

THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER
LUKE 16:1-13

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The Human Rights Campaign is a very shrewd organization. It was founded in 1980 as a political action group created to lobby for gay rights. One of the first shrewd things which the organizers did was to name themselves "The Human Rights Campaign." They might more accurately have called themselves "The Pro-LGBTQ Campaign, or "The Pro-Gay Rights Organization." But who can be against human rights?

Initially the group focused on ending discrimination against gays in health care and employment. In 1989 the group expanded to be more than just a PAC, a political action committee. They also began to lobby for hate crime legislation. Who wants to come out in opposition to hate crimes? Initially the organization had 25,000 members.

In 1993 the Human Rights Campaign organized the National Coming Out Day. People who came out as gay were celebrated and treated as heroes. The group began to expand into research, communications, and public relations. They sought donations from large companies. They acquired support from Hollywood celebrities. Their membership grew to 500,000 people.

In 2000 the Human Rights Campaign organized a big concert in Washington, DC, to honor the victims of hate crimes against homosexuals. They had a lot of support from the press as well as participation from famous singers. In 2002 the Human Rights Campaign created the Corporate Equality Index, which rated large corporations on their treatment of LGBTQ people. Their membership grew to 1.5 million people.

In 2010 the Human Rights Campaign celebrated the first legal same sex wedding on the steps of its headquarters in Washington, DC. In 2015 the US Supreme Court threw out state laws barring gay marriage. This year a Gallup Poll found that 71% of American adults say that same sex marriage should be legally valid and should have the same rights as traditional marriage. Now the Human Rights Campaign is at work in promoting transgenderism, including public school policies that affirm children who decide to change their gender identity.

Many of these accomplishments are evil in the sight of God. When people try to change the Owner's Manual which we have been given by our Divine Manufacturer, there will always be negative consequences. Marriage is a divine institution intended to involve a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. God created us as biological males and females. He did not intend for us to have the option of changing our gender identity. Trying to change these things will only mess up ourselves, our families, and our culture. But you have to hand it to the Human Rights Campaign. The organization has been very shrewd and effective in carrying out their desired goals.

Jesus Christ in the parable before us says that we Jesus followers have something to learn from the shrewdness of people in the world around us. We shall see what that is. We have been doing a series on Sunday mornings recently devoted to the parables of Jesus. Last Sunday we looked at the Parable of the Landowner. Today we shall consider the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.

I.

Let's consider then THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE, which is Roman numeral I in the outline on the back of the bulletin. When Jesus began to get opposition from the religious leaders of His day, he started to use parables. One purpose of the parables was to explain the mystery form of the kingdom of heaven. The Old Testament described a coming kingdom over which a Jewish messiah would rule on the earth. John the Baptist and then Jesus came along proclaiming that He was the fulfillment of those Old Testament prophecies. The religious leaders would not accept Him and His claims. Jesus did not fit their expectations, and He did not follow all of their man-made rules.

So Jesus in His parables began to describe the mystery form of the kingdom of God whereby He would rule in the hearts of His followers until He returns to earth. The use of the parables also made it harder for the religious leaders to arrest Jesus. It is harder to take Jesus into custody for blasphemy or for promoting rebellion when He is just telling stories.

At the beginning of #15 we are told that the Pharisees, the dominant religious group among the rabbis, were listening to Jesus. Later in that chapter Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. That was the famous story where the younger son demanded his share of the inheritance and went off to spend it all in wasteful living. He came to senses and returned to his father, asking if he would take him on as a hired servant. He told his father that he had totally blown it. He had sinned against God and against him. The father welcomed him home and called for a big party. The older brother was jealous of that warm reception. The implication from Jesus is that the Pharisees are like that older brother. They resent God's acceptance of sinners.

Now in #16 we learn about a parable where a manager squanders his master's resources as opposed to a son who squanders the inheritance which he receives from his father. Herein lie important lessons for the people of God.

II.A.

Let's consider then THE PARABLE, which we find in vv. 1-8a. In the first three verses we learn about THE PROBLEM. According to v. 1, **"He [Jesus] also said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.'"**

It was common back in that day, as it is today, for rich people to have managers. It is a scenario familiar to students of Biblical history. The disciples of Jesus would have been

familiar with the story of their ancestor Joseph, who was a manager in the house of Potiphar. Eventually Joseph became a manager under the Egyptian pharaoh.

In this parable an annual audit may have been carried out, and the finances for which this manager was responsible did not look good. He was probably not directly stealing from his boss. The word “wasting” is the same term which was used to describe what the prodigal son did with his share of the estate. This manager was probably taking advantage of his position. He was padding his expense account. He was eating out at nice restaurants and putting the tab on the company credit card. He was using the company chariot to get around town. Furthermore, this manager was just not taking care of business in an effective manner.

So he got the pink slip in v. 2: **“And he [the rich guy] called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’”** The boss gave him some time to clean out his office. He perhaps was expecting the manager to finish up some book work. Papers needed to be in order for the next guy who came along to get the job.

Verse 3 describes the manager’s initial reaction: **“And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’”** The manager is not a good guy. He has not managed his master’s money well. He has spent it poorly. There is no confession of wrongdoing nor attempt to seek reconciliation with his boss.

This guy does take an objective look at his situation. He needs another job. He is out of shape. So he won’t even consider manual labor. He has pride. He has held a good job. So he would be ashamed to become a beggar. Other manager jobs may be out of the question. There was a limited number of rich people around who would be looking for managers, and this guy probably would not get a good recommendation from his boss. So the manager had to be creative in dealing with this problem.

B.

We come then to THE SOLUTION in vv. 4-7. We read in vv. 4-6, **“I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’”**

There is some uncertainty about the financial arrangement that is being made here. The Old Testament and Jewish law prohibited Jews from charging fellow Jews interest. So a couple of things were done to protect a Jewish businessman in this kind of situation. One thing which could be done was to have a manager make these deals so that the rich guy could remain one step removed from these financial transactions. He could claim ignorance about the exact nature of the transaction.

The other thing that could be done was that no specific reference to interest could be made. A client could borrow fifty measures of oil. But any official receipt or contract would only speak about 100 measures of oil being paid back at a certain time. So interest could be built into the agreement, along with a possible commission to the manager. But the only documentation would speak about repayment of 100 measures of oil.

There is also uncertainty about the standard of measure which is being used for the oil, which is no doubt olive oil. Estimates for the standard of measure range from five gallons to ten gallons for one of these "measures." So the amount of debt originally involved ranges everywhere from 500 gallons to a 1000 gallons. It is a substantial amount.

The manager has a limited time in which to make this deal before he has to turn in the keys to his office. The first client is happy to make this deal. His bill is cut in half. The client may just assume that the rich guy has encountered a cash flow problem and needs his money, or olive oil, back. Perhaps the amount originally borrowed was fifty measures.

In v. 7 we learn about another debtor. **"Then he [Jesus] said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'** A scholar by the name of Jeremias says that this original debt would involve the average yield from a grain field of 100 acres. This time the debt is reduced only 20%. Why might that be?

A couple of factors could be in play. Perhaps the value of wheat was much more stable than that of olive oil. Then also it could be that the loan term was much shorter. In other words, the agreement for the wheat could have involved a promise to pay back the amount in two months. Perhaps the loan agreement involving olive oil required final payoff of the loan three years down the road. In both cases the clients who owed money, or a commodity, felt like they were getting a really good deal from this manager.

C.

We come then in the first part of v. 8 to THE MASTER'S REACTION. According to the first part of v. 8, **"The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness."** The key term to examine here is "shrewdness." The original Greek word is the only appearance which it makes in the New Testament as an adverb. But the Greek word appears several times as an adjective.

Jesus Himself uses the adjective In Matthew #7 v. 24 in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, **"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock."** The word has about it the idea of wisdom. Jesus is addressing His disciples again in Matthew 10 v. 16. He says, **"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."** Serpents are not generally regarded as pleasant or virtuous creatures. In Genesis the devil presents himself as a serpent. Yet the serpent is

described there as being more crafty than the other animals of the field. The Hebrew word is comparable to our term here--- wise, shrewd, or shrewdness.

The point here is that both the master and the manager in the second part of v. 8 are called “sons of this world.” Here in the first part of the verse the manager is described as “dishonest.” So Jesus is not presenting either the boss or the manager as models of virtue and godliness. But this manager is shrewd. He is clever. He is effective at accomplishing his selfish goals.

The master is limited in what he can say. To claim that the manager has robbed him of the interest which is due him would get him in trouble with Jewish law by admitting that he was guilty of usury. The debtors are also very happy with the manager and the business owner. They assume, perhaps, that the manager is working with the master’s approval. The master is going to hurt his reputation with them and with other potential clients by making a fuss over what this manager has done. So the rich guy has to recognize that his manager has been very clever.

Some of you may have seen the three Oceans movies, which star a number of familiar movie stars. In the first one, Oceans 11, a team of thieves rob a nasty casino owner in Las Vegas of a ton of money. In Oceans 12 the thieves have all been identified, and they are pressured to pay back the \$160 million to casino owner David Benedict. In Oceans 13 the thieves rescue one of their members who is in big trouble. They have to call on casino owner David Benedict to borrow money to pull off this deal. The crooks are successful in pulling off their mission. As they pay back David Benedict the amount that he is owed, the announcement is made that he is donating this large amount of money to charity. So David Benedict, the casino owner, is stuck. He can’t hardly object. His reputation would be ruined. So the other set of crooks has been very clever.

All of the crooks in the movie and the characters in the parable are worldly people. They are not righteous people. They are not sons of light. But they have proven to be shrewd, to be clever.

III.A.

We come then to THE LESSONS of the parable in vv. 8b-13. The first lesson I find coming out of this parable is described in v. 8b through v. 9. It is that **WE NEED TO MAKE WISE USE OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO WIN PEOPLE TO JESUS.** Look at the second part of v. 8. Jesus says, **“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”**

The Human Rights Campaign has been more effective in influencing the political and cultural view of marriage in recent years than we Christians have. Their view is bad for our culture in the long run. It is a violation of God’s standards and precepts. Those violations always will have negative consequences. But the Human Rights Campaign has been very shrewd and effective. We need to recognize that.

Jesus adds in v. 9, **“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”** The unrighteous manager made friends with his financial shenanigans. The debtors would owe him a big favor. Maybe they could provide a job. Maybe they could make a recommendation.

Notice that Jesus calls wealth unrighteous. Does he mean that money and wealth is inherently evil? I don't think so. There were godly people in the Bible who were well-to-do. David and Abraham were both very wealthy. But money is often associated with unrighteousness. In the parable it was obtained at least partially through a violation of Jewish law. The manager in turn cheated his boss out of money which was his.

So Jesus' point seems to be that His people should use money which is too often connected with unrighteous things to accomplish good causes. It should be used to win friends for Jesus. It should be used to draw people into God's kingdom. One day when we get to heaven, we may find friends there who are the result of our financial investment.

Collectively we should see the expenditures in our church missions budget as something which contributes to that cause. As a church we are involved with the Good News Clubs. This seems to be a shrewd investment whereby we have a Bible study right in the elementary school at the end of the school day. Unfortunately our local Good News Club organization is underfunded. We just had a free medical clinic here at the church. It seems to me that this was a clever way to help needy people and to promote the gospel. Unfortunately the Christian organization behind it is also underfunded. Some of us have invested in child sponsorships for kids in poor parts of the world. Studies have shown that this is a very effective way to help poor kids in underdeveloped countries.

As a result of the pandemic we churches have been forced to invest in technology. There is a downside to streaming services and having meetings by Zoom. Some Christians miss out on genuine fellowship because of it. But then also I learned last week that as a result of one funeral that streamed at the church here there were almost 600 visits from family and friends to see that service which involved a presentation of the gospel.

The challenge to us as a church and as individual Christians is to be shrewd with our investments. We need to be creative and sacrificial in figuring out how we can be most effective in winning people to Jesus. Some day when this brief earthly life is over, we want to see friends in heaven who are there partly because of our financial investment.

B.

The second lesson that I find coming out of this parable is that **WE NEED TO SEE OURSELVES AS MANAGERS OF GOD'S RESOURCES.** That is message which Jesus stresses in vv. 10-12. Jesus says, **“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in**

much. 11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" The dishonest manager is the key figure in this parable. What characterized his position was that he had significant resources at his disposal. None of them actually belonged to him. They all belonged to his master. His responsibility was to manage them well. That he did not do. He became shrewd only when his own job was on the line.

The point of application is that the disciples of Jesus all have certain resources at their disposal, including financial resources. Jesus describes them as a very little thing. These financial resources are not only a little thing in God's eyes, they are too often associated with unrighteousness. They are spent on gambling. Occasionally they are won by gambling. Too often people break the law to get them. Sometimes they end up in jail because they are ill-begotten. Sometimes businessmen ruin their families because their lives are devoted to get more of this wealth. Sometimes financial resources are withheld from people who need them, even family members and relatives.

We Christians are to see our financial resources as a trust. From God's perspective, they don't really belong to us. They belong to Him. Church people can fall into thinking that our responsibility is to give 10% of our income to the church and to Christian charities. Everything else belongs to us to do with as we see fit.

That is an unbiblical perspective. It all belongs to our master. Our responsibility is to manage all of it well. The Bible recognizes that there is wisdom in saving some of those resources and investing them well. The Bible talks about a responsibility we have to care for our families with them. It talks about a responsibility to use them in being generous to others. Jesus in this parable talks about investing some of it in winning friends for Jesus.

Part of that responsibility may mean giving money to our church. Part of it might mean investing in a favorite Christian group. Part of it might mean being creative on our own in figuring out what I or my family can do to advance the kingdom of heaven. Maybe it is preparing Christmas shoe boxes that will include a Christian lesson that some child in Namibia may open this Christmas. Maybe it means helping a needy neighbor. Maybe it means taking on a child sponsorship for one of the Christian organizations that do that. Maybe the Lord would give someone here a creative new idea which no one has yet come up with about how to win friends for the kingdom of heaven.

In vv. 11 & 12 Jesus speaks about some future entrusting of true riches. He speaks of something which will be our own. The meaning of that is not completely clear. Since the background of this is the kingdom of heaven, my suspicion is that this has something to do with the future rule of Jesus upon the earth. Perhaps it is this coming earthly kingdom over which we will be given some kind of responsibility. We may have really important riches to manage then.

C.

The third lesson from this parable seems to naturally arise out of v. 13. WE SHOULD NOT MAKE MONEY OUR MASTER. **“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”**

It is a common sense principle that we cannot serve two masters. When we try to serve more than one master, we always run into situations where our loyalties clash. Because we have limited time, money, and energy one master and one set of priorities will always win out. Probably most of us here claim that God has top priority in our lives. The Bible says that we Christians are involved in a cosmic conflict which involves spiritual forces of evil as well as good. So when we claim that God has top position in our lives, there will always be things that will come along which challenge that priority. Oftentimes it will be money.

That money temptation will take different forms. It may take the form of a job temptation. I know that my job has been all consuming, and I don't spend enough time with my family, but I am doing it for them to provide for their future. I know that I shouldn't lie on my taxes, but the government takes too much of my money, and it isn't fair. I know that I shouldn't spend so much money on the video machines, but it is just my way of relaxing. I know that I spend a lot of time and money shopping and my closet is already full of shoes, but how can I not take advantage of these great deals? I know that I have been spending a little too much lately, but I can just put it on my credit card.

We religious people can be good at covering up this secret love for money that we may have. Keep in mind that Jesus was largely addressing Pharisees in his telling of this parable. They were the ones whom Jesus most closely identified with the unrighteous manager. So it is that in the next verse, v. 14, the author Luke explains that the Pharisees were lovers of money. These guys were the religious leaders of that day. They were the rabbis. They were the ones who were very strict about observing lots of religious rules. Yet they had lots of clever ways to separate people from their money. Send me a generous contribution and I will send you a vial of holy water or a special prayer cloth. This Jesus was just not a good fundraiser. You never find in the gospels after He tells these parables that he sends the disciples around to collect an offering. Interesting, isn't it?

The Apostle Paul further developed this principle explained by Jesus when he wrote in 1 Timothy #6 v. 10, **“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”** Money itself is not the problem. It is the love of money which is the problem.

George MacDonald was a Scottish pastor and writer. C. S. Lewis once wrote that he regarded MacDonald as his “master,” such was the influence of MacDonald upon his Christian thinking. George MacDonald once wrote, **“It is not the rich man only who is under the dominion of things; they too are slaves who, having no money, are**

unhappy for the lack of it.... The money the one has, the money the other would have, is--- in each the cause of an eternal stupidity.” (*An Anthology: 365 Readings*)

From the eternal perspective money is a very little thing. It has little to do with our eternal valuation. With the time and attention which we give to it we treat it as a very big thing.

Jesus says that we need to make wise use of it to win people to Him. We need to see ourselves as managers of our financial resources. We should not make money our master.

Consider this final thought from J. C. Ryle, the Anglican bishop of Liverpool in the late 1800s: **“Wealth is no mark of God’s favor. Poverty is no mark of God’s displeasure. Money, in truth, is one of the most unsatisfying of possessions. It takes away some cares, no doubt; but it brings with it quite as many cares as it takes away. There’s the trouble in the getting of it. There is anxiety in the keeping of it. These are temptations in the use of it. There is guilt in the abuse of it. There is sorrow in the losing of it. There is perplexity in the disposing of it.”** (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*)