

The shrewd manager

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Date: 24 January 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] This morning's reading comes from Luke chapter 16 verses 1 to 15. Jesus told his disciples, There is a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.

So he called him in and asked him, What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer. The manager said to himself, What shall I do now?

My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm ashamed to beg. I know what I'll do, so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.

So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, How much do you owe my master? Three thousand litres of olive oil, he replied.

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

[1 : 05] Thirty tonnes of wheat, he replied. He told him, Take your bill and make it twenty-four. The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

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. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others.

[2 : 22] But God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight. Okay, we turn then to Luke chapter 16 and we'll consider these 15 verses together.

And I wonder how many of you are vaguely unsettled by this parable. How many of you, if you came across it in your regular reading through the Bible, how many of you would just kind of shrug and move on?

How many of you actually stopped to think about what Jesus is teaching here? I mean, the outline of the story is fairly straightforward. A rich man has entrusted the care of his estate to his steward, to a manager.

And he hears a report of mismanagement. He fires the steward. And the steward, the steward knows that he's going to struggle to get another good job with the kind of reference he's going to get from his current employer.

And so he decides to make these alternative arrangements. In order that people will be indebted to him, he uses those last moments before clearing out his desk to reduce the bills of his master's debtors.

[3 : 28] The two examples that were given there are doubtless representative of a number of different bills that he reduced in similar fashion. So these debtors are happy.

The steward has done them a favour. And so in this culture that's so heavily based on reciprocity, you scratch my back, I scratch your back, then they will in turn be obliged to offer him hospitality when he needs it.

The amounts involved here are quite substantial, and their gratitude will be correspondingly so. Maybe he hasn't quite, you know, provided for his old age, but he's at least solved the immediate

crisis by taking this prompt action.

So the events of the parable aren't terribly complex. But when we get to verse 8, suddenly we're hit with this situation where the master in the parable, and by association Jesus himself, where it looks like they're commending the dishonesty of this steward.

Confusing at first sight, I think. But don't worry, all will become clear. I have two overall headings this morning. From the parable itself, running through to verse 8 here, we say, Be shrewd, not naive.

[4 : 39] And then, considering the verses that follow, we say, Use wealth wisely. Two instructions for you and me this morning. Be shrewd, not naive. And use wealth wisely.

Be shrewd, not naive. So then, why, why in this parable is Jesus commending this steward? The most important thing for our understanding here is to be really careful to see exactly what is commended and what is not commended.

If you've seen the Pirates of the Caribbean films, it's Lieutenant Groves' job to stop pirates. That's his job as an officer in the Royal Navy. He has to hunt down the pirates and protect the merchant shipping.

But when he observes Jack Sparrow's escape from custody, Groves' comment is to say, That has got to be the best pirate I've ever seen.

It's possible, isn't it, to respect one thing that somebody does without commending their character overall. It's possible to recognise a worthy opponent who's outsmarted you, even if you still fight to your last breath to defeat them.

[5 : 49] In this case, it's possible to acknowledge the shrewdness, the wisdom even, of recognising an opportunity and seizing it.

The cleverness of thinking your way out of a tricky situation. The wisdom of making provision for the future. It's possible to recognise that here the master in the parable can recognise and can commend the cunning of his steward, even as he condemns the steward's dishonesty.

I mean, the steward is still fired, and yet commended for his shrewdness. As one commentator puts it, there is a world of difference between saying, I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly, and I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.

The cleverness is applauded, not the dishonesty. So with that clarification in place, well, let's actually hear the point that Jesus is making. Let's listen to the challenge here in verse 8.

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

[7 : 01] Be shrewd, not naive. There's a number of different ways that this plays out, aren't there? First notice, the steward makes provision for his future. He sees what's coming. He seizes the lifeline that's open to him.

How many people lack the wit to do similarly? Yes, that means saving money to provide for your old age, I guess, but more significantly, it means looking at what is coming in an eternal sense.

Considering that eternal perspective, looking at the reality of a coming day of reckoning, the day when God will judge every human being who has ever lived, the day when God will judge you and God will judge me, looking at that day and seizing the lifeline that is being offered.

Shrewdness takes the opportunity. That's the first, the most fundamental shrewdness, isn't it? Take the way out that's being offered to you.

Trust in the salvation that's available in Jesus' name. Because if you don't, the result of that is not only digging ditches or begging on a street corner, the things the steward is so keen to avoid.

[8 : 09] No, it will be far worse. Make shrewd provision for your eternal future. Secondly, there's a challenge here in this call to act shrewdly.

There's a challenge to our behavior in a broader sense than just that focus on our eternal future. Jesus bemoans that the people of this world are shrewder than the people of the light.

And John Noland asks, do we who have, at least in theory, the perspective created by a knowledge of Jesus as Christ and Lord, do we have the incisiveness of insight to see as effectively through to the heart of the matter and the incisiveness of action to follow through with what is required?

The question is, in terms of how we engage with the church, in terms of how we seek to advance the kingdom of God, in terms of how we intend to honor God in our daily lives, in spiritual matters, do we have insight?

Do we have strategies? Do we have vision? Do we engage our brains? Do we act shrewdly or operate on autopilot?

[9 : 29] Calvin says, Jesus here charges us with highly criminal indifference. He's right, isn't he?

That we need a dose of shrewdness, that we need a careful analysis of the situation we're in. The shrewdness that's willing to say, out of a church program, that's willing to say, yes, we've always done this, but does it actually achieve something worthwhile?

The shrewdness that looks at the 68 adults associated with Covenant Church, and that by a fairly generous count. Looks at those 68 adults, and then looks at the 3,000 people living in New Mills, and the 3,000 people living in Darville, and the 5,000 people living in Galston, and says, how do we reach this valley?

How do we reach all those thousands? The shrewdness that makes a plan for doing that, instead of hoping that it will just happen without us doing anything.

The shrewdness that engages careful analysis, every possible ounce of creativity to that great end. The shrewdness that is not content to just keep doing the same as always, hoping that what never worked in the past will somehow miraculously begin to work now.

[10 : 44] Matthew 10, verse 16, Jesus charges his disciples to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. And yet, all too often, we who seek to follow him, we are instead as wicked as serpents, and as naive as doves.

We mar our witness with our wicked behaviour, and we lack the wit to take the wise course. Or perhaps not so much that we lack the wit, as that we fail to exercise that wit in the things of God. How many of us bring immense creativity and considerable skill to bear in our daily work, and yet when it comes to that which we do for the church, we're content with, well, that's good enough. Content with the same as always.

Craig Blomberg, he's a particularly incisive commentator on Jesus' parables, and he regretfully suggests that many Christians typically give far less thought and planning to teaching Sunday school lessons than to teaching in real schools.

Or they think that the church will administer itself, or they think it's acceptable to have haphazardly run committee meetings, rather than insisting on at least the same quality of professional standards they would employ in their workplace.

[12 : 06] If we had truly imbibed the biblical understanding of how, even for lay people, involvement in Christian things is the most significant aspect of our lives from God's perspective, then we would put more effort into Sunday school, church administration, committee meetings and programs, than into any of their secular equivalents.

Blomberg says, Jesus says, that our standards in church should be higher than the world's standards, not lower.

Somebody who would offer the most abject of apologies if they failed to do what they'd said they would do at work. That same person, having agreed to do something for the church, failing to do that, would offer at most a perfunctory apology.

Never would a team meeting at work be missed without good cause, yet the church committee is an optional extra. Why? Well, I think fundamentally it's this.

We view church as a leisure time activity. We view that which we do for God, whether associated with covenant church, with the church more broadly, or anything that we might be doing, we view it as a leisure time activity, an optional extra.

[13 : 25] And maybe even more so at the moment. At the moment we say, well, I'll turn on the church service if I'm not too tired on Sunday morning, but if I ever sleep, well, don't worry, I'll catch up later.

And yet somehow, later doesn't come. Now, friends, I am not for a moment saying that you neglect the job you're paid to do. That's not what I'm commending to you.

And I get that this sounds easier for me without another job to do. Easier to call for commitments.

And I'm also all too conscious that even in that position of not having a different job calling on my time, I'm still often later than I should be in sending out the meeting agenda and late on things that I should do.

And there's some things that I know I should do, but nobody sees. Well, they don't always happen at all. I'm conscious of my failings in this, and I feel a little bit hypocritical saying this, but you and I, we have to engage with Jesus' challenge here.

Will you be shrewd in your dealings? Will you devote yourself to the things of God with a higher priority than any other matter? Will we give God our very best in our time and our effort?

[14:37] Friends, we must be shrewd, not naive. Secondly, then, these verses charge us to use wealth wisely.

And again, we have perhaps a confusing statement in this section, in verse 9. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

First, don't be thrown off by the phrase worldly wealth, other translations, unrighteous wealth. The phrase here isn't particularly talking about money as an unrighteous thing per se.

It's not talking about the proceeds of criminal activity. This is just a common phrase to refer to money in general. So, don't get hung up on that.

But even with that out of the way, it still sort of sounds like Jesus is telling us to buy our way into heaven, doesn't it? Use your wealth to gain friends so you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

[15:36] Folks, when we're hit with a situation like this, we have to remind ourselves God is consistent. No portion of Scripture contradicts another. So, when we seek to understand one passage, we can't do so in a way that's ruled out by another passage.

And generally, we're wise to let the clearer statement govern the interpretation of the more obscure. And Ephesians 2, verse 8 is pretty clear. It is by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works.

so that no one can boast. We can safely say Jesus is not advocating for buying a ticket to heaven, is he? So, what then? Well, I think here in verse 9 the idea of gaining friends for yourself, it's shifted a little bit.

In the parable, the friends that the steward wanted were those who had something to offer him and fairly immediately. And here in verse 9 the friends were exhorted to gain, actually this is in the sense of adding to the number of believers, I think.

Jesus is espousing, using the money we have, using our resources more broadly, using these things for kingdom priorities. He's saying if we're devoted to winning and discipling believers, then we will be welcomed into heaven on the last day by those who have preceded us there.

[17:00] Using our money for kingdom purposes, this is not the means by which we purchase eternal favor, but it's one way we demonstrate that we have received God's blessing and Jesus says we will be welcomed.

Friends, do you not think that having funded the translation of God's word into the language of a particular tribe, that the members of that tribe will be keen to welcome you and thank you on the last day when you arrive?

that those who are converted by a particular missionary, yes, their gratitude will be to the one who actually came to speak to them, but will it not also be to you who provided the funds that enabled that person to go?

And that's not just about missionaries in a far off land, it can be much closer to home as well, can't it? Verse 10, 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.

So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

[18:11] Jesus says that how we use what we have now will show whether we are able to be trusted with what is to come. Money, says John Noland again, is intrinsically of quite limited value.

But when handled in this way, it can lead on to its replacement by a really valuable form of currency that will no longer simply be a trust, but will be properly one's own possession.

Money is an instrument, but it should be no master. So we're saying that any wealth that we possess on this earth, that it is both trivial, irrelevant, unimportant, and it is not really ours.

Alone, a trust given to us for a purpose, given to us by God to use as he intends. So then we must ask, what does it look like to use our worldly wealth wisely as God intends?

What does it look like to be trustworthy with someone else's property? I think there's probably gentle commendation in this parable for using it to make sensible provision for your own future.

[19:18] Saving in order that in retirement you won't be a burden to others. As a younger adult, saving so as to be able to buy your own home probably wise. Overall, that seems to cost less

money to do things that way.

I don't think Jesus in these verses is in any way opposed to us thinking sensibly about our money and taking practical steps. It isn't wrong to invest money in order to accumulate more money. At least that's not always wrong, but look at verse 13. Watch out. No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. So it seems to me that if accumulating money is to you at an end to itself, then you're serving money, not God.

And even if the money is the kind of intermediate step to getting the stuff that money can buy, it still doesn't sound much like serving God, does it? Again, don't be confused by this verse.

[20 : 21] Maybe you look at this verse and think, well of course you can serve two masters. Don't be silly. Lots of people have two part-time jobs. And for that matter, surely even those who are most serving God, for the majority, there's some level at which, aren't we serving money?

Otherwise, how do we live and support our families? Well it's helpful, it's helpful to know that the word being translated serve here, that this could also be translated be enslaved.

Now there's negative dimensions to slavery, but what's being focused on here, I think, is the kind of holistic commitment that's involved in being a slave.

The point is that the idea of slavery has intrinsic to it exclusive loyalty and service. That if you attempt to divide that in any way, you can't help but love one more than the other.

If you attempt to divide your loyalty between money and God, you cannot possibly give God the exclusive loyalty that he demands. Now you may well still need to devote some proportion of your time and your energy to thinking about money, to acting in ways so as to get money.

[21 : 28] Most of us need to do that, but the point is that those efforts to accumulate money, that they are entirely subordinate to your loving devotion to God. You earn money because God tells you to, not because money is your master.

Maybe it's a subtle distinction, maybe it's not immediately obvious how that affects our behavior, but I think it is an important distinction. I think it's a distinction that Jesus is drawing here in verse 13.

What this means, if money is not to be a master, if God is to be the only master, then that means therefore that with our money as with every other aspect of our lives, God demands control.

God demands to be in control. God deserves to be in charge of your bank account because it is his money, not yours. And I suspect, I suspect for 99.9% of us, I suspect that probably means giving more of it away than we currently do.

Jesus doesn't give us here in these verses, doesn't give us anywhere else, a number of pounds per month to give away. He doesn't even give us a percentage. There's worse ideas than taking the 10% figure that was expected in the Old Testament as a guideline for us today, but we do also see in the Old Testament law variation in what God expects based upon income.

[22 : 56] Maybe you remember when we were looking at the book of Exodus, the gathering of the materials for the tabernacle. The materials that were asked of the Israelites varied from the extremely costly gold through to the wood that you could go and chop down and bring along to the building site.

Now the principle here, it is not this is the amount God wants you to give to him. The principle is it is all God's already. The principle is to be good stewards of 100% of what God has loaned to us.

Some commentators suggest that that might look like giving explicitly to God's work kind of a graduated percentage. Maybe not dissimilar to how our taxation system operates here in the UK.

Maybe you can't afford to give away 10% of your income. But maybe the honest truth is you could give away 40% and still live comfortably. Friends, I do not know the details of your finances.

But what I do know is that Jesus' words here are a challenge to us. A challenge to consider which is the higher priority. Is your higher priority the expensive holiday or supporting the Garvey family in their work in Joss?

[24 : 18] Where should I spend my money? Do I buy the new car or do I go second hand and give the difference to help plant a church in Chapel Hall? That's one of our Presbytery's current projects. Friends, if one billion people globally live below the UN's poverty line, what is our response to that as Christians?

if there are 2,000 different languages spoken around the world that do not have a Bible translation even started compared to only 700 languages with a complete copy of God's Word, what is our

response to that?

So, so what have you done with the money that you didn't spend last year going out to eat in restaurants? What have you done with the money that you were refunded for the holiday that you didn't take?

Last time you got a pay rise at work, did you actually reassess how much money you were giving away or did you just enjoy the extra cash? How many of us have even taken the simple step of looking at where we're actually spending our money?

Looking at it with a view to being able to say, well, goodness, I don't need to spend that much on that. Let me do this instead. If you're spending more on various different entertainment subscriptions in a month, Netflix and Disney Plus and whatever and whatever, if you're spending more on that, then you are giving to the church.

[25 : 56] I'm pretty confident that your priorities are at odds with what Jesus says here. If your annual holiday budget is larger than your annual giving budget.

I'm pretty sure you should take a hard look at that situation. Folks, it's never comfortable to speak about money. We've trained ourselves as a society that we just don't do that.

But Jesus devotes by some estimates around one-fifth of his teaching time to talking about money. So here we are. I don't know the details of your finances, but there is a real danger that we are like the Pharisees in verse 14, sneering at what Jesus says here.

Why? Because the truth is we love money. We value that which the world values, but which is detestable in God's sight.

So friends, let us be shrewd, not naive. Not least in using our material resources wisely for that which will last for an eternity.

[27 : 03] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, give us soft hearts.

Give us hearts that are willing to be affected by what you say in your word. Give us a willingness to listen. Give us ears to hear.

transform our behavior, we ask. That we might be shrewd. That we might give to you our very best. That we might put the effort in to do well in your service.

To strategize, to think about how we may effectively proclaim your name. How we might show the truth of the gospel to this valley and further afield.

God, we give us soft hearts with respect to your call upon our finances. Remind us, help us to truly feel that it is your money, not ours.

[28 : 12] Help us to use it wisely for your glory. Amen.