

The Shrewd Manager

Intro: Well good morning and welcome to church. We're so glad that you're here with us this morning, whether in person or online. If you're new here, my name is Seth and I'm one of the pastors here at The Well. We are in a series going through the parables. These are small stories that Jesus told in order to communicate a bigger meaning. Last week Philip continued the series by teaching on the parable of the talents and showing the relational nature of the parables and the Kingdom of God. Now, the next parable in chronological order is the sheep and the goats. And that's actually what my preaching calendar says should be preached today, but, for some reason, I misread that calendar and thought this week was the parable of the Shrewd Manager. This parable is, I think, the most difficult parable that Jesus taught. Not because it's hard to be obedient, but because what is he even trying to say?! So, if you've got your Bibles you can go ahead and turn in them to Luke 16. If you don't own a Bible you can head to the Welcome Booth outside and we would love to gift you a Bible. Now let's just look at the parable so we can sit with how bizarre it is.

I. A Scandalous Commendation

- A. **Luke 16:1-9** - 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.' "The 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—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' " 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.' "Then 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.' "The 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. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.
- B. Uhh. What? Is Jesus inviting me into shady business practices? Is this why Christians seem to love MLMs?
1. Alright, let me help you out with this. So, the rich man symbolizes the devil. And the manager represents every person. So our job is to deal deceitfully with the unrighteousness of this world in order to receive true riches.
 2. Make sense? No, I'm actually kidding. That was a legitimate opinion that I read on this, but I also may have laughed out loud when I read it because that take just feels wild to me.
 - a) Here's what I think we're tempted to do when reading the Bible. We're reading and things are going okay, and then we bump into a passage like this that leaves us scratching our heads and we're trying to figure out what in the world to do with it. Typically, we do one of two things. We either just move on and skip it, or we do something like this.

- b) So, this is a birthday card that I got from Target. Not because it's anyone's birthday. But these cards are pretty cool, see when you open them up they, not only play music but they also pop up at you. There's supposed to be a little bit of a surprise factor to them.
 - (1) But you know what. I don't like being surprised. So I'm actually just going to flatten this out here. And you know what, if it's not flattening down well then I'm just going to go ahead and rip out the pop up part.
 - (2) But most of the card is still there so everything's great. It still works!
- 3. This is what we have a tendency to do with difficult passages in the Bible. We try to flatten them out. But when we flatten them out we wind up missing out on what exactly Jesus is trying to teach us. If Jesus wanted a flattened out reading then that's what he would have given us.
 - a) When JC preached on the mustard seed he mentioned that there are difficult parables and this was actually one of the parables he mentioned. At first I did what most sinful people do and I got kinda arrogant and thought to myself that I'm going to read this passage and then come back and say, "See JC? It's not that hard."
 - b) Instead I sat down to study the passage, I read through it, and I said, "Oh no." Because this text is HARD.
 - (1) That's when I was reminded of something really important. **The Bible is meditation literature.** That means that it's not meant to be read like a normal book. It's meant to be eaten.
 - (2) The Hebrew word "Haga" means to meditate... or to coo, to growl, to utter, to moan, to sigh, to mumble. It's actually an onomatopoeia. I don't think I've gotten to say that word in a sermon, that's fun. An onomatopoeia is like "buzz" the word is actually making the sound. Like "Bang", it's almost less of a word and more of a sound.
 - (a) Haga is the same. Think of what it might sound like if you went and listened to a cow chewing on grass. You'd hear something like, "hagahagahaga". And of course we know the grossest thing about cows is just how many times they're going to chew on that grass.
 - (b) But that's meditation. It's not just reading it once. It's chewing on it. Taking time. The Bible is as sweet as honey, but as tough as your dad's well-done tri-tip. You're gonna be chewing on that for a while.
 - c) So, here's what I found when studying this passage. There's more confusion than not. And I think sometimes we want the pastor to come in and solve the Bible for us. If that's what you're hoping for then I want you to know right now that I'm going to severely disappoint you. In just ONE of the many books that I read to prepare I was given 16 different interpretative options for this passage.
 - (1) So, what's going to happen this morning is I'm going to walk you through my take, which is one among many. And ultimately, I'm inviting you wrestle through and meditate on the Scriptures with me. So just know that my

interpretation is me wrestling through the Scripture and coming to you with humility in how I understand this passage.

- (2) The shock values stays, we don't get to flatten it out, but I do think that we can make some sort of sense out of this passage. Ultimately the parable has no good guys in it which makes it difficult for us. We want to allegorize it, meaning we want to say this person represents me, that person represents Jesus, and so I'm supposed to do this _____
 - (a) But I think Jesus is actually simply inviting us to think. He never says, "Go and do likewise" in this story. He's sharing this bizarre story and leaving it in our laps for us to wrestle with. And it's in that wrestling that we find wisdom.
 - (b) So a little bit of context before we jump back into the parable. This comes immediately after Jesus shares the parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son. If you remember the parable of the prodigal son then you'll remember that the story ends with us wondering how the older son will respond. Will he go in to the party with everyone else? Jesus has been talking to the Pharisees about how they've missed it. They don't see that the Kingdom of God is here. They don't see the reason to celebrate. Then Jesus immediately tells this parable.

II. What the Manager Gets Right

- A. So the master is getting ready to fire his manager. This is the guy who he's trusted to handle all of his dealings. A master like this would give rights to the manager to act as if he were the master. Everything he says and does holds the same weight as the master. But now he's about to lose his job.
 - 1. The master tells him to give an account and to explain himself for what he's hearing about the manager wasting his money. What we'd expect here is all the excuses in the world.
 - 2. Like, I'll walk into the living room and see that the kids made a massive mess and I'll start to say something but before I can even get the words out of my mouth all of the kids are blaming each other. My favorite right now is that they'll go steal popsicles or something and then blame their sibling because their sibling "made them" steal the popsicle.
 - a) So we're getting ready for the manager to defend himself, to defend his honor, to defend his job. Instead we're not giving a single word from him.
 - b) Instead, he silently thinks to himself. And here's what the text says:
- B. **Luke 16:3-4** - "The 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—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'
 - 1. So, what's the focus here. The manager talks to himself and starts questioning what he's going to do when he's faced with this difficult situation. He starts to look at his options and he realizes that he's too weak to do manual labor, but he's also too ashamed to beg.

2. And you know what, I feel that. God has gifted me with the body of a man who would make a really good secretary. There's actually this really cool thing about me where I don't have all the sweat glands I should so when it gets hot, rather than my body sweating to cool down, I just pass out. Isn't that awesome? So yeah, I'm out on manual labor. But I'm also not pretty enough to beg. It's way too easy to just pretend I don't exist, so I'm out of luck on both.

a) But then this guy does have an idea. He says that he knows what he'll do. What is it? He doesn't say. Jesus has yet to reveal to us the plan that the man has, but he does show the motive that the man has.

b) The man seeks to avoid shame, as we just saw, and he realizes that he can make it out of this if he can work hard to build some meaningful friendships.

(1) Life is all about who you know, right? Like, think about it. The whole reason I got this job was because I had previously worked with Gilbert. Had I not known Gilbert, I likely wouldn't have known anything about The Well. It was about who I knew.

(2) If you want to make it in this world, then you've likely realized that friendships matter. And this man understands that. So, what does he do about it? See, so far we're thinking that the teaching of Jesus is making perfect sense. Then this happens.

C. **Luke 16:5-7** - "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' " 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.' "Then 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.'

1. And now Jesus seems to have lost the plot. Like, I thought I was tracking, but then the manager, before anyone knows that he's fired, goes to the master's clients and he's like, "Yo, how'd you like the hookup of your dreams?" But in doing this he's exploiting the master and his money!

2. Think about this, he's getting fired for mismanaging the master's money, but what is he doing now? Mismanaging the master's money!

a) Now let's think about this for a second. Rewind your life to before Jesus. What would you have done to survive in this world? You'd do just about anything, right?

b) I have a friend who's a police officer, and he always used to tell me, "It's only illegal if you get caught." Which, might I say, is terrible advice from a police officer.

(1) But those are the rules of this world. You survive any way you can. So, how does this man choose to survive?

(2) Friendship and forgiveness. **Even the broken world we live in knows how far friendship and forgiveness can take you in this life.**

- c) Even the master had to look at the manager's shrewdness and smirk a little. I love how the NLT puts it.
- d) **Luke 16:8** - "The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd.

III. What the Children of Light Must Get Right

- A. **Luke 16:8-9** - For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.
- B. Admittedly, I got to this part of the parable and thought to myself, "What in the world did I just read?" After reading tons of different perspectives on this parable there was one quote that I read that felt like it blew the whole thing open for me.
 - 1. Joel Green (NICNT) wrote, "'Children of this age,'" he observes, understand how the world works and use it to their benefit; why do "'children of light'" not understand the ways of the kingdom of God?"
 - 2. Remember I said that this came right after Jesus teaching the Pharisees with the parables of the lost sheep, coin, and son? Jesus has already been defending himself for hanging out with shady characters. Then he tells a story that only seems to have shady characters. But he never tells us to do what anyone in the story does.
- C. Rather, it seems to me, that Jesus is saying, "Look, even the people of this world know that there are systems and they can use those systems to build themselves up or to make connections. Even the people of this world realize that money can be used as a means for friendship. Yet, you who say you belong to the Kingdom of God, why can't you figure out how the Kingdom works?"
 - 1. He's inviting them to chew on this, to meditate on this. And interestingly Jesus begins this by addressing his disciples, but the passage concludes with the Pharisees sneering at Jesus, and right in the middle Jesus seems to address a third group of people.
 - 2. There was a people group called the Essenes. They lived out in the desert and had their own little community because they wanted to stay away from all of the wicked and bad stuff. But when you were welcomed into that community you would hand over all of your money for the leaders to distribute as was needed.
 - a) The Essenes called themselves the children of light, and everyone else the children of darkness. They also called their little pool of money righteous mammon and all other money unrighteous mammon. These exact phrases are all used in Jesus' parable.
 - b) It's as if he's saying that the corrupt people of this world get it. But the people who are worried about holiness have missed the plot.
 - (1) You know what's better than hoarding wealth in your little pocket of holy people? Spending it for the sake of making relationships and spreading the Kingdom of God.

- (2) You know what's better than loving your money like the Pharisees did? Forgiving debts and creating relationships so that others might know the forgiveness of God.
- 3. After looking at Jesus partying with sinners, after looking at the parables of celebrating the lost being found, and after this parable from Jesus we have to ask the ultimate question, "What kind of world am I creating?"
 - a) The way you position yourself in this life, what impacts is it having? Are you contributing to a world where people are dependent on you, or a world where you're dependent on Christ?
 - b) See, the way of our world is to turn money into power and to use power over people. But even the corrupt manager realized that the better option was to use money FOR people.
 - (1) The problem with the manager is that he still has a distorted view of friendship. To forgive debts the way he did would have created obligation. Now that he's forgiven such massive debts... the clients owed him. And that was going to set him up for success as time went on.
 - (2) But Jesus calls us to give without any expectation of return. We don't use money for obligation, we steward money, even corrupt money, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.
 - c) Each of these parables, and even the parable that Jesus is about to tell in the second half of Luke 16 have a common thread. They are all addressing hospitality.
 - (1) If the corrupt, broken, and sinful people of this world understand the value of hospitality then there is literally no excuse for the followers of Jesus to misunderstand hospitality.
 - (2) No one has been shown hospitality more than us. It was Jesus who saw the poor sinners who could never pay him back and said he'd give it all to us and for us.
 - (a) It's Jesus who has invited us into his household of infinite riches, not just to see them, but to be participants in them.
 - (b) Jesus actually saw the systems of the world and he said, "You know what... I can use this for my Kingdom. I can use this for my mission."
 - i) But rather than taking advantage of anyone he uses the systems of this world to ensure that the Romans and Jews would unite for the sake of nailing him to a cross.
 - ii) While the manager was terrified of the potential shame that awaited him, Hebrews says that Jesus happily took the shame of the cross because of the joy of unity with you.

- D. **Hebrews 12:2** - fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
1. It's not just that Jesus offers us salvation, it's the way it happened. Jesus used his infinite access to wisdom and it's in stories like this that he invites us to draw nearer to him and to grow in wisdom.
 2. But that begins with a relationship with him. If you don't yet have a relationship with Jesus that's your invitation today. He's invited you to his table. He wants to show you perfect hospitality. He simply asks, as Romans 10:9-10 says, that you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. If you've done that, then you will be saved. And you're welcomed to the table.

Takeaways:

1. **Ask for wisdom.**
2. **Plan creative hospitality.**
3. **Forgive recklessly.**