

The Shrewd Steward

Luke 16:1-8

Imagine it's noon on Friday. The Deputy Commissioner of Taxation's on the carpet. His superior's found out he's been wasting the government's money providing gym memberships for all the department's employees. He's told to clock out at 4pm and never come back. He goes back to his desk, opens up his file of requests for private rulings, and approves several dodgy schemes that benefit by millions the various applicants. Do you think he'll have any trouble getting a new job? And how do you react to the story?

- Do you think it's unfair he's dismissed? The tax office has plenty of money. All he's doing is giving some hard working employees extra fringe benefits.
- Do you object to him approving dodgy schemes? The people who want dodgy schemes are usually rich already. They don't need any breaks. It just means the rest of us hard-working plebs have to pay more tax.
- Do you admire him for providing for his future? It was pretty quick thinking. He hasn't done anything wrong. It'll get him all sorts of influential friends.

Would your thinking change if it was the manager of Red Cross or World Vision instead of the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation?

The Simple Story

On the surface, this is a simple enough story. It has one main character: a manager or steward or agent. This guy was responsible for his master's possessions – especially for renting out his master's farming land to tenants. However, this manager's been helping himself to his master's

assets. He's guilty of what we might call white-collar crime. His master finds out and gives him the sack.

Now, this raises quite a dilemma for our white-collar manager. What's he going to do for a crust now? His reputation as a manager's in tatters. No one else will hire him to do that sort of work. How's he going to support himself now?

- He could become a blue-collar worker – get his hands dirty, dig ditches, become a farmer. But he reminds himself there's a reason he's a white-collar worker rather than a blue-collar one – his poor physique, his old age, his bad back.
- He could become a beggar – that was a recognised vocation in those days, even if despised by most. But his personal self-image can't quite stoop to that level just yet.

He's in a precarious position.

But he comes up with a plan. He's been dismissed. He has no authority left. His only task is to get all his master's documents together and hand them over. Yet, no one else knows that yet. He still has this small window of opportunity. He calls in some of his master's debtors. It's unlikely he got to all of them in the limited time available – some of them were probably on whatever passed for overseas business trips in those days. But it's also likely he got to more than these two we're told by way of example.

Dealing with each debtor one by one, he reduces their debts. A couple of things to note.

- First, most likely I think (though not all agree), these are rental debts on farm property. The land

was rented out to various tenants and they agreed to pay a certain fixed amount of the produce when harvest time came round.

- Secondly, harvest time's not here yet. The manager isn't getting his hand on any more of his master's property – he's just reducing the amounts these guys owe to his master. They're the ones getting the actual benefit.
- Thirdly, these are big debts. We're talking about a large olive grove here and a big field of wheat. The tenants aren't just small, one-family operations trying to put enough food on their own tables. In other words, these tenants were relatively wealthy. The manager isn't after the favour of poor, struggling peasants. Rather, he's after someone to look after him in the manner to which he's been accustomed now he's joined the ranks of the unemployed.
- Fourthly, many commentators calculate that the reduction in the two debts amounts to an equivalent cash value. In other words, he reduces each debt by the same amount.
- Fifthly, I don't think there's any suggestion these debtors were in on the swindle. They don't know the manager's been sacked. They think he still acts with the full authority of the master. Rents could be reduced because of bad conditions – or for other reasons. They're simply intended to think that the manager's talked the master into giving them a better deal.

That's the story. As I said, it's simple enough. The problem comes in verse 8:

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.

This problem's huge. This is one of the most argued over of all Jesus' parables. The problem has two parts to it:

- First, why does the master commend this guy who's just ripped him off even more? Why doesn't he take the full force of the law against him?
- Secondly, the manager seems to be the hero of the story. How can Jesus tell a story about an embezzling manager – a manager doing the wrong thing by his master – and then tell us to go and be like him?

The Converted Manager

One way to get around this problem is to suggest the manager has some form of conversion experience. This comes in several forms.

The simplest form is to say the manager was originally swindling the tenants for his own personal gain. The master set the rental figure he wanted. Then the manager added his own cut on top – that was the swindle – and wrote out the contracts for that. Now he's been caught, he simply calls in the debtors and gets them to re-write the contracts for what they should have been. That is, he was doing the wrong thing, but now he's doing the right thing. That's why he's commended.

I don't think that works.

- First, the story itself doesn't suggest he's been ripping off the tenants. He's sacked for squandering his master's money, not the tenants'. Now, it's true that someone who's stooped to financial impropriety with one person is likely not to be satisfied with that and so spread his net to include others.

However, the story itself doesn't tell us that.

- Secondly, this doesn't explain why these debtors would now turn around and welcome him. He's been ripping them off for years. He now has a change of heart and lets them off for this one year. That's nice for this year – but, overall, he's still ripped them off. He hasn't repaid what he's taken in earlier years.
- Thirdly, there's no indication of repentance in the story. Have a look at verse 4. He doesn't say anything about having done the wrong thing. He doesn't say anything about wanting to now do the right thing. It's all about self-interest. I've lost my job – how can I now get an advantage for me?
- Fourthly, verse 8 calls him a *dishonest* manager or a *steward of unrighteousness*. That pretty well says he hasn't reformed. He was bad at the beginning of the story. He's still bad at the end of the story.

There are also more complicated forms of this interpretation. Some of them suggest that, as well as the manager being a scoundrel, the master was also a scoundrel. They were both involved in the deal to rip off the tenants. Those interpretations suffer from the same problems I've already outlined and one additional problem: there's no hint in the story that the master's done anything wrong.

The Shrewd Manager

Another way to overcome the problem – and probably the way that's most common in the commentaries – is to emphasise the manager's shrewdness. Jesus doesn't tell us to copy the manager in all things. Indeed, as I've just mentioned, He clearly identifies the manager as dishonest at the end. Rather, Jesus holds him up as an example of

acting shrewdly. That's what we're to copy.

This guy faces a crisis. He's out of work. The circumstances of his dismissal mean he's also facing a change of career path. The alternative careers don't particularly appeal to him. Centrelink's non-existent. Yet, he comes up with a scheme to assure his future.

It's a clever scheme. What could the master do?

- He can't do anything else to the manager – he's already sacked him.
- He can't go after the manager for the money. He's already squandered the initial lot and he doesn't actually get anything extra out of this scheme.
- Perhaps he could have him thrown into gaol, but he didn't do that initially. The manager's sure hoping he doesn't go for that option now.
- Presumably he can't do anything about the new contracts. Maybe that's because he hadn't made public the manager's dismissal and so is still bound by the manager's actions purportedly done on his behalf. Maybe it's because his tenants are already celebrating and singing his praises and it would be too damaging to their ongoing relationships to tell them it was all done fraudulently.

Certainly, the manager's got himself in with the tenants. While they acted in good faith in changing the contracts, they'll soon know the truth of what happened. They'll then be obligated to the manager until they've repaid their social debt to him.

The manager's acted very shrewdly. He faces disaster and well and truly lands on his feet. Now, you can still

criticise all this – as to why it doesn't conform to your understanding of what a good Christian parable should be like.

- Why doesn't he repent?
- Why doesn't he ask God for a new job?
- Why doesn't he pray to God for wisdom to know how to deal with this difficult situation?

That's missing the point. It's forcing the parable to fit into some preconceived mould you have. That's not what parables are about. They often aim at one main point. And they often achieve it by shock value.

So, we're to act shrewdly.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

But how are we to act shrewdly? In relation to what are we to act shrewdly?

Looking Backwards

It's possible to look at this parable with a backward focus. Chapter 15 has three parables, one after the other. This one simply flows on from them as a fourth story Jesus' tells. True, Jesus addressed those parables to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, whereas this one's told to the disciples. But, if you look down to verse 14, you'll see the Pharisees are still around. And there are some similarities with the Prodigal Son.

- They both squander money – the same Greek word is used.
- Neither offers excuses.
- They both get extraordinary mercy.

We're used to stopping at the end of chapter 15 and thinking that chapter 16 starts a whole new topic. But Luke

wasn't the one who put in the chapter divisions. He may not actually be starting a new topic.

Each of the stories in chapter 15 has a time of crisis – when something's lost. They each focus on the joy when that lost thing's found. This story looks at the crisis from the other side. What if you're the lost thing? What if you're facing the time of crisis from that perspective? That crisis (being lost in relation to God's kingdom) threatens to be your undoing – not simply in this life, but for all eternity. What should you do about it?

In verse 2, the manager learns of his master's justice – he's rightly dismissed from his job. But he also learns of his master's mercy. He's *only* dismissed from his job. He's not thrown into debtor's prison until he pays back what he's stolen from his master. In this regard, this master's like the rich father in the Prodigal Son.

So, if you're facing the crisis brought on by the ministry of Jesus – the crisis that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners and appears to welcome them with great mercy – what should you do about it? You should appraise the situation rightly. You should recognise the danger you're in. You should act to save yourself. You should seize the opportunity that presents itself in the midst of this threat. You should throw yourself on God's mercy.

Our God's a merciful God – a God who acts generously towards those who don't deserve it.

- He showed great mercy to the ancestors of these Pharisees
 - He rescued them from terrible slavery even though they'd done nothing to earn that rescue.

- He provided them with His gracious words on how life's made to be lived.
- He didn't abandon them even when they ignored Him and chased after false gods.
- He didn't wipe them off the face of the earth like they deserved.
- This same God offers us great mercy today.
 - Our sin deserves God's judgment. Our rebellion against Him is great.
 - God poured out His judgment on Jesus instead. To us, He offers forgiveness.

So the crisis is there. The time of judgment is coming. It hasn't arrived yet. It's still future. But it is certain. And there's time to act now in relation to it – to act before it arrives.

- Some, like the Pharisees, won't properly recognise the nature of the crisis. They think they can handle it by themselves. They're self-sufficient. They've handled all that life's thrown at them in the past. They think they can stand before God on their own two feet.
- Others, however, read the crisis properly. More importantly, they read the character of the Master properly. They depend on His mercy. They act in such a way that shows they depend on His mercy. And when the judgment comes, they'll benefit from God's mercy. God will commend them.

That's how you can think of this parable in light of the three parables in chapter 15. It's not how the parable reads to me. God's mercy is certainly a great theme – and a very important theme Biblically – but it just doesn't come across to me as being the emphasis of this parable.

The context means you can put forward a good argument for it but, to me, the wording of the parable doesn't really support that emphasis.

Looking Forwards

So, it's also possible to look at this parable with a forward focus. There are connections with the verses that follow – especially the ones we'll look at next week.

- They have the idea of wealth and the use of wealth in common.
- The language of verse 9 has echoes of the language of verse 4 as well as verse 8.
- Verse 9 seems to be a direct application of the parable to use money to make friends.

And it's possible to see both stories of chapter 16 as illustrative of the teaching of verses 9 to 13 – the first illustrates how to use wealth properly and the second (the one about the rich man and Lazarus) shows how not to use it.

Thus, the focus is to be shrewd in your use of money. This manager faced a crisis. He used the resources available to him – his master's money – to find a way out of the crisis. We too face a crisis. You can picture the crisis in different ways.

- The kingdom of God.
- Future judgment.
- Physical death.

They all amount to much the same thing. The issue is: given that crisis, what will you do with your money? No, that's not quite right. Rather, given that crisis, what will you do with the money and resources God's entrusted to you? Will you act shrewdly?

The people of this age know how to use money to achieve their purposes. Not all of them, of course – but we've got all sorts of businessmen and entrepreneurs and politicians and famous personalities accumulating their wealth in this world. They come up with all sorts of innovative ways to secure their future.

- Some have clever inventions that they patent and everyone goes out and buys one and the product's really good they make lots of money.
- Some have not-so-clever inventions that they patent and market really well and everyone goes and buys one even though the product's a waste of money.
- Some invest in property for the long term.
- Some invest in the share market and know just when to get out before the big crash.

It just goes on and on.

And many of them are quite willing to give you access to their shrewdness – for a price. You can buy their investment strategies and get-rich-quick schemes and biographies and read all about them in the women's magazines. And in that way they get you to part with more of your hard-earned money and give it to them. They know they have what you want. They know you'll pay for it – that often you'll pay for even just the dream.

The reality is that even the sons of light know how to use money to achieve those sorts of purposes as well. We all have various dreams in life:

- dreams about our sports and hobbies
- dreams about the overseas holiday
- dreams about the sort of house we want to live in

We can find the money to invest in those dreams readily enough.

But what about the dream we're supposed to have – the vision the Bible holds out before us of God's perfect and righteous kingdom? What about the vision of people from all nations and tribes gathered around the Lamb's throne for eternity? Are we using our money – are we using God's money – to achieve that dream? Are we making shrewd investments in relation to that?

The people of this world are those for whom the frame of reference is no bigger than this age or this world. They are people who live as if this world is all there is. And so, they want to get as much as they can out of this world. Their dreams are all tied up with enjoying whatever they can get from this world. The people of the light are God's people. They know this world is not all there is. They know this life is simply the prelude to the life to come. Yet, says Jesus, it's the people of this world who are more shrewd. They are the ones living more consistently with their vision of reality – even if it's a wrong vision.

Earlier generations had a better grasp of this. Fifteen years ago, we headed out to PNG. The mission organisation we were with was concerned about their supporter base. It was dying off. They had a great group of people who'd financially supported the mission faithfully for years – but they were all retirees now and the next generation hadn't taken up the challenge. I know they weren't the only mission organisation having that problem at that time.

What was the cause of this problem?

- Had God's mission in the world changed? No – God had not supplied new revelation withdrawing

the Great Commission.

- Had God's mission been completed? Again no – there were still billions of people in the world who needed to hear about Jesus.
- Were mission organisations flush with funds? No – they didn't have enough funds to send out all the people willing to go.

The problem was the next generation wasn't as shrewd in investing God's resources. It bought into the propaganda of our culture.

- Luxuries became necessities.
- Leisure activities took more disposable income.
- The appetite of self-indulgence had to be fed.
- Socially, it was important to be upwardly mobile.

The dream changed. It no longer focused on God's throne and people from every nation. That didn't disappear completely. Whatever scraps were leftover were still invested there. But it was no longer the priority. The priority was enjoying a good journey on the way to the throne.

Jesus tells a number of stories that teach the importance of living wisely in this life in view of the future – and especially in view of God's final judgment. If that's *the* important future event – if that's the crisis towards which this life is heading – what impact should it have on this life and how we relate to others in this life?

- What sort of effort do you put into your day job? Do you put the same sort of effort into preparing your Sunday School class or leading the service?
- How seriously do you take planning in your job? Do you prepare for planning discussions? Do you appreciate the planning others do? How seriously do you take planning in the church?

- How keen are you to get involved in a sporting club – or to have your children involved? What do you give up to maintain your involvement? Are you just as keen when it comes to God's church?

What is it that's really driving our lives? Would Jesus consider us shrewd in the way we use His resources?