### “More Shrewd” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Sept. 21, 2025

**Proverbs 9:8–12**

8 Do not rebuke a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke the wise, and he will love you. 9 Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous, and they will gain in learning. 10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. 11 For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. 12 If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it.

**Luke 16:1–8**

1 Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ 3 Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7 Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

We have a good classic passage from Proverbs, with the famous line, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). You can give instruction to the wise, the author says, “and they will become wiser still” (9:9). A scoffer, you cannot teach. You are responsible for seeking out wisdom in your own life (9:12). If you get it, your days will be multiplied (9:11).

With this background in wisdom teaching, let’s look at the parable in Luke. I have told you before that we should not read parables as allegories or in a literal way. A parable has one single lesson. The single lesson in this one is that we should be shrewd. We should be wise. He makes the ironic observation that materialists seem to be shrewder than are “the children of light” (Luke 16:8), a fairly disturbing observation. Maybe the children of light are too naïve, or too focused on just one thing, or maybe too trusting and optimistic, and not practiced in shrewd reasoning. It is good to have a kind heart but also good to have discernment, and to be able to add wisdom to kindness.

Exactly what kind of shrewd reasoning is he talking about? It’s not clear. He’s not asking us to just be selfishly shrewd, like the middle manager in the parable. He’s recommending some kind of shrewdness, but I think we have to dig deeper to find out what it is. We don’t get a clue from the context in Luke. The previous chapter had the parable of the Prodigal Son and two other parables, all of which talk about how much God values the individual, and how abundantly forgiving the Father is. Those don’t seem to be lessons in shrewdness at all.

The material that follows in Luke 16 strings together different sayings that have to do either with money or with masters and servants, including the saying that you cannot serve two masters (16:13). Now, *that* might require some shrewdness, discerning how to make God our only supreme master, while fulfilling one’s obligations to one’s boss in the workplace, not a “master” in the spiritual sense.

Somehow, though, I think the parable would have given us a clue if that is what it is aiming at. I think I just have to accept that it’s a story recommending that the children of light learn to be clever in many ways and concerning many things. Maybe we should be more clever in our evangelistic efforts. Maybe we should be more perceptive about the people we meet, learning to discover what spiritual motivation they already have, so we can build upon that, instead of speaking to them as though they were completely clueless in spiritual matters.

Maybe we should be more shrewd in our anticipation of the future. That is what the manager in the story was doing, securing his future. Indeed, materialistic people are sometimes very clever in their techniques for maximizing profits, avoiding taxes, downsizing the work force, and flipping real estate. They always seem to have a plan, and usually a back-up plan, too. Do we people who value spiritual realities practice as much cleverness as they do?

I don’t know. Nor do I find an easy answer to the question, “what kind of wisdom or shrewdness is Jesus calling for in the parable”? I’m going to provisionally conclude that he is wanting us to be more clever in our spiritual ministry, sharper in our vision of the future, and maybe even to discern our discernment! Pull down that oxygen mask for yourself first, then help others. Cultivate your spiritual communion with God, then, when your character is strengthened, find ways to minister to your fellows.

In nearby passages in Luke, we are told that he who is faithful in little things will be faithful in great things (16:10); we must be ready to forgive repeatedly, “if there is repentance, you must forgive” (17:3); the kingdom of God is within you (17:21); be humble (18:14); be sincere like a child (18:16). He also wants us to learn to become more steady in our faith, and more persistent in our praying. Luke 18:1–8 has a parable about persistence.

All these are manifestations of spiritual wisdom. The parable of the dishonest manager is ultimately advice for us to be wise, not dishonest or narcissistic, but wise in ways that are appropriate for the “children of light” (16:8).

I have a friend in Las Vegas who helped organize something called Camp Anytown Las Vegas, whose slogan is “breaking down barriers; building up communities,” where young people come together and talk about barriers they have encountered or fears or worries they have about race or gender, and learn how to befriend people from other backgrounds. They seek solidarity and understanding. My friend told me that one Latino young guy came to the camp saying “I’m not going to talk to any white people; I’m not going to talk to any black people.” The camp experience changed him so completely, he became dedicated to the idea of breaking down barriers, and is now the supervisor of the camp.

He became wise after entering a group process aimed at breaking down barriers. We become wise as we develop our relationship to God, and then seek to do God’s will as “children of the light” in this world. Get light from God, and then shed light where you go!