

Shrewd Manager or Dishonest Steward

Coming from a big city, a man named David wasn't prepared for the approach rural Maine businessmen take toward their customers. Shortly after David moved there, he rented a rototiller. The store owner showed him how it worked and explained that the charge was not based on how many hours he had it out, but rather how long it was actually used. Looking over the tiller for some kind of meter, David asked, "How will you know how long I've used it?" With a puzzled look, the owner simply said, "You tell me." (*Loren Morse, Reader's Digest, March 1991*)

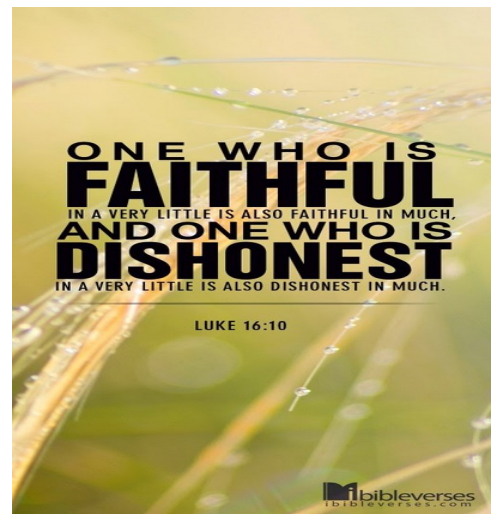
Honesty. Today's Gospel parable appears, at least on the surface, to be an example of a biblical paradox: Do we regard the manager as shrewd or as a dishonest steward? And, unusually, both of the parable's main characters are unscrupulous people.

To understand this reading, we need to understand first century money matters. The Romans occupied Galilee and controlled the economy. Professor Barbara Rossing of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago describes the rulers and landlords as loan-sharks, charging exorbitant interest rates to amass more land, often causing peasants to be robbed of their family land. This was a direct violation of biblical covenant law [that Jewish businessmen were not allowed to charge interest to fellow Jews]. The rich man, along with his steward or debt collector, were both exploiting the vulnerable poor. (*adapted from Working Preacher, September 2016*)

New Testament scholar William Herzog explains that wealthy landlords created ways to "charge interest under other guises...often hiding interest by rolling it into the principal... [usually]...about 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods." (*Parables as Subversive Speech, pg. 246, adapted from Working Preacher, September 2016*)

Jump ahead to the 21st century, and these exorbitant numbers can be found today in high interest student loans, same day payday loans and high interest credit cards. History repeats itself, and there is a saying for that: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" or "The more things change, the more they stay the same." (*Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849*)

Our Gospel story itself sounds quite contemporary. A manager is about to lose his job due to poor work performance or fraud; the text does not tell why, other than the rich man confronting his employee and saying, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." (v2) He is fortunate in that he has not yet been fired, and, using this window of opportunity, he has time to try to benefit himself. This is called being "shrewd" in Biblical Greek, meaning "to act with foresight." Because he doesn't want to do manual labour or receive charity, he goes around to all the people who owe his employer money and reduces their debts, hoping that they will feel obliged to help him.



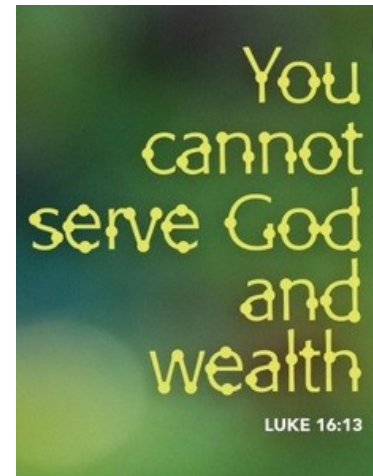
As Richard Horsley describes, “To ingratiate himself with the debtors, he had them change the amount they owed on their bills to exactly the amount they borrowed, [the principal], eliminating the hidden and prohibited interest.”

So the deceitful, dishonest manager outwitted his master and cleverly protected his future. If the rich man was not a Gentile, but a Jew (the text does not say), he would know the Torah teaching against interest, and he “suddenly recognized that he needed at least to appear to be observing covenant laws, commending his steward” for his shrewdness. *(adapted from Working Preacher, September 2016)*

Jesus has been addressing his disciples, the children of light *(John 12:36, Ephesians 5:8-13, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-9)*, while critiquing the Pharisees, the “lovers of money,” who were also listening and ridiculing him *(v14)*.

He recognizes that his followers are rather naive and unworldly in money matters, and that the unbelievers are far shrewder in economics. “Clearly, what [Jesus] requires is not a way of life that will appeal to a person who loves money. The gauntlet is thrown down: Serve God or Money. They are two rival gods, and you cannot serve both.” *(The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant by Gary Inrig, 1991)*

Pastor John Hagee demonstrates the right attitude: “Since my money is God’s money, every spending decision I make is a spiritual decision.” *(quotetab.com)*



Jesus is going to show the children of light how to use money to secure their future, their ultimate future, their eternal future; that they should invest in people’s lives for God’s Kingdom. The proper use of wealth is to spend it, preferably on God’s purposes; but if not that, then on things that will increase our dependence on God.

English clergyman John Wesley said, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” *(John Wesley, English Clergyman 1703-1791)*

Earthly wealth is time-limited; you can’t take it with you when you die. St. Paul reminds us, “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” *(1 Timothy 6:7)* And as for the shrewd manager? His deceit, his “dishonest wealth,” *(v11)* will come to nothing; his future is based on wealth that will fail when he dies.

We are asked to be shrewd stewards of money, not slaves of it. “Being shrewd requires knowing what rules your heart, knowing whom you serve, as Jesus suggests in verse 13. If you serve wealth for its own sake, you will fail. But if you serve God and shrewdly use what you have for God’s purposes, you will enjoy the blessings of life with God.” *(Shrewd Christians, article by Verity A. Jones, Huffington Post, updated December 6, 2017)*

And to quote John Wesley again, “Money is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends.”

I will close this morning’s homily with another story:

“A man was shipwrecked on a lonely, unknown island. To his surprise, he found that he was not alone; a large tribe of people shared his island. To his pleasure, he discovered that they treated him very well. In fact, they placed him on a throne and catered to his every desire. He was delighted but perplexed. Why such royal treatment?

As his ability to communicate increased, he discovered that the tribal custom was to choose a king for a year. Then, when his term was finished, he would be transported to a particular island and abandoned.

Delight was now replaced by distress. Then he hit on a shrewd plan. Over the next months he sent members of the tribe to clear and till the other island. He had them build a beautiful house, furnish it, and plant crops. He sent some chosen friends to live there and wait for him. Then, when his time of exile came, he was put in a place carefully prepared and full of friends delighted to receive him.

Disciples are not headed to a desert island but to the Father's home. Yet the preparations we make here follow us there. If we are shrewd, there will be eternal friends and eternal rewards to greet us. Fools serve money and leave it all behind. Shrewd believers serve God and invest in eternity.” *(The Parables by Gary Inrig, pp 118-119)*

Amen.