



Catalog No. 1955

Luke 16:1-13

55th Message

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March 30, 2014

PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

As an engineer in the Silicon Valley, I've worked in many companies and have experienced several "roller-coaster" rides in my career. Each time the economy worsens, we brace ourselves to face rounds of lay-offs. During one such downsizing at my previous company, I watched my colleagues updating their resumes, networking, sending out requests via Linked-In, and taking half-day interviews. And I wondered to myself, "What should I be doing? Should I be doing the same thing to prepare for my future?"

How many of you have had this experience? On the one hand, we want remain loyal to our company. But on the other hand, we want to "jump ship" before it's too late. Do we do as others do? Is a Christian to act differently? Should we take the attitude of "trust God" and sit idly or do should we prepare, network, and proactively manage our options?

This crisis of losing a job is exactly what is experienced by the main character in Jesus' parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1-8:

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. (Luke 16:1-8 ESV)

This is a perplexing parable, isn't it? On the surface, we have an ineffective employee who is about to be fired. As his last move, this employee cheats his boss by forgiving debtors of his

master's money, and his boss commends him for being shrewd! Is Jesus teaching his disciples to be cheaters?

Many people prefer not to preach this, because it appears to be sending the "wrong message." Maybe that's why the pastors assigned this passage to me so that they don't have to deal with it? Or maybe they think I'm an unscrupulous manager at work, just like this character! (I hope not!) It's certainly true that as an engineer in the Silicon Valley, I have seen colleagues lose their jobs, I've had to lay off some of my staff, and I've been let go from a company myself. This situation is very relevant to me, and I hope to make it relevant to you as well.

Parable of the Shrewd Manager

The audience for Jesus' parable is the disciples (v. 1); Jesus teaches them how to live in this world. The story begins with a rich man, who is most likely a landowner who rents out his land to tenants. The rich man has working for him a manager or often translated to be a steward. The steward is a head servant who is given charge of the owner's business. It is his job to buy, sell, and manage the assets of the owner. To the listeners of this story, the role of the steward is very familiar, as this is the basis of Ancient Near East economy. This role is similar to today's position of a financial planner, or a project manager, or anyone given authority to manage a business. The disciples understood that a steward can be shrewd and thrifty, and through careful negotiations he can save money for his master and gain a profit for himself. On the other hand, the manager can be unwise in his business dealing, and mismanage or lose the master's money. This second situation is what occurs in this parable. The steward mismanaged and "wasted" the master's possessions. Did this steward steal from his master? Jesus doesn't say so explicitly, only that "wasting" occurred. This word also means "squandered" and is the same word used in Luke 15:13 to describe what the prodigal son did with his inheritance. In fact, this word "prodigal" means squandering, wasting recklessly. This word ties together these two parables.

The master asks for an explanation; the steward gives no answer. This suggests that he is guilty as charged as there is nothing he can say to defend himself. So the master then asks the steward to turn in the books—the ledgers, account balances, etc. Then the rich man dismisses him from the job as manager.

So now the manager is fired from his job. His private musings (v. 3-4) mirror the anxiety many of us experience

when our jobs are at stake. We step back and evaluate our resume and our options. The manager accurately and honestly evaluates his own skills, admits that he is not as marketable as he hopes, and that there is a bleak future if he doesn't do anything proactively.

The manager decides to be “shrewd” and ingratiates himself to his master's debtors. Before his dismissal is public, before he turns the ledgers to the master, he meets privately with each of the debtors and dismisses about 1-2 years worth of debt from each person. In other words, he plans ahead, networks, and earn favors while he still has the option.

Was this cheating and lying? Was it in his authority to forgive debts? There are many differing opinions on this point. Many people believe the manager was a scoundrel. Some suggest he was rectifying the exorbitant rates the rich man charged to the tenants, like a Robin Hood of the times. Yet others think that he gave away his own profit, his own cut or commission of the business loans. I believe that the steward knew he was being dishonest but did what he had to do to save himself.

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. (Luke 16:8)

It's important to note that the master was not praising the steward for his morality or ethics, because he calls the manager “dishonest” or “unrighteous”.

Rather, the master gives a nod of approval to the dishonest manager for *shrewdness*. This word “shrewd” used twice in this verse (Greek – *phronimos*) is not a bad character but rather a desired trait for a manager. It is used 14 times in the New Testament and it means prudent and wise. In Luke 12:42, Jesus asks, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household”, and in Matt 7:24, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Being wise is a valued trait. So, the master is commending him for acting wisely, and even generously in managing this crisis and planning for the future.

Therefore, the lesson of this passage is this: Jesus wants the disciples to be street-smart, wise, clever, proactive, to use their resources to plan and to live in this world. If the worldly people can be wise, then how much more wise ought the disciples be. Jesus teaches his disciples a similar lesson in Matthew 10. In that context, Jesus sent the twelve disciples into the community to spread the Gospel. He gave them spiritual authority and many instructions. In Matt 10:16 he tells them, “behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The term “wise” used here is the same word *phronimos* as used here in Luke 16:8.

Jesus wants us to be wise, to be proactive, to plan ahead. He wants us to prayerfully and thoughtfully evaluate our own skills, gifts, and options and act prudently. And we must act. We are to work *with* God, not independently of Him. We do

need to take steps, because while God may open doors for us, we need to move our own feet to walk through those doors. We have a responsibility to act, and to plan prudently.

What did I do in my career crises I shared earlier? I did not sit idly and wring my hands. I updated my resume, talked with friends and networked. I prayed a lot, asking for wisdom, patience, and open doors. I evaluated opportunities that God brought to me. In His time, God opened a door for me. I have a decades long friendship with a non-believer with whom I shared my spiritual story. This good friend introduced me to my present job. It was God's plan all along, but I had taken steps proactively as well. I kept my network alive and continued to invest in friendships and relationships.

John Hanneman preached once,

“imprudence is living indiscriminately, mindlessly, letting other people make decision for us. Prudence is taking hold of God, not being paralyzed by pressure, choosing God instead of the world.”¹

That summarizes Jesus' first lesson for us. And “choosing God instead of the world” transitions us to the second half of today's passage in Luke 16:9-13.

Teaching about Money

In verse 9, Jesus continues,

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” (Luke 16:9)

Once again, Jesus' words seem perplexing: Is Jesus telling us to “buy friends” with “dirty money” and buy our way into heaven?

Let's first look at “unrighteous wealth” which occurs several times in this passage. “Wealth” is the word **mammon**, which means both money and possessions. Unrighteous wealth may refer to possessions obtained in an unrighteous manner. Or it may refer to the unrighteous desires to use wealth for personal gain and satisfaction. Or it may refer to the corrupting influence of wealth, the temptation of material possessions that may lead you astray to unrighteous behavior and attitude, making you no different from “the sons of the world.” I believe it is this potentially corrupting influence of wealth that is meant here.

In verse 9, Jesus is saying “Use the material possessions that you are a steward of to benefit others, to help and bless others.” Money in and of itself is not bad; it was entrusted to us by God. Do not avoid it or pretend it is beneath you or unspiritual. Why not use it generously to care for others, to give to their wellbeing rather than hoarding it ourselves? Moreover, we are to give generously to those who are in no position to reciprocate, who are in debt. Jesus taught the disciples in the Lord's prayer—“forgive our debts as we have forgiven our debtors”—that it's good to forgive debtors and

bless them, as the shrewd manager has done in this story. Therefore, give without expectation to receive back.

In so doing, you may make friends for yourself, opening the path to share the gospel with them, and even offer them the free gift of salvation. And some day later, after the wealth is gone, you will have gained a brother or sister in heaven!

If you are out having coffee or lunch with a non-believing friend, may I suggest that you treat your friend if that is an option for you? You may find this will open doors for you for the future.

It's not just money, but also possessions, that can be used in this way. At my current job, I have a friend who loves Porsches but doesn't own one, so I let him drive my old "jalopy" Porsche as a treat. He was thrilled and grateful, and this old car opened the door for us to share about other passions in our lives, including my spiritual walk. We went from being colleagues to being friends. I told him I would be praying for his elective surgery over Christmas break. You see, we can use money and even old cars wisely to open doors to friendships that may yield eternal fruit some day.

Jesus continues His teaching about stewardship in verses 10-12:

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (Luke 16:10-12)

Stewardship begins with an attitude of *faithfulness*. Jesus uses this word four times in this lesson to underscore its importance. What is "faithful stewardship"? It starts with our attitude: how do we view possessions?

Let's say we regularly give to church or a worthy cause; does that mean we are "faithful stewards?" Perhaps not! You see, we may compartmentalize our possessions, treating a portion as "God's," but the rest is all our own to use or waste as we want.

Well, that's not "stewardship"; that's "ownership!" Stewardship means that everything belongs to God, not to us, and we are not to compartmentalize, but rather to be wise when we use *His* possessions.

The Newly Married Fellowship headed up by Bill & Liz Altmann will have their yearly retreat next month, and Gloria Wellman graciously offered up her home to them for the whole weekend. When I thanked her for her generosity, she said it's not "her" house—it's God's house. It's all His and she is only putting it to right use. That's the correct attitude behind stewardship.

In verses 10-12, Jesus invites us to *act* as stewards, starting with small things and in little ways. If you can act faithfully in small things, then the "larger" things will come more naturally. For example, giving a few dollars to the homeless on the street may lead to donating a larger sum to God's work. As a steward

of your time, you can spend an afternoon in Tenderloin apartments with the Compass ministry, and it develops to a yearly commitment to volunteer with high schoolers at King City. Start small, start with material things. Then God will grant you larger, more significant tasks that have Spiritual impact.

Begin where you are now with what God has given you to bless the people He put around you. There are so many opportunities to be obedient in this way: you may choose to give to church, support missionaries, volunteer to advance social justice. Use your time and possessions for purposes that transcend the material world; help others without seeking recognition for yourself.

Jesus concludes in verse 13 with a very strong warning against the danger that wealth may have on our hearts.

No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Luke 16:13)

Money may ensnare us, pulling us away from our first love which is God. Jesus calls money a "master," indicating that it may gain mastery over us, consuming our thoughts, passions, and time.

Jesus does not say you *should* not serve two masters. Rather, he states emphatically that you *cannot* serve two masters. It is physically impossible. Both God and money demand your full attention, your full loyalty. You cannot sit on the fence and say "I can serve God and pour my life, thought, and attention into making loads of money." You must choose either one or the other as the master of your life.

The apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy gives a similar strongly worded warning against the worship of money. 1 Tim 6:9-10 says "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." In the world's eye, in the venture-backed high tech industry, even in our neighborhoods and schools, the attitude is, "money is king." We've heard it said, "money may not be everything, but it is way ahead of whatever is in second place!"

This is the dangerous and corrupting influence of worshipping money. Does money have an unhealthy grasp on you? This is a provocative question, and only you can answer for yourself. I want to encourage you to think about these lessons today as I close this morning with a story of faithful stewardship that led to a great life of service for God.

This is the true story of a young 18-year old man who was studying and working for a doctor, intending to use his knowledge of medicine as a missionary in the future. His Chinese name was Dai DeSung. He was poor and often

lacked money to pay for rent and food, but trusted God to take care of his needs. During one bleak winter night, he met a destitute man in the street who asked him for money for his desperately ill wife. The sight of the starving man and story about his family broke Dai DeSung's heart. All he had left was a small amount of money, and he was out of food himself. He struggled for a few minutes, then gave his last bit of money to the grateful man and went on his way. The next day someone sent him a pair of nice used gloves, and folded inside one glove was money—four times the amount he had given the destitute man.²

What did Dai DeSung learn? He learned as a young adult how to use God's money faithfully and generously, to bless those less fortunate than himself. God will turn this act of obedient stewardship to His glory. This lesson was to carry him through the rest of his life. Dai DeSung's English name was James Hudson Taylor, and he later became the most influential missionary to China, founding China Inland Mission, introducing 800 missionaries & 125 schools to China, and bringing tens of thousands of Chinese to God's saving grace.

Hudson Taylor had an attitude of faithfulness and a will to act. He started small, being obedient to God to bless people right around him. To him were entrusted greater things and true riches in Heaven where tens of thousands of friends greet him. This is how to be a wise and faithful steward.

Let me close by reading an excerpt from a hymn written by Frances Havergall.

Take my life and let it be

Consecrated, Lord to Thee...

Take my silver and my gold

Not a mite would I withhold...

Take my self and I will be

Ever only, all for Thee

Ever only, all for Thee

1. John Hanneman, PBCC sermon Jan 16, 1994, <http://www.pbcc.org/sermons/media/932.html>

2. Joyce Volmer Brown, *Courageous Christians* (Chicago, Moody Press, 2000), 97. Adapted from the story of Hudson Taylor.