

17. The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Luke 16:1-15

The Parables of Jesus

In his narrative, Luke gives us another parable that Jesus taught. There is no visible link to the previous passage, so we have no way of knowing if it was spoken at the same time. The earlier parable of chapter fifteen told of a young man who squandered his father's resources. Now, the Lord taught His disciples about the correct stewardship of their time, energy, and money, i.e., the resources we are given during our time on earth. Although the parable was spoken to the disciples, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were also listening (v. 14). This parable Jesus taught speaks of a manager of a rich man's estate who squandered what was not his own.

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Jesus told his disciples: "There was 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'" (Luke 16:1-2).

Jesus' parables often had a twist or shock value to them that would help in the memorization of the parable. For instance, in the last parable, the Parable of the Loving Father (Luke 15:11-32), none of the listeners were expecting the father of the prodigal son to receive his young son in such a way. They all expected the father to be tough and a disciplinarian in the receiving of his son's coming home. The Parable of the Shrewd Manager again has shock value, for none of the Lord's listeners expected the story to have a twist at the end.

Jesus speaks of a wealthy landowner living in a distant land away from his estate of perhaps hundreds or thousands of acres of land. He has an employee, a steward or manager, who is supposed to be managing his business affairs to the betterment of the landowner. This man had been adequately trained in handling large financial matters, writing out tenant agreements to farmers, making loans against the harvest on the lands, the managing of debts, and keeping detailed financial books. The wealthy landowner got word that the manager was cheating him out of some of the proceeds of the land. Like the young prodigal, this manager was squandering the owner's goods. He was called to appear before the landowner, and in the face-to-face meeting, he was confronted with his embezzlement. Told that he was out of a job; he was sacked or fired.

We should not think that this land-owner is a picture of God, for not all the details of parables represent someone or something. We are only to get the main point, which comes at the end of the story. His master found out that the manager was "wasting his possessions" (v. 1), but the owner then makes a mistake. He did not tell him to clear his desk and have him escorted off the property, instead, the manager was given time before his final day. No competent manager today would make that mistake with an employee caught mismanaging company funds. This delayed departure gave the manager time to think of what he could do to benefit himself while still in the master's employ. He sat down and began to take inventory of his present circumstances, and think about his future. He concluded that soon he would have nowhere to live for most managers

lived on the land they were tending. He also would have no money, and thirdly, his reputation would be gone once word got out. A bright idea came to him:

³The 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— ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." ⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" ⁶"Eight hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied. The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred." ⁷Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "A thousand bushels of wheat," he replied. He told him, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred" (Luke 16:3-7).

We don't know if the manager had a family, but with a responsible job overseeing land tenants, we can logically say that he was not a young person. He had several skills that could only be acquired with time and experience. He was not young anymore, so he lacked the strength to do a manual job like digging. He didn't want to beg, either, that would hurt his pride and self-image. Having become deceitful during the time he had been embezzling his master, in his deceit he now began to scheme how to use his present resources to his benefit while they were still at his disposal. Today we would call this man a "wheeler-dealer," so to speak. Even though he has been fired, he is still able to "cook the books." The wealthy landowner should have sent someone in authority to collect the records to safeguard the business. In today's terms, he was being asked on a certain day to bring along the records of all the business transactions and then clear away his desk.

Before his final day, he would falsify the books and use his master's assets. He shrewdly went to the first person, and upon agreeing that the man owed a hundred measures of oil, he told him quickly to rewrite it to be fifty measures, instead. This is the proceeds from about 150 olive trees, approximately 900-1,000 gallons of oil, or around the wages of three years for an ordinary person. He cuts the man's debt to half of what he owed. He then went to the next person, and they agreed that he owed one hundred measures of wheat, i.e., 1,000 bushels of wheat, taking 100 acres to produce. He told him to rewrite the debt to eighty (vv. 5-7). All those listening to Jesus that day would have been wondering what the land-owner would do to the manager when he finally got the books and saw the depth of the cheating.

All of them were shocked to hear the next words out of the mouth of Jesus:

⁸The 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 (Luke 16:8).

Question 1) What were the reasons and motivation behind the dishonest manager's behavior? Why do you think the Landowner commended this man's actions?

To be shrewd is to be astute or sharp in practical matters. A person who is shrewd is calculating, scheming, perceptive, and prudent. This is the way of the world in which we live. When a man lives with no eternity in view, worldly wisdom demands that he gets ahead somehow. One will

wheel and deal, and curry favor with those who can give him the edge, find the inside scoop, climb over the little guy, use people to gain position, and, maybe, put forth a bribe to get around the law. Those who are shrewd and astute in the ways of this world believe that rules and laws are made to be broken. In a culture of reciprocation, i.e., you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours (e.g., you invite me to your dinner party), and I'll return the favor, this man sought to secure his future by obligating the debtors to him.

When the wealthy land-owner saw the books, he could do nothing about the embezzlement because each of the land tenants would back up the manager. It is possible that the scheming manager did not tell the debtors his position had been terminated. He may have thought to say to them later that he been fired because of how he cooked the books for them, making each of them indebted to him. They would then open their homes and, perhaps, have him work for them since they were the ones that benefited from the manager's unrighteous act. He was undoubtedly in a good position to exercise some blackmail over them if he ever needed to do it.

Some commentators believe that the percentage reduced was the manager's commission that was added to the master's assets, making each of the debtors very thankful to him. Jesus, in telling this story had quite a twist for them because each of His listeners would be expecting for the manager to be brought to justice. Upon receiving the books, the master saw that the month's payments were down, and he turned around and commended the manager for his shrewdness and foresightedness. This landowner was possibly a shrewd man being outplayed by someone even shrewder.

What's Jesus Getting at with This Parable?

Like the manager, we own nothing ourselves. It all belongs to our Lord. While we live this life on earth, we are just managers or stewards of everything that we have, whether we are a believer or not, **"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it"** (Psalm 24:1). It all belongs to the Lord, i.e., our cars, our homes, our children, our finances, etc. We also have received notice that our stewardship will come to an end one day and that we will be called to account concerning what we have done with the things over which we are given charge (Romans 14:12).

The Lord is not approving the sinful behavior in the manager, for this is not the focus of the story. What Jesus is pointing out is that the manager was admired for his foresight. The Lord is making a comparison. We who are Christians can learn a lesson from business people dedicated to making money in this world. The point He is making is that the manager, though he failed in managing his master's money up to this point, is looking ahead and making an intelligent decision in this situation. The people who live for this world act with more foresight than the people who are born-again of the Spirit and living for the next world.

In this world, people look ahead to where the culture and needs of the world are going. In worldly-wisdom, they position themselves to ride the wave that they see coming. Smart investors look ahead and see needs that are yet in the future and invest their resources accordingly. Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft, saw that the world was fast heading along a road where computers would be needed. He dropped out of school and threw his time, energy, and money

into something that would benefit his future. Investment is an essential point in this lesson. Few investors catch a vision of eternity and position themselves to be rich in the things of eternity (Luke 12:21). Paul the Apostle put it like this: **“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously”** (2 Corinthians 9:6).

In the Parable of the Sower, a farmer sowed good seed into four kinds of ground. The seed that fell on good ground bore fruit in different amounts: 30-fold, 60-fold, and 100-fold (Matthew 13:8). Many do not live their lives as if the reality of heaven and eternity will come. Those who have seen the value that God places on people, sow into ministries that are bringing forth an eternal reward that God will give. They position themselves in the world to come by their investment into the things that matter to God in this world.

Christians should invest in a spiritual sense: each of us are given time, energy, knowledge, and money to use for the furtherance of our Lord’s kingdom. In fact, money is just a system we have invented to store up our time, energy, skills, and knowledge. We came into this world with nothing, and we will leave with nothing. Only what we invest in the Kingdom of God will gain a reward in the next world. A man's real wealth consists not in what he keeps but in what he gives away (William Barclay). **“He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done”** (Proverbs 19:17). It is an excellent investment to care about the things about which God cares.

There is another point to this story that we can easily overlook. The manager was using his master’s funds and assets. He was generous with his master’s money. So, we are to be generous with that which is in our hands. Everything we have is on loan to us from *the* Master, so we are to be generous and wise about how we use what He has given us.

Question 2) Can you think of practical ways in which you can invest your time, energy, and money to reap a spiritual reward? What does that look like to you?

Three Lessons for a Heavenly Welcome

In verse nine, we find the application to the parable.

“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9).

In the first lesson from the story, Jesus instructs us in this passage to use worldly wealth to gain friends for ourselves so that, when it is gone, we will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Money invested wisely in this life is used by God for the eternal benefit of saving the lost. "If we would have God open His treasury, we must open ours" (Thomas V. Moore). I have a friend in Israel who has given her life to reaching others for Christ. She had an experience where she died after an internal hemorrhage. As she passed into eternity, she told me of seeing friends and loved ones that had already gone before her into eternity, and others singing to her and welcoming her home to her true home. She came before Jesus, but she heard her husband crying out to God in prayer for her. The Lord gave her a choice to stay there with Him or to return and to continue the work she had been doing. She chose to come back and continue to labor. It is touching to know that there are those who will welcome us the other side of death’s door.

We have opportunities while we live our lives on earth to be a blessing to others, and for our heavenly welcome to be much greater when lives we have touched welcome us home. When our lives are over, what we have given and what we have accomplished in the Kingdom of God will have eternal consequences and eternal rewards. Heaven is a reality which, someday, we will experience. It will be too late to invest then. You cannot take it with you. Just as in the game of Monopoly, it must all go back in the box, sometime.

All that remains in eternity is what you have invested in God's kingdom. It is heavenly wisdom to sit down and think through very carefully how you want to invest in this life. Jesus spoke a lot about how we use our resources, and He always linked this to our hearts. How we use our gifts, talents, and resources says a lot about us and our faith. It reveals our hearts.

What type of eternal dwelling are you preparing through your actions and investments here on earth? There are those who are very prominent in this world that may have to be very humble in the next. There will be many surprises in the kingdom of God. Those whom no-one notices in this world may be the princes in the world to come.

Now we know that if the earthly tent (our body) we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands (2 Corinthians 5:1).

How much material have you sent ahead of you that can be used to build a dwelling in the heavenly realms? Jesus told us: ¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). We build on earth what will be ours in heaven. Heaven will reveal our true character expressed in earthly terms that we can understand as a home in heaven and as treasure.

2) The second lesson Jesus taught concerns faithfulness in what we have, be it little or much.

¹⁰Whoever 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. ¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? (Luke 16:10-12).

You may say that you don't have lots of money, but it's not about how much you have but being faithful with whatever you have been given, handling it with honesty and integrity. The story is told by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson about Abraham Lincoln. "Once when he was a shopkeeper, he had totaled up a woman's bill to two dollars and six and a quarter cents (a coin borrowed from Spanish currency). After she had paid and left, Abe wasn't sure he had figured it right, recalculated, and found that he had charged her an extra six and a quarter cents. He closed shop and walked two to three miles to her home to pay her. On another occasion, he found he had inadvertently shorted a customer in measuring out half a pound of tea. He closed the shop and

carried the few ounces of tea to her home. He was strict in his honesty. He did not let it slide because it was a paltry amount. It was the principle of the thing; his integrity was at stake.”¹

Question 3) How does the stewardship of our earthly possessions affect us in this life and in the life to come?

Often, I think that our character cannot stand to be greatly blessed with riches in this life, for we may self-destruct. One cannot be blessed with abundance beyond the level of character we have acquired through trial and challenge to one's faith. Many a man's character cannot handle wealth. God observes how we handle what has been apportioned to us, whether it is little or much. In His wisdom, He gives us what He knows we can handle and what will further us and others both here and for eternity.

Verse 12 teaches us that, if we live a life of stewardship with our master's goods, i.e., our time energy, skills, and money, then we will inherit property that will belong to us for eternity. Paul the Apostle wrote that, in our wildest dreams, we could not understand the wonderful things that God has prepared for those whom He has called heavenward and who invest accordingly.

However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" -- the things God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Earth is but the preparation and testing ground for eternity. What you are given in heaven depends on how you have used things on earth. No man will be given higher office until he is tested in more humble ways to find out if his character can stand being promoted. How has he fared with a smaller office? What is at the core of our being? The way we handle our time, finances and energy provides a magnifying glass to our inner motives. Our spending patterns reveal our priorities in life.

No Man Can Serve Two Masters

The third lesson concerns our hearts. Will we live out of putting God first or money and worldly significance?

¹³No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money. ¹⁴The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:13-15).

Question 4) Why is it that the love of money is not compatible with love for God? About what was Jesus speaking when He said, "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight?" About what detestable things do you think He was talking?

¹ http://www.jesuswalk.com/lessons/16_1-15.htm

Perhaps, he was warning His disciples of how the love of money can hinder us in this life from being a spiritual investor. The enemy can sidetrack us into caring more about money and our image than Christ and His Kingdom. Frederick Saunders said that Mammon is the largest slaveholder in the world.² As Jesus was sharing these words, we know that Judas was already being dragged away and enticed with the lure of money. “He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:6). This was a call to each of Christ’s disciples not to worry about serving money and storing it up in this world, but to be wholly devoted to serving the Lord.

Serving the Lord Jesus should never be part-time, even when we are working at our regular job, raising kids, or sweeping the streets. All believers work for Jesus, whether your boss pays you or you work for yourself. Your vocation is focused on being entirely a servant of Christ, and you should labor accordingly, whether you are an engineer at GE, a school teacher, a lawyer, a road sweeper, or debt collector. He is the One who will reward each of us for work well done.

The Pharisees, who loved money, sneered at Jesus, having their hearts laid bare (v. 14). They had the esteem of the people and believed that, if they were rich in this life, they were esteemed of God and blessed accordingly. Jesus turned and told them that what is highly valued among men is detestable to God (v. 15). What were the Pharisees doing that was so abhorrent in the sight of God? They were using false piety to gain position, influence, and worldly wealth. They were the wheelers and dealers that the parable condemns. The sword of the Spirit was thrust into their hearts, and they reacted with anger toward Him. They were sneering and scorning Christ after listening to His words (v. 14).

He saw through the motives of the Pharisees, and yes, He sees all that genuine servants do with their resources, too. On our deathbed, we will not regret our choices to invest in heavenly things. How joyful we will be when we meet the Lord on that day! We are often short-sighted when busily engaged in life on earth where material possessions and desire for prestige can occupy such a vast space in our lives. This is especially true in the western world with a worldview that idolizes success concerning how big our house is, the kind of car we drive, and what we have acquired in this life. Jesus brought us a new way of thinking. His priorities are different from this world. Can we dare to let Him work in our minds and hearts to rearrange our world view and our priorities? He promises us that, if we trust Him, we will not be disappointed.

Prayer: Father, I pray for each of us today that we will be welcomed into heaven by many that we have not even met, precious lives touched through our spiritual investments. Amen.

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

² John Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, Printed by Evangelical Press, 1984. Page 204.