



**“The Shrewd Manager”**  
**Scripture – Luke 16:1-13**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, September 18, 2016**

If you are not scratching your head after hearing (Sue, Gen) read this morning’s gospel passage, I know why. You were either checking your emails or sending a text. You were NOT listening!

Of all the parables Jesus told, many biblical scholars rank this story number one. It is far and away the most puzzling tale Jesus ever told.

The gospels attribute a few dozen parables to Jesus and most of them appear in more than one gospel. Luke shares a handful not found anywhere else, and this is one of them. Perhaps the authors of Matthew and Mark never came across it, but I’m willing to bet they heard it, and decided to take a pass.

The esteemed theologian of the fourth century, Augustine, was so baffled by this parable he doubted its authenticity. He declared, “I cannot believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” Countless others have nodded in agreement.

Would Jesus really hold up a nefarious character for us to imitate? And why are there several different interpretations of the parable, some of which do not fit?

The setting for our story is a grand estate where tenants farm the land. A report comes to the wealthy owner that his manager is squandering his property. The owner summons the manager and dresses him down. He demands a full accounting. The manager realizes the gig is up. The security net has been jerked from beneath him.

“That’s it!” he says to himself. “I’m doomed! I haven’t done manual labor in years and I’m too weak to start now. I am embarrassed to beg. What am I to do?”

The manager is given some time before he must make his full report and that provides him with just enough space to hatch a scheme that will save him after he is canned. He calls in the people who are in debt to his master and alters their bills. One man owes 100 jugs of olive oil. The manager says, “Let’s change that to 50.” Another owes 100 containers of wheat. The manager winks, “What do you say we make that 80?” The debtors are thrilled to play “Let’s make a deal” and no doubt leave the manager’s office with a spring in their step. The manager is frantic to save his neck. His actions are shady, but who would not be tempted to do the same if it meant the difference between a life of comfort and starvation?

The twist in this parable that catches us off-guard is when the owner of the estate who suffers the loss *commends* rather than *curses* his manager for acting so shrewdly.

Parents, rest assured. We never tell this tale at Vacation Bible School or encourage our Confirmation Class to follow its advice.

At the conclusion of the parable there are various interpretations that attempt to rescue it. The parable concludes with: “And the owner commended the dishonest manager because he had acted so shrewdly.” What follows is interpretation number one: Jesus says, “For the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Keep reading and we find interpretation number two. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” Did Jesus add these lines?

Perhaps, but they do not seem to fit the parable. Did the author of Luke cut and paste this saying from another context? Did a redactor who came after Luke attach this saying? There is no real consensus among New Testament scholars.

In the next verse, we encounter interpretation number three. “If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” To me, it sounds like Luke went out for Chinese food and found that befuddling proverb when he cracked open a fortune cookie!

Finally, the concluding verse gives us yet another interpretation. “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” That sounds like an authentic saying of Jesus, but it doesn’t fit the parable. It sounds as if when Luke was doing research for his gospel – which was written 50 years after the death of Jesus – several people told him this was something they heard Jesus say, but Luke could not figure out the best place to put it, so he slapped it onto the end of this parable. Matthew inserts it in the Sermon on the Mount.

If we go back to the parable itself, before these interpretations, we are left with the question: Why did the owner commend the manager for his actions?

It helps to understand its first century context. Wealthy landlords used peasant farmers to work their land and charged them exorbitant interest rates. The rich man and his manager were fleecing the vulnerable peasants, driving them deeper into debt. Further, the Law of Moses forbids charging interest. But, like any law, before the ink dries on it, someone figures out how to circumvent it. That’s exactly what the Pharisees did. They figured up the principal, added interest to it, but called the total principal.

It is a little like going to a nice restaurant with a large group of people. The restaurant does not let you decide the tip. They figure the tip and add it to the total cost of the meal before presenting you the check.

So what appears to have happened in this parable is that the manager called in the people who were in debt and he deducted the interest plus his cut. With no written record to the contrary, the owner could not challenge his manager’s claims. So, instead of complaining about his loss, he played along, and thus acquired a completely undeserved reputation as a pious believer who did not break the Mosaic Law against charging interest. And the manager knew he could later call on these people to return the favor when he needed help. The owner was impressed with the manager’s quick resourcefulness to save his neck and said, “I’ve got to hand it to you; that was shrewd.”

What did Jesus mean by the use of the word “shrewd?” The word has both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, the dictionary defines shrewd as slick and sly, cagey and cunning. On the other hand, it defines shrewd as astute and ingenious, perceptive and wise. Did Jesus mean to use the word positively or negatively? Perhaps he chose the word because it was a bit edgy.

Jesus was not urging his followers to engage in dishonest actions. He was holding up an example of a shrewd business transaction to gain material wealth and saying, “My followers need to be as shrewd in acquiring spiritual wealth.”

We may pull off a shrewd business deal, but why have we not been as shrewd – as clever – as the gun lobby and figured out how to banish semi-automatic weapons from our streets? Why have we not been shrewder – more farsighted – in protecting God’s creation? Why have we not been as heady in pushing peace as other have been in pushing war?

We live in an age when many people line up on issues according to their political ideology. Republicans run issues through the Republican filter, Democrats run issues through the Democratic filter, and Libertarians run them through the Libertarian filter.

When we are confronted with whether or not to aid refugees, many run it through their partisan filter and take their stand. That is not how people of faith are to shape their opinions and take their actions. God wants us to run every issue we face and every concern we have through a biblical filter. That filter is not dependent on political philosophy or financial considerations. It is built layer by layer on the teachings of the prophets, culminating with Jesus.

When we peruse the past, we see the mistakes our ancestors made when they were driven by political ideology and financial concerns rather than the vision of Scripture. As a result, slavery lasted for centuries and required tremendous struggles to liberate those held captive.

Is it not tragic that people who claimed to be followers of Jesus fought so strenuously to keep human beings enslaved? They knew the story of Moses liberating the Hebrews held captive by Pharaoh. They knew the teaching of Jesus to “treat others as you want to be treated.” Yet their politics and pocketbook carried more weight than their faith.

The prophet Micah said it succinctly: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” That is the filter of “Love your neighbor as yourself.” God wants us to catch the vision of the prophets and Jesus which is shaped by love, justice and peace, and to act as shrewdly, as those who struggle mightily against God’s vision.

Doesn’t God want us to be a bit shrewder in alleviating poverty? It is necessary for us to stock food banks and to serve at soup kitchens. People who are hungry need to be fed. But perhaps being shrewd means doing something more than literally feeding hungry people. It means educating people so that they can work and earn the money they need to put food on their own table. It means advocating for a fair wage so that if someone works, she can meet her basic expenses. It means caring for people with mental illness. It means providing drug and alcohol treatment for people with addictions. Surely we could be a bit shrewder in handling violence, overcoming racism, caring for God’s creation, and working for peace.

Many have an image of St. Francis of Assisi as a forerunner of the hippies who wandered the countryside in sandals serenading birds. They know he had an extraordinary prayer life, but think he was out of touch with the hard realities of life. Hardly! St. Francis did not simply talk about peace and withdraw from the world to pray for

peace. He went to several cities in Italy which were at war and he negotiated peace deals. During the Fifth Crusade when Christians and Muslims were battling, St. Francis walked into the Muslim camp, and after several days walked away having built a friendship with the Sultan. Ten years later the Muslims handed Jerusalem back to the Christians and many say that the contact with St. Francis had been the tipping point.

Following Jesus is about much more than simply being nice to others. He wants us to be as shrewd in advancing God's kingdom as others are in opposing it. First century followers of Jesus were accused of trying to turn the world upside down. The angels would surely rejoice if such an accusation were leveled at us.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

***Refrain: Take, O take me as I am; Summon out what I shall be;  
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.***

Take us as we are, O God of Creation, for we are yours ... We are your people – the work of your hands, whom you formed from the dust of the earth and enlivened with your breath. We are your people – your beloved, whom you claimed in the waters of baptism, and called to life with you. We are your people – your children, whom you redeem, and sustain, and empower. Take us as we are, O God, with all our sorrow and all our joy. Some of us come into your presence with hearts overflowing with gratitude, and some with hearts weighed down by grief; some with hearts moved to awe, and some with hearts that struggle to believe. However we come, take us as we are and embrace us with your love. We pray for all who yearn for your comfort, your healing, your peace: For those grieving the loss of loved ones, or relationships, or stability, or health ... for those who struggle with illness or addiction or loneliness or despair. We lift before you sisters and brothers near and far who face each day with uncertainty because of poverty or hunger or conflict. Send your Spirit upon all your beloved children, that they may know your peace and experience your wholeness. And take each of us, with all our doubt and all our hope, and draw us into your redemptive work. Take us as we are, O God, and use us to bring comfort, and healing, and peace.

***Refrain: Take, O take me as I am; Summon out what I shall be;  
Set your seal upon my heart, and live in me.***

Take us, O God, and transform our hearts. Though you created us in your likeness, we do not always show forth your love and grace. Yet, you love us enough to see beyond our brokenness. Call out that which is best in us: our creativity, our compassion, our willingness to care for creation, our commitment to serve you and love one another. You have endowed each of us with unique gifts and called us to offer them in service to Christ. Embolden us, O God, to offer these gifts freely, that we may participate in your holy work. Imaginative God, even now you are re-creating this world, planting seeds of justice and peace so that – little by little – your vision of wholeness will take root. Give us the courage to nurture these seeds, as we wait and work for the day when all creation experiences your *shalom*. Until then, set your seal upon our hearts, O God, and live in us, that we might serve Christ in all things.

***Refrain: Take, O take me as I am; Summon out what I shall be;  
Set your seal upon my heart, and live in me.***

We lift this and every prayer in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us how to pray: **Our Father ...**