular identity. In this case, it does not offer a clear moral teaching on how to handle money, but there is usually some moral teaching placed alongside the basic narrative which can simply confuse matters given the form of the presentation.

Finally, a first century Jew would have known at once what it was about. “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.” So, what to do? The Pharisees would have wanted to tighten the regulations to make Israel more holy, but this would have excluded the very people Jesus was reaching out to.

In this parable, Jesus appears to be saying to Israel: “you are facing a great crisis, so throw caution to the wind”, and learn from the cunning of the Gentiles with whom you often (do) business. Don’t hoard money and land, but use them to make friends. If all this is true, then Jesus is directing this lesson to the actual situation of his hearers. It is a situation-specific narrative.

One thing is clear. Jesus is not talking here about business practices or personal finance or capital management. Rather, it is about not taking so seriously the various regulations we often impose on one another, because in turbulent times you may have to postpone the teaching of moral lessons until a less challenging time.

But it is also true that Jesus appears to be conveying the need to resist easy answers to complex problems, especially when we are talking about matters as complex and fraught as the handling of money. Thus, “what

is commended is action born of wisdom in view of the crisis” one is confronting, so it isn’t about church stewardship or tithing, no matter how important these matters are. Instead, it cautions us to make “wise use of possessions in view of the eschatological crisis” faced by Israel in the time of Jesus.

That crisis concerned the coming of God’s kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ. God was acting again in history, demonstrating his concern for his creation but doing so in a way only God could imagine.

But this coming of the kingdom meant also the arrival of conflict, because the world has demonstrated time and again that it doesn’t really very much like what God is advocating. So, people fight. They fought over the meaning of Jesus, for example. They fought over whether to follow him or not. They struggled to define what it was he was saying. And all of this meant strife. That was the crisis they were confronting, and *mostly they just didn’t get it*. Like the disciples themselves, they didn’t fully appreciate the teaching of their Lord. Had they understood better, they might have avoided the terrible consequences of the futile and deadly war with Rome which resulted in utter defeat for Israel in 70 A.D.

And Jesus frequently talked about the world to come, the end of the age, the final reckoning which rendered most current concerns irrelevant. Jesus was calling people to a whole new

way of viewing everything that touched their lives. In this sense, the parable “disrupts our usual definition of what acting in our own self-interest means in light of the reversal of fortunes the kingdom of God will bring.”

Of the many possible interpretations that have been offered, I’d like to share one which capitalizes on an appreciation for the culture in which the narrative was operating. In this view, what is at stake is the honor of the master as well as that of the steward. From this perspective, we have a clear focus on *the honor and shame system* prevalent in the Middle East at the time. Since it was a powerful motivator, we need to take it seriously as an authentic window on the action. Here’s how this interpretation works.

A master hears that his steward has been misappropriating funds. “His honor and status in the community are threatened” by the public perception that he cannot control his employees. Thus, he decides to save face by immediately dismissing the employee. Now the steward faces a new crisis: all he knows how to do is to be a steward. A reputation as a dishonorable employee means he can’t get another job. So, he decides to resolve this by restoring his master’s honor. He does so by forgiving a portion of the amount owed to the master. This makes the master look generous so that he retains his reputation as a person one can rely on.

The master hears what the servant has done and praises him for his actions since his honor has been restored. The steward is now in a position to either keep his position or seek a new one without a black mark on his record destroying his chances of being re-employed.

But this whole notion of shrewdness may need to be viewed in a larger context. Perhaps what Jesus is saying here goes well beyond our relationship to possessions. Some commentators have argued that perhaps Luke is emphasizing “God’s mercy, Jesus’ concern for the poor, and the reversal of fortunes that come with the kingdom of God. One’s own best interest, in that larger context, is to act compassionately toward the poor and those who are suffering and to refrain from making wealth the goal of one’s life.

In that context, clearly it is not shrewd for someone with wealth and power to be indifferent to those who are poor or on society’s margins, much less to oppress them for one’s own continued gain. While such actions may be undertaken to secure one’s material

future, in reality, such a state of living precipitates a crisis in one's condition in light of the kingdom to come. It leads to poverty and death, figuratively and literally.

On the flip side, it is shrewd for one who is being taken advantage of to seek justice by opposing the unfair practices of those in power. It is shrewd for someone with resources and influence to advocate for the disadvantaged. Whatever rung we are on in the social, economic ladder, we need to take immediate, decisive, shrewd action to secure our future, and no one can take that action for us. We must do it ourselves.”

(see Alyce McKenzie)

**Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.**

**Amen.**

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