

A Sermon  
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## **Shrewd Disciples**

Luke 16:1-13

According to Jesus, there was a rich man who entrusted a big chunk of his wealth to his manager, with instructions to invest it wisely. The manager rushed out and broke one of the cardinal rules of the market. He didn't spread the money out into a diverse asset allocation. In fact, the manager put most of the money into some cheap oil stocks, which came tumbling down even further with all the other sectors of the market. So like lots of other big players on Wall Street, the rich man was now significantly less rich.

In order to cut his losses, the rich man called in his manager and demanded that he account for this financial disaster. The manager tried to explain that during the past week, everybody who was in the stock market had seen a big drop in the value of their portfolios. "It wasn't entirely my fault," said the manager. "The U.S. economy is still sluggish. The Chinese lowered their interest rates again. The Federal Reserve is keeping everybody on edge about a potential rate hike. Sure, I didn't have the right mix of stocks and bonds, but hey, this week, everybody lost a lot of money. Please, before you make a decision about my future, at least take into account the big picture."

But the rich man had run out of patience, and showed no mercy. In true Donald Trump form, he stared the manager in the eye and said, "You're fired." Of course, those are just two of many words that Donald Trump is famous for. Nowadays, as he continues along the Presidential campaign trail, Trump keeps adding to his list of memorable statements.

Anyway, back to Jesus' parable. After the manager gets such a decisive termination notice, we might think we've seen the last of him. But according to Jesus, there's still much to learn from him. That's why Jesus takes us inside the manager's head, where he's weighing his options for the future. He says, "Okay, step back, take a deep breath, and let's survey the situation. I've just lost my job. I'm not real good at manual labor, especially since I've spent most of my career sitting in front of a computer analyzing stock charts, balance sheets, and profit and loss statements. I'm too proud to go out in public and beg, or to apply for unemployment."

Suddenly a light bulb comes on. "I know what I'll do," the manager says to himself. Before they get word about my dismissal, I'll go out and make friends with the people who owe money to my former boss. I'll just discount their debt. That way, they'll owe less money to him and a favor to me. A favor they could repay with something like, maybe, food and a place to stay while I'm out of work."

As you can tell, this manager, for all his financial mismanagement, is still pretty smart. Unfortunately, he doesn't combine brains with honesty. By slashing the amounts that the rich man's debtors owe, the manager is still out there squandering his employer's wealth, just in a different fashion. After this second round of reckless financial stewardship, you would think that the rich man would come down even harder on the manager for his scheming and maneuvering. But no, the way Jesus tells the story, the rich man actually commends the dishonest manager. He certainly doesn't give him his job back, but he does compliment him for his creativity and cleverness. After all, the manager, though shady and

misleading, did seize the opportunity in front of him and did what was necessary to position himself for a better future. He may have been untrustworthy, but he was still shrewd.

St. Augustine, one of the great fathers of the church, once said, "I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord."<sup>1</sup> But here it is, in black and white. Jesus has good things to say about a bad character. Our Lord takes this shady fellow's actions and lifts them up as an example of how his own disciples should live. Though that may be a little surprising to us, it's certainly not the first time in the Bible that a far from perfect person gets highlighted as a model for others to follow. Plus, it's hard for any of us to claim superiority over the dishonest manager when we know full well that each of us is also a mixture of the commendable and the less commendable.

Now note that Jesus doesn't commend the manager's dishonesty. He simply doesn't let the manager's untrustworthiness overshadow other aspects of his character, in particular, his shrewdness. Jesus says, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (v. 8a). Shrewdness usually isn't one of the first traits that comes to mind when we think about what Christians should be. Other terms seem more appropriate, like "faithful," "obedient," "devoted," or "committed." But "shrewd"? As preacher Fred Craddock says, "It is difficult to speak of a 'shrewd saint.'"<sup>2</sup> This is partly because we frequently associate shrewdness with behavior that's self-serving and ethically questionable. If someone is being shrewd, there's a good chance that they're not acting for the good of others.

Part of our discomfort with shrewdness also has to do with the fact that we often stress the emotional or heart-centered aspect of our faith at the expense of the head-centered aspect of our faith. Yes, discipleship certainly involves the heart. But it also involves the head. The reign of God applies to our thought life as well as our emotive life. In other words, thinking, using our heads, is also a kingdom activity. And shrewdness has a lot to do with using our heads. Shrewdness means being astute and practical. It involves being clever and prudent.

Jesus says, "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (v. 8b). Our Lord makes a crucial distinction between values and behavior that are rooted in this present world, with its focus on materialism, consumption, and acquisition, and values and behavior that are rooted in the world to come, the kingdom of God. It's no secret that those who belong to the present world that's passing away act shrewdly to gain the things that the present world offers. But that doesn't mean that those who belong to God's reign shouldn't act shrewdly as well. They should, but toward a different end, to gain true riches, lasting riches.

When it comes to worldly wealth, hear again the parable. Look and learn, says Jesus. The manager may have been dishonest, but he was under no illusions about what he was facing. He didn't pretend that everything was okay, or that if he waited long enough, everything would just work itself out, without any effort on his part. No, he was clear-eyed about the urgent situation staring him in the face, and he knew that he needed to do something about it. So he moved into action and did what was necessary in order to position himself for the future. As one person has put it, "He used all the means at his disposal to adapt to his new reality. We should be no less shrewd in adapting to God's reality."<sup>3</sup>

What is this reality? It's the kingdom of God, the main subject of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and ministry. Jesus announces that in and through himself, God's reign of justice and peace, the life of the world to come, has arrived in the midst of this present world. This is what's happening, says Jesus, and this is where things are headed. And if you want to be part of it, and have a place in it, then you need to repent and follow me. What's more, when you become my disciple, you don't have to check your brains at the door. In fact,

shrewdness is mandatory, so bring it with you. You're going to need it in order to live out the values of God's kingdom in the midst of this old sinful world that's on its way out.

Let me reference Donald Trump one more time. Not as a candidate for President, but during his days as host of "The Apprentice" and "Celebrity Apprentice." Though I certainly wasn't a devoted viewer, whenever I did catch part of the show, I was struck by how much cleverness and creativity it took for each team to come up with a winning plan that would ensure their survival for another round. When faced with the opportunity to secure a substantial prize, the participants showed incredible shrewdness, maneuvering in their relationships and managing their money so as to position themselves for victory. If the pursuit of this present world's ideas of success and prosperity can generate that kind of cleverness, how much more should we as God's people be alert, prudent, and shrewd about pursuing and obtaining the things of God's kingdom.

It's no wonder that in Matthew Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16, NRSV). The word translated as "wise" also means "shrewd." So shrewdness is essential to discipleship. Shrewdness enables you to see the urgent reality of the kingdom that's right in front of you, and available to you, in Jesus. Shrewdness enables you to make the choices you need to make, and take the actions you need to take, in order to gain true and lasting wealth. Shrewdness guides your investment strategy, so that you deposit your life, day by day, into the kinds of things that yield lasting riches.

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (v. 10). In view of the kingdom that God has promised, and the judgment that comes with it, Jesus expects us to be trustworthy with all the resources he has placed in our hands. Those resources come in the form of time, opportunities, talents, education, and experience. And more than anything else, these resources come to us in the form of relationships and material possessions. Indeed, these are the things that stand out in the example provided by the manager in Jesus' parable. Notice how the manager handles two things, relationships and money, in order to adapt to his new situation and to position himself for a more secure future. This in itself points to the fact in the hard realities of daily life, how we as God's people manage our relationships, and how we manage our financial and material resources, go a long way toward determining how much our values are rooted in the reign of God.

As disciples, being shrewd is part of being trustworthy, especially in the small things. Most of us won't end up on Wall Street or the White House or the halls of Congress. We won't be handling the big accounts, making the big decisions, or passing the new laws. Instead, we'll be following Jesus, and gaining the kingdom, in low profile, less prestigious ways. As Fred Craddock says, "The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. . . . Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much" (v. 10).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William Willimon's sermon, "The Future and What to Do About It," at [www.chapel.duke.edu](http://www.chapel.duke.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 192.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer E. Copeland, "Shrewd Investment." *The Christian Century* (September 7, 2004) 21.

<sup>4</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 192.