

Shrewd Manager

An Exposition of Luke 16:1-9

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Of all the parables Jesus taught, the parable of the shrewd manager is most puzzling. For that reason, numerous interpretations have been given. Each one is trying to explain the teaching of the parable in the light of its ethical implications. The difficulty which confronts the reader is that the parable is placed within a Jewish setting and reflects Jewish practices. The setting with all its points must be reconstructed in order to gain a clear picture and to understand the teaching of the parable.

Setting

Repeatedly the Israelite was told by God not to charge his fellow-man interest on money, food, or anything else that could earn interest. "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest" (Exod. 22:25; also see Lev. 25:36; Deut. 15:8; 23:19). God taught his people social responsibility and forbade usury. The implication was that the usurer must be considered a robber.

Human nature being what it is, practices developed in the course of time which aimed at circumventing the law of God. Rich people, for example, would appoint a trustworthy person as a manager. Such a manager was given full power to act in the name of his master. He was responsible to his employer, but should he resort to usury, not the master but the manager could be brought to trial. At all times, a rich person stood to gain from the usurious transactions his manager negotiated. Should such transactions be contested in court, the rich would go free and the manager had to take full responsibility.

The manager, however, was given ways to protect himself which even the Pharisees and teachers of the law condoned, and against which the magistrate could do nothing except recognize them as necessary evils. The manager and a borrower drew up a statement in which the debt and interest were listed in one total figure. According to the religious leaders, the following note revealed usury, and he who practiced it could be brought to court: "I will pay Reuben 10 *kor* of wheat on the first day of Nisan and if I do not, then I will pay 4 *kor* of wheat annually in addition." The following note was considered legal: "I owe Reuben 14 *kor* of wheat." What the note did not say was that the borrower had received only 10 *kor* and had to pay the balance in interest. For example, in AD 33-34, Herod Agrippa I faced near bankruptcy and instructed his freed-man Marsyas to borrow money from someone. Marsyas went to a banker who forced him to draw up a bond stating that he had received 20,000 Attic drachmas. In reality, however, he received 2,500 drachmas less. The interest was added to the principle sum, and the borrower would have to pay the full amount even though he had received a considerably smaller amount. The bond itself did not provide details.

Interest rates for borrowed wheat went as high as 20 per cent, with an added five per cent for insurance against price fluctuations and depreciation of the value of the product. If the commodity happened to be olive oil, the interest rate was 80 per cent plus 20 per cent insurance cost, totaling 100 per cent. The risk in lending olive oil was great. Olive crops are rather unpredictable and the quality of olive oil, because of the size and quality of the olives, varies from year to year. Also, cheap oils extracted from other sources could be added to olive oil, and methods to determine its purity were inefficient.

We are very pleased to be able to publish one of Professor Kistemaker's masterly analyses of the parables. Another will follow soon.



A manager was given a position of trust and confidence. He controlled his master's assets and was considered a member of his household. He represented his master and was given full authority to deal with debtors as he saw fit. Debtors, therefore, had to abide by the stipulations laid down by the manager. They were responsible to him alone.

Should the manager exhibit incompetence, inefficiency, or untrustworthiness, the master would summon him to give an account and afterward summarily dismiss him. The manager had no recourse to outside help. He would have to leave his master's employ with no possessions of his own, and he would not be welcome by colleagues.

Story

Jesus related a story, which could very well have actually occurred, of a rich man who had appointed a manager to look after his business. He had placed complete confidence in this manager, but when he learned that the manager was wasting his possessions, he called him in and told him to get his books audited and to find other employment.

The manager knew that the charges brought against him were true, that he had abused his master's trust, and that he could not plead for mercy. He knew that a successor would take his place. What did the future hold for the manager? He had to depend on his own ingenuity. He was not physically strong enough to do manual labour, and begging was out of the question. He talked to himself, considering possibilities and alternatives. Suddenly he called out, "I've got it!" He knew what to do. He would make his master's debtors indebted to him, so that upon his dismissal they would welcome him into their homes.

He called in the debtors one by one. Two examples are given. The first came and the manager asked him how much he owed the master. He answered, "One hundred measures of oil." That was a sizeable quantity of oil, amounting to 868 gallons or 3,946 litres. One olive tree bears about 120 kilograms of olives or 25 litres of olive oil. The amount of olive oil owed by the debtor would come from an orchard with some 150 trees or more. The manager told the debtor to take the bill, which stated the amount owed, and to reduce it by half.

The next debtor was asked the same question, "How much do you owe?" And his answer was, "One hundred measures of wheat." This is the equivalent of a thousand bushels, which corresponds to what one hundred acres yielded in that day. The manager told him to take his bill and to reduce the amount by 20 measures.

In both instances large sums of money were involved. Yet on the authority of the manager, who already received notice of dismissal, they changed the figures on the bills. We may assume that other debtors did the same.

The debtors wrote out the amounts because they knew that the interest rate for borrowed olive oil was 100 per

cent and for borrowed wheat 25 per cent. They gladly changed the totals to the amounts they actually owed the master. They did not falsify figures; rather, in their own handwriting they indicated how much they had to pay. In short, because the usurious rates were lifted, honesty prevailed.

When the manager presented the books to his master, who subsequently learned about the altered transactions, he was praised because he had acted shrewdly. The manager was in control of the situation, not the master. Words of praise were conveyed because the manager had assured himself the hospitality and generosity of the debtors, had paved the way for his successor by removing any ill will on the part of the debtors, and had given his master an opportunity to praise him for removing the usurious rates and to show himself as a religious and law-abiding citizen. The manager must have placed the master in a most favourable light if he spoke words of praise.

"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." The word *dishonest* cannot apply to the manager's actions toward the debtors, because then the clause "because he had acted shrewdly" would be contradictory. Instead the word characterises the manager's earlier life when he squandered his master's possessions. The characterisation is the same as that for the unjust judge, who in the course of time had established a reputation for being unjust. When he spoke justice in behalf of the widow, he certainly did not do her injustice. Likewise the manager, because of his previous career of shady deals, is called dishonest, even though the instructions he later gave the debtors were honorable and praiseworthy in the eyes of the public. The master could not go to the debtors and apply the usurious rates earlier transacted by the manager, for then he would be a usurer who could be brought to justice. The masters praised the manager for his shrewdness.

Application

What precisely does the parable mean? The story of the dishonest manager, clarified in the light of the original Jewish setting, still conveys a message which is relevant today. What, then, is that message? Jesus summed it up in a rather comprehensive statement by saying, "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."

The point of the parable is that the manager, who had gained a reputation of being dishonest and who realised that his future was at stake, sought approval by being honest and charitable to his master's debtors. He did not cling to worldly wealth, but generously gave it to those who were indebted to his master. Nevertheless, the money

which he liberally gave to the debtors was not his, and in a sense not even his master's. Likewise the people of the light should not set their heart on worldly possessions. They can afford to be generous and give some of their assets away. They can afford to do so because these assets do not belong to them but to God. When they donate money to the poor they are redistributing the wealth God has entrusted to them. Jesus put the same truth in these words, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19, 20). And what Jesus taught finds its roots in many forms and ways in the teaching of the Old Testament. David in the presence of God's people prayed, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chron. 29:14). By means of the parable of the shrewd manager, Jesus consels his followers to give their money away as much as possible so that they may gain God's favour and be welcomed to live in his house eternally.

A point of contrast, though not expressed, is implied here. Indirectly Jesus says: the dishonest manager, by reducing the amounts his master's debtors owed, looked to the future; how much more should God's people share their possessions and look toward their eternal home. God's people must use their earthly possessions for spiritual investments just as worldly people use their money to obtain material gains. The time comes when money is a thing of the past. When death comes, man's spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccles. 12:7). God welcomes all his people who have not set their hearts on earthly treasures but have gathered treasures in heaven.

The people of the world know how to use worldly possessions and apply materialistic ways. Suddenly, however, they may abandon dishonest standards knowing that in the long run honesty pays. On the other hand, Christians who have learned the standard of God's law are often inclined to relax and modify Christian principles. They want the best of two worlds: they want to have the Christian faith couched in the comfort of an affluent society; they want to be loved by God and at the same time be praised by man. Jesus said, "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." If the people who do not profess to serve God realise that his standards are fundamental, should not those who profess to be his people uphold the law of God, practice what they preach, and show by word and deed that money will ultimately fail but heavenly riches will last forever? In his pastoral letter, James admonishes Christians who opt for a double life. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

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