

## “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager”

November 15, 2020

Luke 16:1-13

### I. Introduction

Of all the parables Jesus taught, “*The Parable of the Shrewd Manager*” or, as other translations title it, “*The Parable of the Unjust or Dishonest Steward*” is one of the most difficult parables to interpret. This difficulty has led to a variety of interpretations all related to Jesus’ commendation of a shrewd or unjust or dishonest manager. Regardless of the particular interpretation, Jesus used the parable to teach His followers about the use of money.

Of the nearly 40 parables told by Jesus in the Gospels, about a third of them deal in some way with money and material wealth. Jesus ministered to people who, for the most part, were poor and who thought that acquiring more wealth was the solution to all their problems. At the other extreme, the wealthy, religious leaders were of the feeling that if a little was good, more was better. People of Jesus’ day, as well as today, spent much of their time thinking about money: how to acquire it, spend it, save it, invest it, borrow it, keep track of it, and sometimes even give it away. The preoccupation with money, that through the ages has dominated society, results in anxiety, covetousness, selfishness, greediness, discontent, idolatry, and pride.

The Bible has much to say about money. Scripture reveals both the right way and the wrong way to think about money. The right attitude is to acknowledge that God owns everything: in [Psalm 50:10](#) God said, “**For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills;**” [Haggai 2:8](#) adds, “**The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty.**” God is also the source of people’s ability to make money. Paul wrote in [1 Timothy 6:17](#), “**Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.**” The wrong way to regard money is to love it—

1 Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

In this parable as well as other teachings, Jesus encouraged His followers to share what they had with others. It was because of such teachings that the early church was a fellowship of people who willingly shared their possessions with the less fortunate (Acts 2:44-47; 4:33-37). Unlike the last three parables, this parable was not addressed to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, the main audience this time was the disciples. For a time, Jesus moved from a salvation message to one of discipleship.

## II. The Parable

**A. The rich man and the manager** It all began with the rich man’s accusation: the manager was wasteful. The rich man was wealthy enough to hire a manager or steward, someone to manage his wealth. It would seem that this rich man was probably an absentee landowner. So, the manager was given full authority to act in the name of his employer or master. The manager had to remember that all the riches around him belonged to his master and not to him personally. For that reason, the riches were to be used in a way that would please and profit his master and not himself.

However, this particular manager forgot that he was the manager and began to act as if he were the owner himself. Eventually, it was reported to the rich man that the “manager was wasting his possessions.” Being apprised of the situation, the rich man took immediate action. “So, he called ~~him~~, i.e., the manager, 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 master fired the manager. But before letting the manager go, the master kept him until he had completed a final inventory of all the goods and audited the books. Then we see ...

**B. The manager’s response** The wasteful, and soon-to-be unemployed manager, had a problem, “What shall I do now?” Facing a future on the streets, the soon jobless manger considered his options. He didn’t want to work as a daily laborer, for he was not strong enough, and it would be embarrassing for someone who used to collect the bills from such men to become their temporary hired hand. The other alternative was

equally unacceptable. If manual labor was beneath him, how much more would he have been “ashamed to beg?” The future was certainly looking rather grim; how was he going to get out of this dilemma?

Then it hit him: “I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.” He couldn't change the past, but he could prepare for the future. He would make friends of his master's debtors so that they would take him in when he was thrown out. Since his master had not terminated him immediately, he still had access to all the contracts he had made. He still had the authority to act on behalf of the rich man. “So, he called in each one of his master's debtors” and renegotiated their deals to lower the amount they owed. Reciprocity was an integral part of Jewish society; if someone did a person a favor, that person was obligated to do one for him. By reducing what they were obligated to pay his master, the manager put them under obligation to him.

Jesus gave two examples of the manager's deceitful or shrewd dealings. “He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’” (800 gallons of oil was worth more than 3 years' wages for a common laborer.) This new deal, which cut the debt in half, created a significant loss for his master. The second debtor owed “a thousand bushels of wheat.” The manager reduced his bill by 20% to 80 bushels. (A 1000 bushels of wheat would have been the equivalent to 8 to 10 years wages for a common laborer.) All this was done to benefit the manager by making the debtors to the master debtors to him as well.

**C. The Conclusion** Then came the unexpected conclusion to the story, “the master commended the dishonest manger because he had acted shrewdly.” The master didn't praise the manger because he was wasteful or a thief. He praised him because “he had acted shrewdly.” *Shrewdly* means to act wisely with insight. The dishonest manager took advantage of his opportunity, carefully working the situation to his own advantage. Since the debtors were now obligated to him, his future was secure.

Jesus didn't commend the manager for robbing his master or for encouraging others to be dishonest. Jesus commended the man for his wise use of opportunity. "The people of this world" are experts in seizing opportunities for making money and friends and getting ahead. Jesus said that God's people should pay attention and be just as wise when it comes to managing the spiritual affairs of life. The people of this world give more thought to their temporary future in this present age than the righteous do in securing their eternal reward in the age to come. Believers should be far more shrewd in preparing for their eternal futures.

### III. Three Lessons re: money

**A. Use money to make friends for yourselves & God.** Jesus drew three lessons concerning believers' attitudes toward money. First, He said, "use worldly wealth—or *mammon*—to gain friends for yourselves," i.e., use money to make friends for yourselves and for God. Unbelievers, like the unrighteous manager, often use money to buy earthly friends. Our lives and our resources will one day end, so it is important for us to use them wisely while we have the time. Therefore, while we have the opportunity, we must use our money to "make friends" for the Lord & for ourselves—friends, not just for this present age, but for all of eternity.

Jesus calls for Christians to use their money for eternal purposes to produce a heavenly reward. Turn to Matthew 6:19-21. Where they invest their money reveals where people's hearts are. It is tragic to see how God's wealth is being wasted by Christians who live as though Jesus never died and judgment is never coming. Endless personal accumulation is sinful, wasteful, and robs those who pursue it of eternal blessing.

**B. Be faithful in the way you use your material wealth.** Then Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted or faithful with very little can also be trusted or faithful with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much." This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> application: Be faithful in the way you use your material wealth. Some claim that if they had more money, they would give more. But the truth is that character, not circumstances, determine faithfulness. Some, like the poor widow described in Luke 21:1-4, who have nothing give everything, others who have everything give nothing. Those who are faithful with the very little they have would be faithful if they had more; those who are dishonest—selfish, proud, unrighteous—in

the use of what little they have would be just as dishonest if they had much. The determining factor isn't how much people possess, but how strong their commitment to the Gospel of salvation is.

A Christian's perspective on money—unrighteous mammon—and the resulting faithfulness or unfaithfulness has implications for his or her eternal reward. **“So, if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”** People who are unfaithful in the way they use money will also be unfaithful in the way they use the **“true riches”** of God's kingdom. One cannot be orthodox in theology and at the same time heretical in the way money—unrighteous mammon—is used. Those who fail, for whatever reason, to invest their wealth in the work of redemption, impoverish themselves forever. Eternal reward comes to those who are faithful.

Jesus then asked a question, **“If you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?”** Christians need to remember that all we have belongs to God, and we are responsible to manage it to His glory—**turn to Matthew 25:14-30**. Be faithful in the way you use your wealth. God will not commit His true riches to individuals or ministries that waste money and will not give an honest accounting to the people who have supported them.

**C. Be wholly devoted to God; not to money.** Jesus 3<sup>rd</sup> application is: Be wholly devoted to God; not to money. **“You cannot serve both God and money.”** Christians cannot love or serve two masters, anymore than they can walk in two directions at one time. God and money or material wealth cannot be co-rulers in the same heart. Conflicting demands will without a doubt produce conflicting emotions and attitudes. Those who love money will despise and resent what God demands of them regarding it. But those who love Him will choose to honor Him by not making earthly wealth their master.

If God is your Master, then money will be your servant, and you will use your resources serving the will of God. But if God is not your Master, then you will become the servant of money, and money is a terrible master. The pursuit of money and worldly wealth can cause one to ignore God, undervalue family, walk over people, use them, act unethically and engage in a host of other destructive actions. This is why the

Bible calls greed idolatry—Colossians 3:5 says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” Lives are wasted and one day we will find ourselves “friendless” as we enter the gates of glory if money is our master. In so many words, Jesus said, “*Make money your servant and use today’s opportunities as investments in tomorrow’s dividends.*” Be a wise manager. There are souls to win to the Savior, and your money and material wealth can help get the job done.

#### IV. Conclusion

Like the manager in the parable, we are stewards of what God, our Master, has given us. We are managers of the material wealth we have, whether much or little. One day we will have to answer to God for the way we have acquired it and used it. This goes beyond paying God a tithe of our income and then using the remainder the way we please. True stewardship means that we thank God for all that we have and use all of it as He directs. Giving God 10% of our income is a good way to begin, but we must remember that God should control what we do with the remaining 90% as well. We are also managers of our time—turn to Ephesians 5:15-17. The main lesson of this parable is that the manager, as dishonest as he was, used his opportunity wisely and prepared for the future. As wise managers, we need to make “the most of every opportunity” and invest our time and our wealth for future results.

Christians are also managers or stewards of the gifts and abilities God has given them—1 Peter 4:10 says, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.” As God’s representatives, as good stewards we must use our abilities to win the lost, encourage the saints, and meet the needs of hurting people. Finally, Christians are stewards of the Gospel. It is our job to guard it—turn to 1 Timothy 6:20-21. But we must not keep the Gospel a secret; Jesus said in Matthew 28:19-20, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Like the manager or steward in Jesus' parable, we will one day have to give an account of our stewardship—Romans 14:12 says that “Each of us will give an account of himself to God.” We are stewards/managers of our material wealth, our time, our gifts and abilities, and the Gospel. If we have been faithful, as we read earlier in Matthew 25, the Lord will give us His commendation and reward. But if we have not been faithful, we will lose those blessings, even though we will be saved and enter heaven—turn to 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. What kind of steward are you? Are you planning for the future? What will you hear when you stand before God?