

Luke 16:1-18
The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

¹ Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

³ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶ “ ‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

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. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

More About Money and Wealth

¹⁰ “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ “No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.”

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.

Additional Teachings

¹⁶ “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John [the Baptist]. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. ¹⁷ It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

¹⁸ “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Luke 16:1-18

1. Who did the Rich Man's creditors think was being generous to them? Why would the shrewd manager gain from lowering the bills of his master's creditors?
2. After the manager lowered the bills, what choices did the master have?
3. What does "shrewd" mean? Is it bad to be shrewd?
4. What are some possible interpretations of this parable, especially Verses 8-9? (Hint: there are at least 6 interpretations, perhaps more.)
5. Is Jesus commending dishonesty? (16:8)
6. What is Jesus saying about (or to) "the children of the light?" (16:8, Matt 10:16)
7. What's the bottom line meaning of Verse 16:9?
8. Verses 10 to 13 almost sound like proverbs of the New Testament. How do these relate to sayings in the "Wisdom books?" (Job 36:18, Psalm 37:16, 49:20, 62:10, Prov 8:18, 11:28, 23:4-5, 28:20, Eccl 5:10)
9. Verse 16:13 is one of the best-known Biblical teachings about money. What is the other one? (1 Timothy 6:10, Hebrews 13:5)
10. Why is it so difficult to keep a proper (Biblical) perspective about money? How do you need to change your attitude toward wealth?
11. Jesus' statement in Luke 16:17 is very difficult to reconcile with current Christian beliefs. Jesus basically says that every one of the Laws of God passed down through Moses (spelled out in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) is in effect forever. How can we explain this? (Matthew 5:17)
12. Luke 16:18. What should be our attitude toward adultery? Toward divorce? How do you think Jesus would want you to treat Christians who are divorced?

This parable is difficult for some people to interpret, since on the face of it Jesus appears to be commending dishonest behavior.

For others using a broader context, it is less difficult. For example, Luke 15: 1-3 adds to the narrative, showing that Scribes and Pharisees are part of the target audience to whom the parable was addressed: not just the disciples. This is denoted in Luke 16:1 by "also" which is from a Greek word pronounced "kai": and when written prior to "disciples", shows they were addressed "also" in addition to someone else. If the "also" was placed (in the Greek) after "disciples" it would refer to something said in addition to something else. Readers who don't include Luke 15: 1-3 can find the parable difficult if not impossible to understand.

At one level the meaning is straightforward enough, and is provided by Jesus himself - "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves", with the additional application of using advantages in this world to gain for yourself favor in the next.

This additional application was espoused by most early church writers, as evidenced by the following quote from Asterius of Amasea:

"When, therefore, any one anticipating his end and his removal to the next world, lightens the burden of his sins by good deeds, either by canceling the obligations of debtors, or by supplying the poor with abundance, by giving what belongs to the Lord, he gains many friends, who will attest his goodness before the Judge, and secure him by their testimony a place of happiness."

The seeming commendation of dishonesty is usually explained in one of two ways. It is either pointed out that Jesus 'commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, not the shrewd manager for his dishonesty' - i.e. the manager's principle is the right one, even if he goes about it in the wrong way. An alternative is to interpret the story as not involving deceit by introducing elements not present in the text. For example, it has been asserted that records of a loan were sometimes inflated in order to get round the judaic prohibition against usury; thus a loan of four hundred gallons of oil might be written up as eight hundred, so that the loan would appear to be without interest. The manager thus might be reducing the loans to their original amount - entirely honestly but no more pleasingly to his master.

The editors of the New Jerusalem Bible state "It was the custom for a steward, or responsible servant, to take commission on all sales of his master's goods this was his only means of making a salary. In the present case the original loan was presumably fifty measures (400 gallons in the translation above) of olive oil and eighty measures (800 bushels in the translation above) of wheat. In reducing the debtors' bills, he is not depriving his master of anything, but only sacrificing his own immediate interests by forgoing his legitimate commission. It is for this that he is praised as 'astute.'"

The Jesus Seminar rates this as one of the fifteen red (or authentic) sayings of Jesus. Its portrayal of a deceitful man as the clever hero is the sort of reversal typical of Jesus' authentic parables. They rejected, however, the explanatory ending after the parable itself. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure also features a clever, deceitful hero.

Additional Notes for Leaders

NLT:

8 “The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with the world around them than are the children of the light. 9 Here’s the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.

New Life:

8 Then the rich man said that this sinful manager had been wise to plan for himself for the days ahead. For the people of the world are wiser in their day than the children of light.

9 “I tell you, make friends for yourselves by using the riches of the world that are so often used in wrong ways. So when riches are a thing of the past, friends may receive you into a home that will be forever.

Note that the creditors were probably under the impression that the Rich Man was the one being generous with them and lowering the amount they owed him. But the shrewd manager was hoping the creditors would welcome him into their homes and give him hospitality when he lost his job and was in need. He was hoping the creditors would honor the messenger who gives them good news.

The Rich Man then commends the “dishonest” manager because he acted “shrewdly.” The shrewd manager left the Rich Man with two not-very-good choices. First, he could expose the dishonest manager for acting independently of his wishes and tell his creditors they still owed the full amount of their bills. If he does this he would appear selfish and greedy (even though it would be within his rights). Secondly, he could let the action of the manager stand and receive the praise given him by his creditors (and perhaps others within the community) for his generosity. He would learn from his mistake of letting a dishonest manager act on his behalf. Next time he would fire him on the spot.

In this parable, Jesus clearly is not praising dishonesty. He is praising a dishonest person for being shrewd, not a shrewd person for being dishonest. Is it bad to be shrewd? No. To be shrewd is to be keen witted, clever, or discerning in practical affairs. The dictionary equates “shrewd” to “common sense.” It is a mistake to associate being shrewd with bad things, like being selfish, stingy, greedy, or hard hearted.

Every commentary I’ve found admits this is a difficult passage to interpret. Here are a few theories as to why the master (in the parable—not Jesus) commended his actions:

1) Equate dishonesty with being “streetwise.” In the Message, Eugene Peterson translates Verses 8-9 as follows: “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

2) Some scholars believe the manager cut out the interest that was being improperly charged by the Rich Man. In those days, records of a loan were sometimes inflated in order to get round the Judaic prohibition against usury (Deut 23:19); thus a loan of four hundred gallons of oil might be written up as eight hundred, so that the loan would appear to be without interest. The manager thus might be reducing the loans to their original amount - entirely honestly but not pleasing to his master.

3) Others believe the manager eliminated his own commission. This would not have affected the master negatively. The editors of the New Jerusalem Bible state "It was the custom for a steward to take a commission on all sales of his master's goods as this was his only means of making a salary. In the present case the original loan was presumably 400 gallons of olive oil and 800 bushels of wheat. In reducing the debtors' bills, he is not depriving his master of anything, but only sacrificing his own immediate interests by forgoing his legitimate commission. It is for this that he is praised as 'astute.'"

4) It could be a combination of 2 and 3. That is the manager jacked up the price without the master's knowledge and now he was deducting the excess profits he himself had tacked onto their accounts, earning the gratitude of the debtors and the admiration of the master. The master is not being cheated and he commends the manager's shrewdness in getting in the good graces of his customers who owed him money.

5) Another theory is that although the master was affected financially, the incident improved his image as well as the manager's. Why else do business owners have sales?

6) Jesus is not commending the manager's methods, but rather his motives. Even as a wicked manager, he has the foresight and 'wisdom' to plan ahead and look out for his own future. He knows that his job is ending, so he prepares a path forward so he will be provided for and looked after by others. This leads into Verse 9 about being welcomed into eternal dwellings. Here, Jesus says, if even the wicked can plan for their future in their selfish and narrow minded ways, are you planning for your future? Are you shrewd enough and clever enough, and do you have enough foresight to plan for the real future?

No matter what interpretation you put on it, we can't ignore Jesus' statement in Verse 8: "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." In other words, if a crook can figure out that his own life is better when he gives away money to benefit others, then why can't the people of the light manage to get it right?

The point is not to be dishonest, but to say, "Look, how come you religious folks are so dense that you can't see that using money to benefit others is simply the best way to use earth's wealth? Even dishonest managers know that you need to have some philanthropy in your financial dealings." I think it relates to Matthew 10:16 "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

Today, 2,000 years after this was written, it is still true that the people who only live for this world, with their worldly motives and their worldly methods, are often more shrewd in managing their lives than are the people of the light, we Christians who have much nobler motives and methods at our disposal. The people of this world have their 5-year business plans, their schemes to reduce costs and their strategies to maximize output. They study, work, save, calculate, assess, and predict, in order to achieve their aims. They seize every opportunity that is available, and

when none is available they create opportunities. They will often sacrifice not only their time and energy, but even their health and relationships, in order to achieve their ambitions. They are often very shrewd. And what about us, we who are called ‘the people of the light’: what enlightened plans, what carefully thought-out strategies, what concerted efforts, what noble sacrifices are we engaged in to further the work of God’s kingdom?

In Verse 9, Jesus is also saying that earthly money has no eternal value, so if you’re going to have it, you should be using it for making life better for others. At first, the dishonest steward just squandered the money. Then, after he was caught, he wised up and used it to make others happy. Granted he did it for his own benefit, but even in his warped mind he could see that things would go better for him if he made it better for others.

Jesus is not saying that the ends justify the means. He is trying to say, “Even the crooks of the world know that money is a tool and not an end in itself, why can’t you people of faith understand that?”

This, then, is the meaning of Verse 9: Use whatever wealth you have wisely, to do good, to relieve suffering, to support God’s people and advance the work of the kingdom. When these resources are gone, and earthly life is finished, there will be a welcome for you in heaven from the very people you have assisted.

From the Message:

God Sees Behind Appearances

10-13 Jesus went on to make these comments:

If you’re honest in small things,
you’ll be honest in big things;
If you’re a crook in small things,
you’ll be a crook in big things.
If you’re not honest in small jobs,
who will put you in charge of the store?
No worker can serve two bosses:
He’ll either hate the first and love the second
Or adore the first and despise the second.
You can’t serve both God and the Bank.

We are not owners, then, but stewards. Moreover, the teaching of the Bible is that stewardship this present life is best viewed as an apprenticeship, a preparation, a training ground, for stewardship in the life to come. Faithfulness and trustworthiness in the here and now will be rewarded by greater responsibility in the hereafter.

‘All our pieces of gold are legal tender until we reach the grave; but they will be worthless in the world to come. Therefore as travelers change their money into the currency of the country to which they are traveling, let us do good with our money while we live, so that when we die, by a blessed bill of exchange, we will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. To part with what we cannot keep, in order to gain what cannot lose, is an excellent bargain.’

Verse 13:

Luke 16:13 “No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.”

Money may be a useful servant, but it's a terrible master.

Money is a demanding master, because it is never satisfied. Ask any person - rich or poor - how much money they would need in order to make them happy, and the answer will always be the same: 'just a little more'.

Money is a disappointing master, because you can't take it with you. When one of the world's richest men died, his chief accountant was asked, 'How much did he leave?' The reply was instant: 'Everything.'