Shrewdness in the Christian Life
“Topics you always wanted a sermon on” series

Question: “The Unjust Steward – I heard a sermon years ago that made it all make sense but I don’t remember a word of it.”

This person recognizes that there are some questions that arise when one reads this parable—things that seem to contradict the rest of scriptures. Don’t shy away from these challenges in the Bible. I LOVE the hard parts of the Bible – the tougher the question the better. I may not figure out the answer to my question for years, but I have always found that the Lord deepens my understanding and appreciation of His character and His ways when I don’t try to explain it away or don’t try to ignore it. Instead let it deepen you & open your eyes to God’s wonderful truths.

The key stumbling block in this parable is the “unjust steward” or what I call “the dishonest manager”. Jesus seems to be condoning or even praising the deliberately sinful behavior of this manager. That is awkward at best and wicked at worse! The earliest that I could find non-church people using this parable against Christians is 1,650 years ago when Julian the Apostate was the last non-Christian Roman emperor. Julian attacked Christians with this parable to claim Jesus is not worth following because He taught His followers to be liars and thieves. Here is a story where a scoundrel is praised, he said. Julian went on to say clearly Christ & Christianity are an embarrassment and clearly inferior to the old Roman gods & religious practices. Remember, don’t get unnerved when the culture around us claims awful things about our faith – every generation of Christians is going to face it as Jesus foretold us. Let’s dig into this parable and let it challenge us in ways that will help make our lives more significant!

PROPOSITION: Use material things for future spiritual benefit.

I. The parable & its questions

A. The situation of the parable

Parables come out of real life situations that people of the day recognized. So it is always helpful to picture the situation first from their perspective and then how it might look today. This parable is straightforward. There is nothing allegorical in it. It has no hidden meaning. In this parable, we are introduced to three groups of people—a rich man, one of his managers and some debtors. If we jump right in from just our perspective in the 21st century, we could wrongly picture a bunch of people with gambling debts owed to a loan shark or people struggling with credit card or consumer debt for personal things they have purchased.

The rich person, also called ‘Master’, is most likely a very large land owner – These rich people own many fields, orchards and vineyards. But they don’t want to farm
those themselves so they rent out their farm land, orchards and vineyards to farmers who didn’t own their own fields. That is why the “rent” is paid in crops (wheat and olive oil) rather than money. Since most of us aren’t farmers without any land, today this would be most like business inventory or renting a place to live. This debt is not for the extras in life but the very basis of your job or living place. That rich landlord also doesn’t want to deal with the logistics of handling or selling the crops, collecting the rent, making sure the tenants kept up the property or dealing with daily problems. So the rich person hired a trusted manager to do all of that. So you could picture the rich person like the landlord you never see who lives in another area, the manager is like the property manager who collects rent, deals with problems & watches over the property and the debtors are like the renters.

B. The manager is wasteful, proud, dishonest, & lazy

**Lk 16:1-7**

**READ v 1.** Notice here that the rich man, or owner, does not know his manager is dishonest at this point, just irresponsible. The manager is “wasting the rich man’s possessions.” That can be from mismanagement, being irresponsible, spending too much on himself from the corporate funds or being wasteful. So some people who like the rich person pointed out things like the manager leaving the A/C on 24/7 even though they are only in the office every other day for 2 hours, cable TV at the office with a new 60” super TV, over-spending in supplies, indulging in expensive food and wine at the master’s expense – the list goes on. Please note there is no sign of the manager being dishonest at this point – that word isn’t used in the parable until after the shady deals. So the rich person calls the manager in. **READ v 2.** If there was any idea of fraud, cheating or dishonesty in the manager, the owner would have just released the manager immediately instead of saying “I’ve lost confidence in your ability to manage well – explain yourself, bring in the books and your job is ending.” Again, the manager is being released for apparent mismanagement, not fraud. That is why the manager can complete some more contracts.

**READ v 3-4.** The steward, realizing that he will soon be without a job, considers his future. He is too proud to beg and is too weak, or lazy, to do manual labor – so the manager comes up with a plan. He will lower the rent of the farmers for the next year.

**READ v 5-7.** Even though you see different amounts being cancelled here – each is worth about 500 denarii at the time or a year and a half wages. Think $45-75,000 today. If someone dropped your expenses by more than you make in a year, you’d be pretty excited too. And these aren’t small plots they are renting out – it takes 100 acres at that time just to do the 1,000 bushels of wheat and about 150 olive trees to make 900 gallons of olive oil. So the size of the land rented would be more than that.

Now this bartering over the rent of fields, orchards and vineyards was going on constantly. If rains didn’t come, the renters would ask for a break. If an abundant harvest came the owner would ask for more. So when the manager offers to lower the year’s rent – which would be paid at harvest time – the manager is going give some
C. Is Jesus applauding dishonesty here? Lk 16:8
Now picture you are one of Jesus’ dedicated followers – this is the first time you have heard this parable – what are you expecting Jesus to say next? How justice came to this wasteful, proud, lazy & dishonest manager. What do you hear instead? READ v 8. Talk about shockers! The manager is the bad guy in the story – wasteful, proud, lazy and dishonest. When all these negatives are clearly recognized, the master seems to be applauding the dishonesty. That is not right. There is no repentance by the manager for his wastefulness, pride, laziness or dishonesty. How can anyone say anything positive about him? Do you see how this forces us out of our normal thinking so we can be challenged in ways we aren’t regularly challenging ourselves.

D. Manager prepares for the future
Jesus did not commend the manager for robbing his boss nor for encouraging others to be dishonest & not pay their debts. READ v 8. Clearly the manager is called “dishonest” – a swindler, fraud and cheat – a total failure as a manager. What Jesus and the owner commend the man for is preparing himself for the judgment coming. The manager is applauded for his “shrewdness” which we will define more clearly in a few minutes. He is applauded for his clever plan to gain favor with others and also reflect the generous character of the owner so the owner didn’t bring this fraud to court. It is like in the movies when a swindler is swindled themselves, but instead of keeping the swindled money, it is given to some orphans in the name of the swindler and the whole town applauds so the swindler doesn’t want to real story to come out. Now some interpreters claim the owner was as corrupt as the manager, but there are no signs of this here. If the owner was also corrupt, he would have immediately sacked the manager, gone after his personal possessions & family. He wouldn’t give him 2 weeks notice & pay. Plus the owner had to be liked enough that others would tell him about his manager wasting his resources because they cared about him.

E. Is Jesus telling us to “buy/bribe” friends? Lk 16:9
As shocked as they were, Jesus’ next words shocked them more. READ v 9. Jesus clearly agrees with the master, the rich man. Then Jesus goes farther to tell us to use worldly wealth to gain friends and be welcomed into heaven. A new question arises! Is Jesus telling us to “buy” or “bribe” people to be our friends? This is what the rich do – many of their supposed friends are just there for the money and what they can get. Jesus had been saying it is hard for the rich to get into heaven, but now Jesus
seems to be saying the rich have an advantage since they have more resources to influence people. Again do you see how we are being forced to go deeper and think different than we usually do? It is only because this parable is a hard to understand that we are being forced to consider questions we may not be considering now.

F. Use the material for future spiritual benefit

Let’s go back and reREAD v 8-9. What Jesus is really challenging each of us to consider is ‘how are we personally using the material things we have today for future spiritual benefit?’ People of the world – those who don’t care about eternity – use all their brainpower, planning and resources – to get the most worldly benefit for themselves. In contrast, “the people of the light” stand on the edge of eternity but lack the vision, foresight, and strength of will to do anything to make eternity better for themselves. Unbelievers are wiser in the things of this world than believers are about the things of the world to come. If only Christians would give as much attention to the things that concern eternity as they do to worldly business.... If only we would be as spiritually shrewd as the corrupt manager was in temporal pursuits. The dishonest manager faced the reality of his future and used all his intelligence, wit, and energy to insure his earthly comfort. Have you and I regularly been considering how to use whatever resources we have right now to enjoy eternity more? I know the disciples were not expecting this challenge to come out of this parable! That is what God is challenging all of us with now! Are we using material things now for future spiritual benefit!

II. Jesus’ application and challenges

The word “shrewd” in v 8 is from a Greek word (fronimos) that means wise and discerning. There are no negative connotations to the word. I have some negative connotations of the English word “shrewd” because pictures of people who are devious or materialistic opportunists come to mind. Interestingly I could find NONE of those negative implications even in our modern English dictionary for “shrewd”. There it simple defined shrewd as “having or showing sharp powers of judgment, astute.” In fact the definition of shrewd for English Language Learners is “having or showing an ability to understand things and to make good judgments: mentally sharp or clever”. The synonyms include astute, sharp, smart, perceptive, discerning, insightful, wise, & clever. Biblically, shrewd is a positive word. Jesus goes on to apply this principle, “Use material things for future spiritual benefit”, in three ways.

A. Look at money & people different

Jesus first calls us to look at money and people different than our current culture. READ v 9. People today do not put a priority on using their income and stuff for other people. They want to help, but when they have an excess. Clearly here people are a priority over stuff or money. Notice the parallelism here. Generally people of the world use worldly wealth and people to get more of what they want for themselves – attention, stuff, praise, discounts, future opportunities, whatever. In contrast, Jesus
wants the people of the light to use money and possessions differently. If these new friends are going to welcome us into heaven (that is our eternal dwelling), then they must come to faith in Jesus just as we have. And if they are going to welcome us, then we helped them in some way become or grow as Christians which they are eternally grateful for. Jesus is calling us to use our mind, planning and skill to be generous in advancing God’s work in this world. That is not just giving to Christian churches and ministries, but becoming personally involved in peoples’ lives especially those who aren’t walking God’s way! Spiritual shrewdness has less in this life, but more in the life to come.

Some examples will probably help...

- Today, worldly shrewd people buy things on-line because it is cheapest. Jesus challenged me to buy local when I can even though it costs more money because I can get to know the merchants involved and encourage them, share with them or be open to share something about Jesus with them.

- People in our day think they are shrewd when they go to places, check out the merchandise, then buy the same item for a cheaper price on-line. Personally I think that is stealing – stealing the store people’s time, set-up and energy. But just picture heaven and both of you are there. Are they going to be excited that you used them for your benefit here on earth?

- Worldly shrewd people try to make friends with people who can help them now. They ask their friends for discounts, favors or help. Spiritually shrewd Christians pay their friends the full price for their goods, look for ways to help them, and sacrifice to encourage spiritual growth. Which group are you going to get most excited about when you see them in heaven? This parable challenges us to a counter-cultural way of looking at how we are living life.

- The Semprebons, who owned Calmont Beverage Company, gave their downtown warehouse to Barre EFC for $1 which we then remodeled into this church building. When any of us meet any of them in heaven, we are going to give them a rich welcome for the sacrifice they made for us. That’s the picture here.

Now let’s be clear. None of the shrewdness here gets anyone to heaven. The only way to heaven is through the grace of God – none of us can earn it or do enough good things to deserve it. But somehow American Christians have taken on this false idea that every Christian is going to enjoy heaven the same. Let’s say I could give each of you a free ticket to Disney World (that’s grace), not all of you will enjoy your time there the same? Some will have prepared for it, understood the fast pass system, developed a sense of self-control and moderation in life and learned contentment – you are going to have far more fun than others. Spiritual shrewdness doesn’t get us to heaven – it lets us enjoy more of heaven and be given more in heaven! Here the people in heaven welcoming you are excited you are there and want to give you thanks for the positive spiritual role you played in their life. We are all sinners and fall
short of the perfection needed for heaven. But Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins and rose from the dead to prove He is the only way! God offers us heaven, and we receive that free gift by repenting of our sins, truly believing Jesus died for our sins and rose again and then surrendering to go God’s way rather than our own feelings.

B. Regularly prepare for eternal life

Jesus doesn’t stop there but gives us a second lesson. READ v 10-12. How we use our income, gifts, investments, rebates and possessions makes a huge difference in what is going to be entrusted to us in the millennium and heaven. Some people want to win the lottery so they can help God. That isn’t going to help God because God is trying to transform us from our self-focus to a God-focus with what we already have. Every time you have too little or you get something extra – that is a character building moment with effects through eternity. How do we respond to that lack or that blessing? This has nothing to do with whether we will be in heaven or not – but a great deal to do with what we will be entrusted with once there. Again, the millennium and heaven are not going to be the same for everyone – some will have more because they sent treasure to heaven by giving generously like Jesus told them. Some will have greater authority because they were spiritually shrewd and used their time, treasure and talent to advance God’s work. The irony of greed is that the more people accumulate for themselves in this life, the less they truly possess “property of their own” in the next life.

Watch out whenever any Christian teacher talks about money and gives you a picture of God making you financially rich now. We can’t even bring a dollar to heaven – all we have is God’s and it is just on loan for this time on earth to see what we will do with it. You never need to feel insignificant because you have less than others so you can’t give as much – you actually have a greater chance for greater eternal riches and property because it is easier for you to be considered generous in God’s sight. Believe it or not, God is not impressed if Bill Gates gives away a billion dollars. Be spiritually shrewd. Be willing to take actions now which will greatly impact your eternity. And beware any Christian teacher who stresses tithing over being generous. Dave Ramsey is a popular Christian teacher in the area of finances and has helped many get out of debt. But if you look at his teaching, generosity doesn’t come until you have accumulated a lot! He encourages tithing from the beginning, which is a great start – but then it is all about you accumulating lots – house, cars, funds for kids college, large retirement fund – then you can be generous. Generosity should increase every time our stuff or wages or gifts or blessings increase. It directly impacts our eternity – not whether you are in heaven but how welcomed you will be by others you crossed paths with here on earth!

C. Be honest about who or what is in control of your life

Jesus doesn’t stop there but gives us a third lesson. READ v 13. It is totally impossible to serve both God and money – just like it is impossible to walk two
different directions at the same time. If we choose to serve money, then we cannot serve God. If we choose to serve God, then we will not serve money. Be honest as you look at your spending, your check book, and your financial desires – who is really in charge of your life – you, getting more, financial security or God? This is radical. There is no middle ground. But most American Christians attempt to do both. If God is our Master, then money will be our servant, and we will use our resources in the will of God.

D. How America might respond today Lk 16:14-15

How might Americans respond today if they heard this teaching of Jesus first hand. Probably most would push it away like the Pharisees. READ v 14-15. Back in chapter 15:2, the Pharisees “muttered” in their disagreement. Now the Pharisees “sneered at Jesus.” Because they loved money, prestige, acclaim and stuff. They professed to trust God, but they measured life by wealth and possessions, the same as Americans do today. Be spiritually shrewd - Use material things for future spiritual benefit. As Jesus said “What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.”

III. Other applications of spiritual shrewdness

A. Material possessions and money
B. Time and talent
C. Opportunities

The thief says, “What’s yours is mine—I’ll take it!” The selfish person says, “What’s mine is mine—I’ll keep it!” God is transforming us so we can say, “What’s mine is a gift from God—I’ll share it!” We are managers who are called to use our current resources to win the lost, encourage the saints, and genuinely come alongside hurting people.

Let’s keep overcoming in the power of Jesus