

## THE GOSPEL OF LUKE (THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER)

Luke 16: 1-6 | Luke Knight

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The priest of a small parish explained to his congregation that the church needed funds for a new roof, so he asked them to consider being more than generous, and offered whoever gave the most money the chance to pick three hymns. After the collection plate was passed around, the priest glanced down to notice someone had put in a large roll of cash totaling \$1,000. He immediately shared his joy with the church, saying he'd like to personally thank the person who gave the large donation. A very quiet, elderly, saintly lady in the back shyly raised her hand. The priest asked her to come to the front, and she slowly she made her way towards him. He told her how wonderful it was that she'd been so generous, and in thanks asked her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation. Pointing to the three most handsome men in the church, she said, "I'll take him, him and him." <sup>1</sup> Some people are clever with money. That's one of things we hear in our text today, Jesus' parable of the shrewd manager.

### The Setting (Luke's material themes)

As you've probably noticed this isn't one of Jesus' easily accessible parables, in fact it's been a notorious challenge for scholars over the years. It comes before a number of sayings from Jesus about money, but as we've been learning, the gospels are best understood not cut up into little bits and pieces, but taken as a whole. So this is a good example of why reading the parables in light of regular themes in the gospels is not only helpful, but crucial. Interpreting a parable like this in isolation could get us into trouble, like reading it as an endorsement from Jesus to go away this week and rip off your employer. Tempting as that may be, it's likely not what Jesus' intends for his disciples hear.

That's probably our first clue, Jesus tells this parable *to his disciples*. But it also seems the Pharisees are still within earshot, as they chime in again shortly in the narrative, since Jesus had been addressing them directly prior with his lost and found parables. Luke also notes later that the Pharisees, "loved their money", which is another clue, following the parable with more sayings from Jesus about integrity, wealth and faithfulness. Though this is instruction for his disciples, it's not private subject matter, as the Pharisees seem to be under Jesus' microscope too. With that in mind, a question: why does Jesus bring up money all of a sudden, especially following those lost and found parables? Why the sudden turn? A better question is whether or not *this is in fact* a sudden turn in the first place. If we're to take the whole of Luke's gospel as interconnected, we'll notice that Luke's narrative has been covering themes about provision and trust all along. These days we tend to draw lines between the spiritual and material, but the Bible doesn't, and often does the opposite, especially Luke's gospel. This is the gospel that time and again asks us to consider what our relationship with material things says about the state of our hearts and our devotion to God; the gospel that reminds us routinely of the cost of discipleship to Jesus. A few examples can be seen simply by flipping through Luke 9 to Luke 16 alone. Jesus sends out his twelve disciples, instructing them to take nothing along but to depend on God and those who welcome them (9.1-6). He tells his disciples to feed thousands of people with nothing more than a basket of bread and fish, and God multiplies the meal (9.10-20). Jesus says his kingdom is about dependence, not on family, but on God first, that though animals have homes "the son of man has no place to lay his head." (9.57-62). Again, he sends out more disciples telling them to take nothing with them (10.1-16). We're given the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the presumed "evil Samaritan" becomes an example of generosity and mercy (10.30-37). We have the parable of the rich fool, the parable of the king counting the cost

before going to war, and then talk about the cost of being a disciple (12-14). Then of course we have the preceding three parables to this one (the lost sheep, coin, and brothers) all of which are about what things “cost” and God’s mercy. So there’s a very strong theme in the Gospel of Luke of Jesus instructing his followers about the *value of things* in his kingdom, how his followers should relate to material resources, along with an increasing tension with the scribes and Pharisees when Jesus takes shots at their relation to wealth. Jesus isn’t roaming around, then, spreading a kind of spiritualism disconnected from the real world of cost, sacrifice and trust. As we’ve just remembered last week, Good Friday did not come cheap.

Luke’s gospel is shot through with micro and macro-economic effects. We find the same theme in Luke’s later work in the book of Acts, where economics and societal health is drastically shaped by the gospel in various towns and cities. When Jesus’ followers arrive in Greece to share the gospel, one upset businessman named Jason remarks that these people, “have caused trouble all over the world, and now they have come here...” (Acts 17). So it’s not that Jesus or his followers are spouting a new disembodied spiritual philosophy. The gospel and those who bring it are seen as troublemakers because they upset material norms within many communities, like how people relate to their bodies or to money or governments. Jesus didn’t offer folks a free course on mindfulness that will cost them nothing and promise them everything. The world into which Jesus’ kingdom was arriving was *our world*, full of dirt, sex, debt and sweat. Fair warning to us then: following Jesus is no cheap endeavor. And, as the Pharisees found out, if we’re wealthy and religious, Jesus makes demands on our dealings with money and our dealings with him. Some of us have a little more than others, but most of us are still among the most affluent people on the planet today. So, sometimes when I hear Jesus getting into money matters, I feel a bit like Jason in the book of Acts myself, “Don’t start causing trouble in my little world too!”

### The Parable

Let’s talk about the parable of the shrewd manager itself. First, notice that both characters are shady. The manager is shady in dealing with his boss’ business (“wasting his possessions”), so much so that he’s getting fired. But the boss (or “rich man”) is also suspect, since scholars tell us that gaining interest via material goods was a common loophole used in that in that society, debt constraints being strict in that community. So, when the crooked manager changes the bills of his boss’ debtors and is then commended, the boss is not commending the manager’s dishonesty but his *shrewdness*. The soon to be unemployed manager has not only made himself some friends on the way out the door, but has also put his boss in an awkward position. If the boss wants to claim the manager has defrauded him further, he’d have to own up to his own shady dealings with his debtors and the unfair interest he’s been charging. The manager may also have given the boss a good reputation by lowering the bills as the debtors might assume the manager was working out the boss’ wishes. The shady boss, like it or not, has to sit back and admit he’s been bested by his shady manager. With no honour among thieves, it’s all about clever maneuvers. That’s the gist of the parable.

### The Meaning

Sometimes Jesus will let a parable hang in mid-air, other times he’ll apply it directly. In this case he applies it, “the people of this world are more shrewd with 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.” (16.8-9).

What on earth does Jesus mean? First, let’s knock off what he clearly doesn’t mean. This is not a parable telling his disciples to be clever or even underhanded with money to shore up a future security. The phrase “welcomed into eternal dwellings”, might trip us up. Is Jesus telling his disciples to use money to buy a better bit of heaven? That may be too simplistic a reading, also running against much of the rest of scripture.

Jesus is probably getting at a few things. First, this is a parable of contrast. Jesus tells a story with crooked characters to tease out the point about *shrewdness*, even a kind of worldly wisdom. If we were to oversimplify the parable we might say that Jesus is telling his disciples (with the money-loving Pharisees in earshot) *to be smart about their resources in light of eternity*. This is how parables sometimes work, asking us to consider the principle, less the example. In light of eternity and Jesus' present kingdom, are his disciples thinking wisely about their stuff? Are they learning to live with a *kingdom-shrewdness*? In a moment Jesus will warn about money's tendency to master when it's loved it or hoarded. So, be money smart, says Jesus, under a definition which may be new to you – an eternal definition. You can't serve two masters, you can't worship God *and* money, so pay close attention to your dealings with both.

Second, zooming out again to consider the theme of money and the heart throughout the Gospel of Luke, there's the question here of what that *kingdom-shrewdness* might look like. For Jesus, the instinct to hoard, or placing confidence in wealth is simply foolish. As we see in other passages, the wise instruction for his followers is not to trust and worship money, but to trust and worship the Creator of all material things. All of Jesus' teachings on money are about the avoidance of idolatry which leads to death, and the invitation to trust God as the source of provision. That same essence is drawn out in this parable when Jesus instructs his followers to think about dealings with money with eternity in mind. One scholar says that Jesus is urging his followers to invest in "homes that last". That's the aforementioned "eternal dwellings", which sounds similar to Jesus' teaching of storing up "treasure in heaven" in Matthew's gospel. So Jesus is not only warning about money's potential to master his disciples, but challenging them to be proactive in their handling of it. The instruction is to avoid tying their energies and resources up in ways that don't align with Jesus and his kingdom, as it's the only kingdom which will last in the long run.

Third, even though Jesus is giving his disciples this parable, as we said the Pharisees are also under the microscope, as there will be a back and forth in the next verses. When we think about the preceding parable, of the two lost brothers, what is the elder brother concerned about when he gets hot and bothered about the party thrown for his younger brother? He's not concerned about his father's affections or reputation, but what he thinks he's owed. If the older brother is meant to stand for Israel's religious leadership, then Jesus is calling their devotion to God into question. Here in Luke 16, things get heated. People can be touchy about God, money and security. Why? Material matters are always matters of the heart. So, this next parable of the crooked manger may be as much a teaching for Jesus' disciples as it is a warning, or even a knock, to the Pharisees. By way of this parable about crooked businesspeople, Jesus may be saying that as wise as the Pharisees think they are with all their rules and all their wealth, they're actually *foolish*. Your rules won't save you, your self-imposed self-righteousness won't save you, and all your money won't secure you. What master are you really serving? Invest in what will last. Be smart about this.

## Our Questions

So what on earth does this parable have to say to us? Well, first it's one of those parables that seems very much for the first audience, and the churches reading the gospel as it circulated. As the good news was spreading, as churches popped all over the years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the first Christians were challenged to think about how their relation to money in light of their devotion to Jesus. Under persecution or hardship would they hoard, or share? Would these new communities follow the lead of the scribes and Pharisees who "loved their money", giving people who had more resources special attention or privilege, or would they follow Jesus' lead and make room for everyone equally? Jesus had been very clear, they had to count the cost of following with integrity day in and day out. We read all about that in the early chapters of the book of Acts. This kind of message was no doubt as challenging for Jesus' disciples to hear first-hand, as it was for them to teach and model in those first churches.

So this is a parable for then. But to say this isn't a parable for now is too easy, and maybe too tempting given the subject matter! Who can say they're entirely wise when it comes to God, their resources, choices and trust? Who doesn't find security and wealth a very tempting god to serve? We get awkward when the Bible gets direct about money or sex for a reason – they are formidable idols easily served in secrecy.

A thousand practical questions tumble out of this parable. What should Jesus' followers avoid? What does investment in "homes that last" look like day to day? What are kingdom money-smarts? We could think about that personally, or even as a church. For example: how are we using our energies or resources as a church? Are we going in the direction of Jesus' kingdom, or are we tied up in superfluous or foolish investments of time, energy and resources? Do we draw all our confidence from a sound financial report at an AGM, or from the God who gives and takes in his sovereign wisdom? There's an urgency in this parable, and it's right for Jesus' people to feel that urgency. Don't waste resources on things that won't matter in the eternal-kingdom. We all have choices, and can be smart or silly about our life's investments. As the Templar Knight in *The Last Crusade* says to Indiana Jones, "choose wisely". There's some encouragement in studying the book of Acts further. How did the first Christians share what they had and provide for one another? One of the great joys in being a pastor is seeing how people share what they can in Christian community Time, gifts, money, physical assets. What a joy to contribute together to the Langley Memorial Hospital. And just recently a family in our church opened their home to host Alpha, where people new to faith could be hosted well and explore. We could share many other examples. Often it's not about what we have or don't have, but what we do with it.

One of the things we should hear from Jesus in this teaching, and in any of his words on resources and trust, is that money and our relation to it matters. Jesus doesn't teach that God wants our money. If that were the case, Jesus would be no different than the countless human enterprises with designs on our bank accounts. *Jesus raises much higher stakes*: God has designs on our whole being, including our resources, material or otherwise. Our dealings with money are simply a gauge of our heart's alignment with our Creator. The challenge from Jesus, the cost of discipleship, is to put resources, relationships, sex, family, ambition and goals in their place. As we drive along, Jesus says to put those things in the back seat (or maybe the trunk), not in the passenger seat, giving us overbearing directions. Jesus is the one buckling up in that passenger seat, providing trustworthy navigation at every turn.

We hold five Core Values as a church, and they're not simply intended to sit as a few nice words on a wall. Real authenticity with God and one another is a daring thing. Community in an age of rampant individualism is difficult. Generosity in a society obsessed with materialism and entertainment is a challenge. Growing in maturity to become more like a servant-hearted, sacrificial Jesus is hard. Recognizing and Releasing our time, gifts and resources will take intention when it's tempting to hoard with a scarcity mind-set. But we're trying to hear Jesus' through these values, to go his way in this place, at this time.

The message today from the parable today is really rather simple: We're all a bit foolish, we can all be easily deceived, so let's be smart about this and follow Jesus in his wisdom by adopting an eternal perspective, aligning with his character and kingdom. Some of us are especially money smart, but as his followers we're all called by Jesus to grow daily in *kingdom-smarts*, and to choose wisely.