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July 20, 2025

### **“Re-Imagine the World: Shrewd Manager Parable”**

Luke 16: 1-9

Today we are talking about one of the most difficult parables of Jesus. It comes right after 3 nicer and easier to understand parables:

- The lost sheep (who doesn't love that pastoral scene where the shepherd goes off to rescue the one stray little bugger?)
- The lost coin (and you can just picture the woman stooping to look under everything to find the small coin that is so precious to her!)
- The lost boy – or the prodigal (the love of that father is so heartwarming!)

And now we turn to the Shrewd Manager story. Already it is difficult. That word “shrewd” isn't exactly heartwarming or inspiring. It is the story of a man who loses his job because of mismanagement and dishonesty and then figures out a slick way to save his hind end by calling up his boss's clients and cutting deals with them. Are you feeling all spiritually warm and fuzzy yet?

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position 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 dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and*

*make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

Luke 6:1-9

This is an all-too-familiar story in our own culture – the story of corporate crime. Think Enron, Bernie Madoff, and the WorldCom accounting scandals. This is why we have seen a change during our lifetimes in corporate protocol when an employee is terminated. Employees who quit or were being let go for any reason beside fraud used to work several more weeks in their position. They often trained replacements and helped their companies in the transition. No longer. Whether you are honest or not, many employees are told to leave at the moment they are given notice. “Clean out your desk. Turn in your badge and phone. I’ll walk you out the door. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200.”

The man in our story was summarily let go in this way. And he began to panic. It didn’t take him long to figure out that manual labor was not his gig. And begging was beneath him. So he ingratiated himself to all the people with accounts payable to his former boss that he could recall. He slashed their debt and collected only a portion of what they owed. They, in turn, must have been grateful. Perhaps they would help him when he finally admitted that he was without income. He was trying his best to become their close friend.

And then Jesus instructs his disciples to “make friends for yourselves through dishonest wealth”. What?!! Preacher Tom Long paraphrases this verse by attributing to Jesus these words: *“I wish the children of light, I wish the people of God, I wish the ministers of the church were as shrewd for the gospel as the wheeler-dealers out there in the world are shrewd for themselves.”* In other words, *there are people out there in the culture who get up every morning scheming for a buck, focusing every ounce of energy on feathering their nests, working in overdrive to save themselves and to scramble to the top of the heap. “I wish God’s people,” Jesus says, “would be just as focused and energetic for the beloved community.”*

Another commentator wrote, “To gain friends by means of money is to use it in such a way that others appreciate you for your exercise of stewardship, your kindness and generosity.” In other words, possessions are a responsibility. The way we use them is a test of character, values and stewardship.

I see my cousin Brad only once every few years. He lives on the east coast with his family and sometimes comes to Kansas City or Wichita on business – but not very often. A few years ago, he called our daughter, Erin, because he was going to be in Kansas City and offered to take her to dinner. Because he was on business, he told her that a couple her age would also be dining with them. Erin agreed and the 4 of them met up. The other woman in the group is a jewelry designer and as they looked at some of her creations, Erin mentioned that I would really like her designs. (Erin didn’t say, “but they are too expensive”). My cousin Brad encouraged Erin to get something for me, but Erin protested and said that although I had a June birthday, she didn’t usually spend very much on gifts. Brad jumped on that and insisted that they share the cost of the bracelet. When Erin protested, his reply was, “So you are going to deny me the opportunity to treat my cousin Robin to something she would like?” Brad and I have never exchanged gifts – or even cards – for our birthdays.

Several weeks later, when I called to thank him for such a thoughtful and lovely gift, he told me that he has received so much pleasure thinking of how I would respond when I opened the bracelet and that he has laughed aloud thinking about the surprise. He expressed the absolute joy he had in sharing a secret with Erin and the fun he had in choosing the piece. He had more to say about the joy in giving than I had to say about receiving it! (And Erin was right that it was just a perfect style and design that was unique and something I would treasure).

Brad and Erin’s way of spending money that day showed something more about their values than their money... they were willing to part with more money than was prudent because of the joy of giving.

For many of us, money means self-sufficiency, independence, security, and the opportunity to enjoy life. Many of us strive for that. How many of us see money

as a means to altruism and the joy of giving it away? When a check comes into our account, is the first thought “Woohoo! Just think how I can give this away!”? When we find a bit extra at the end of the month, do we celebrate with “Now, which non-profit needs this the most?” When our investments give a higher dividend than usual, do we immediately plan how to share that bonus with someone else?

Another quick illustration: last week, when someone in our church heard that a couple in our church was moving, he wrote a quick note to me that if that couple needed something with their move, he would be happy to help them with some extra cash to buy it!

This parable is about the roots of our hearts. Where do those roots reach? What nourishes them? If we want to understand what God intends, we cannot enjoy pleasures while we ignore the needs of others.

Then Jesus says in our parable, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” What is Jesus saying about money?

- \* Hold up a store so you can help Family Promise?
- \* Cheat on your cable bill in order to have a bit to hand to the homeless veteran on the corner?

No. The phrase “dishonest wealth” is not a very good translation. It might be translated “the money of this unrighteous age.” You see, it is not the money that is corrupt; it is the culture that is corrupt. If we invest in the culture and what the culture values our money will eventually lose its worth. Invest it instead, Jesus seems to say, in what is eternal; in what is holy; in what is God’s. Then it will last.

Jesus puts the emphasis on “making friends”. This is not simple charity Jesus is suggesting. He is advocating that we invest what we have in relationships.

As you may know, I served on the Board of Interfaith Ministries – now HumanKind - which serves our unhoused neighbors, for many years. One of the stories I like to tell from there is about a man we’ll call “Jack” (not his actual name) who was in

his 50's, has a pleasant smile, a slow manner of speaking, but seems easygoing. Jack has worked all his adult life, but physical disabilities, along with some learning problems, caused him to lose his job and eventually his home.

Jack then moved to Inter-Faith Inn. He worked with his case manager to apply for housing and disability. When his housing voucher was approved, Jack moved to one of the IFM apartments. He liked the security and the fact that he'd still have a case manager. He often told staff how grateful he was to everyone who donated to Inter-Faith Ministries.

A couple of months after he moved to his apartment, Jack learned that his disability had been approved. When he received the retroactive payment, he went to the Inn one more time - to give the case manager there \$2,500! He explained that he knew firsthand how important our shelters were to the folks in them, and that he also wanted to help now that he was able to. "It's a one-time gift, because from now on I'll be on a tight budget," he said, "but this was money I wasn't counting on, so I have to share it with you."

Our lives will be brief. Our money will not last. Shrewd managers know that relationships are the best thing you can build. And investing in relationships that help others – well, that's a shrewd way to help the kin-dom of God!

***Resources Used:***

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Scott, Bernard Brandon. "Re-Imagine the World". Polebridge Press. 2001.

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