

“Shrewdness” (Luke (16:1–15))

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Several months ago, as I was scrolling down my Facebook newsfeed, I saw a meme that a friend of mine, someone I took a couple of seminary classes with, had posted. I’m sure many of us know what a “meme” is, but in case you don’t, a meme is something that is copied and shared. It’s often a picture with a quote or some caption that is funny or pointed. This meme said at the top of the picture: “A LIST OF THINGS THE CHURCH CAN LEARN FROM THE WORLD.” The picture was of a blank piece of paper. The point was that the church can learn nothing from the world. If you’re not familiar with the Bible and Christianese, the “world” is often used to describe the prevailing non-Christian culture, the culture that, as we see it, is opposed to God. So, the meme was saying that Christians can’t learn anything from non-Christians.

But that’s wrong. It’s wrong because even non-Christians know many true and valuable things. Your doctor doesn’t need to be a Christian for you to learn something from him or her about your health. Your mechanic doesn’t need to be a Christian for you to learn that something in your car needs fixing. We learn from non-Christian scholars, teachers, authors, friends, and neighbors. And the reason this is so is because of something we call “common grace,” that God gives gifts even to those who don’t seek him and love him.

But the other reason we know that the church can learn from the world is because Jesus says so. We’re going to see that today in a bit of an odd parable found in Luke 16. If you haven’t been with us recently, we’ve been studying the Gospel of Luke, one of the four Gospels found in the Bible. Each Gospel tells the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. They’re theological biographies. And like different biographies written today, each Gospel has its own themes, its own particular perspectives on Jesus that are developed in unique ways. They all tell the same basic story, emphasizing different points. Of the four Gospels, Luke shares the most of Jesus’ parables, little stories that are designed to teach powerful truths. Luke also gives us a great deal of Jesus’ teaching on money. We’ll see all of that today in Luke 16:1–15.

So, without further ado, let’s look at Luke 16:1–9:

¹ He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ ³ And the

manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’⁷ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.¹

The story itself, from verses 1–7, is pretty clear, but I’ll explain it a bit. A wealthy man had entrusted his estate to a servant, a manager who was responsible for his business affairs. In fact, the servant could be a slave. Slavery existed in Israel and the Greco-Roman world, and while slavery is never a great thing, it was very different in that ancient world than it was in America prior to the Civil War. Slaves could have professions, they could own property, and they had the ability to earn or buy their freedom. At any rate, this steward or manager was the one who took care of another person’s wealth.

The wealthy man finds out that manager was wasting his possessions. Last week, we looked at Luke 15, which includes the famous parable of the prodigal son. The verb translated here as “wasted” is the same verb used to describe how the prodigal son “squandered” his inheritance (Luke 15:13). We’re not told how this manager wasted his master’s wealth, but we can assume it was done unethically in some manner. What’s important is that the manager is about to lose his possession. The wealthy man tells the manager to turn in the financial records of his estate.

The manager knows he’s in trouble. He claims that he is not strong enough to dig. Perhaps he’s older, or perhaps he’s been so accustomed to non-physical labor that he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty. And, as opposed to the Temptations and the Rolling Stones, he is too proud to beg. So, how is he going to make money? How will he survive?

The manager then has a light-bulb moment. “Aha,” he thinks, “I know what I can do to get a new position. I’ll tell the people who owe my master that they owe him less, and that way,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

they'll be grateful to me and they'll take care of me. They'll 'receive me into their houses.'" So, he meets with the people who owe his master.

We're told about two representative people who owed the master olive oil and wheat. The wealthy man probably loaned them money in exchange for future goods. The person who owed the master olive oil owed him one hundred baths, or approximately 900 gallons. That's a lot of oil. In that economy, that could be about three years' worth of wages. It's a significant sum. The manager asks this person how much they owed the master. He already had the financial records, so he knew, but he wants to make sure the debtor knows what the manager is doing. So, he asks, and when told the amount, he says, "Let's change the figure. Now you owe fifty measures," which would have been about 450 gallons of oil, a fifty percent savings. He does something similar with the person who owed the master wheat. This person owed one hundred measures, or cors, of wheat. One cor was equivalent to 10–12 bushels. One hundred measures could have been worth anywhere between one to ten years' worth of wages. Again, it's a large sum. This time, the manager only knocks the debt down twenty percent.

It's debated what this manager is actually doing. Is he cheating his master? If these people owed the master a certain sum and he's cooking the books so that they pay the master less, he's doing the master a disservice. Of course, he's doing that to curry favor from these debtors. If that's the case, he's been very dishonest, robbing money from one rich man to get into the good graces of others. But some commentators think that perhaps he's helping his master while also helping himself. Perhaps the people owed the master what they thought they owed, but the manager is trying to make the master look gracious, forgiving part of the loan. Others think that the master had loaned money to these debtors at interest, which was against Jewish law (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35–37; Deut. 15:7–8, 23:19–20). In this case, the master had acted wrongly, and the servant was righting this wrong while also making himself look good. Finally, some other commentators believe that the manager had originally added a commission to what the debtors actually owed the master. The first debtor actually owed fifty measures of oil to the master, but he didn't know that. The manager told him he owed one hundred, and he was planning to pocket the difference. Now, he erases his own commission so that he could have a financial security in the future.

It seems like the most likely scenario is that the manager is cheating the master, though that last option is possible. Perhaps he was adding to the figures of what people owed in order to

make himself rich. Perhaps that's part of why he was getting fired in the first place. At any rate, this manager is shrewd. He knows that if he doesn't do something clever, he's going to be out of luck in the future. So, he takes the opportunity to do something to secure himself a better future.

So, in verse 8, we're told, "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness." This is another part of the parable that's debated. Is the master the wealthy man of the parable? If so, and depending on what the manager was actually doing, he finds out about what has happened, and he commends the manager for his cleverness. But "the master" might refer to Jesus. The Greek word translated as "master" is usually translated as "Lord" and it usually refers to Jesus, the true Master and King. So, perhaps here Jesus is commending the manager of the story. In either event, Jesus does commend the manager, because he says, "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."

Now, if the manager was being dishonest, cheating the master out of the money he was owed, Jesus is not commending the man's dishonesty. Jesus does not say that the ends justify the means, so do whatever you can to improve your life. The Bible does not teach us to be dishonest and underhanded in any kind of way. God does not want us to cheat and lie and steal to survive. There may be very exceptional cases in which telling a lie is better than telling the truth, like if you were living in Europe eighty years ago and Nazis come to your door to ask you if you're harboring any Jews. But most of us won't ever be in those situations. This manager wasn't. So, Jesus is not commending the manager's dishonesty. But he is commending his cleverness. The man was in trouble and he took the opportunity that he had to provide for his future.

Jesus says that "the sons of this world" are better at doing this thing than the "sons of light" are. As I said earlier, "the world" when used in the Bible often refers to humanity apart from God. The truth is that there is a great chasm that separates people from God. That's how we all start out in life, as sons and daughters of the "world," the fallen, sinful realm of humans who are rebels against God. Ever since the first humans walked the earth, people have rejected God. God made us to love him and live life on his terms, to have good lives full of responsibility and authority but also service to God. He made us to come under his authority, to obey him and his commands because he is good, because he designed life to function in a certain way, and he knows better than we do. Yet we don't trust that God is good. We don't seek after him. We don't love him the way we should. We ignore him at best; at worst, we know what he wants of us and

we knowingly disobey his commands. We don't start out as children of God, children of the kingdom of light and life.

But there are people who become “sons [and daughters] of light” (John 12:36; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5). God loved the world so much that he sent his one and only true Son, who has always existed with God the Father in the realm of light. He left that heavenly world of light to enter into a dark, fallen world. When the Son of God became a human being, he was known as Jesus of Nazareth. And he alone lived a perfect life. He alone loved his heavenly Father as we should. He alone always worshiped God, always obeyed God, always loved other people. He wasn't greedy, scheming, lying, selfish, or any of the other qualities that we often find in ourselves. And though he lived a perfect life, he was rejected, treated like the worst of criminals, and put to death. This wasn't just because people are evil. Ultimately, it was God's plan. Jesus lived the perfect life that we don't live so that all who come to him and trust him as God and King, as Savior, can be credited with that perfect life. When God looks at Christians, it's as if he's looking at Christ, regarding Jesus' perfection instead of our mess. And Jesus came to die to bear God's wrath. He came to pay the penalty that we deserve for our sins. If we come to trust Jesus, to put our faith in him and have a right relationship with him marked by love and obedience, then we have already had our rebellion against God forgiven. We've been transferred from a kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13–14).

Yet Jesus says that the children of light can learn from the children of the world. People who aren't Christians often work harder to provide for themselves a decent future in this life. Non-Christians hustle. They use whatever opportunities they have, whatever gifts God has given to them, to secure a future that ultimately won't last. I can think of lots of examples. There are all kinds of people who hustle online to make money. I just read a story about an 18-year-old young woman who already has eight million subscribers on YouTube. She has millions of followers on Instagram, she has a podcast that is hugely popular, and she's making perhaps as much as two million dollars a year.² I watched parts of a couple of her YouTube videos and couldn't figure out why she's popular. But apparently people with little talent and a bit of personality can be millionaires online by hustling. She's out there selling her product, working hard to build an audience.

² Taylor Lorenz, “Emma Chamberlain Is the Most Important YouTuber Today,” *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/07/emma-chamberlain-and-rise-relatable-influencer/593230>.

We can think of many people who exploit whatever talent and resources they have to make money, so they can achieve fame and fortune in this life. And they often outwork us. I saw a video of Tom Brady running a 40 yard-dash this week. He's never been fast, but the story was that he ran the 40 faster this year than he ran in 2000, when he was drafted by the Patriots. Not many 42 year-olds can outrun their 22-year-old selves, but Brady is still working hard, even after six Super Bowl rings. He's working for fame and fortune that won't last.

But what about Christians? What are we doing? We have a future that is eternal. Jesus promises us true, eternal riches. Jesus promises us the only notoriety that really matters, having a good name in God's eyes. And yet Christians often don't work hard. We aren't as clever as non-Christians in leveraging what God has given to us to help the cause of God's kingdom. Jesus tells us we should work for things that last. And we should use our financial resources to help build up God's kingdom.

That's why Jesus says, in verse 9, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." It's a bit of an odd saying, for several reasons. Is Jesus telling us to buy friends? Why is wealth called "unrighteous"? Can we really use money to buy a home in "eternal dwellings," in heaven?

Jesus isn't saying that we can buy friends. But he is telling us to use our money wisely. The reason why wealth here is called "unrighteous" is not because money or possessions are inherently evil. The Bible does not say the money or wealth is a root of all evil. It actually says, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils" (1 Tim. 6:10). When we put our trust in money, it's wrong. We often trust money because we're led to believe that money can provide us with security and comfort. That's even reflected in the word translated as "wealth." If you are familiar with the old King James Version, you might know the word "mammon." This is an Aramaic word. It's probably related to a Hebrew word that means "to trust." In other words, what's unrighteous is putting so much trust in money. Because money will fail us. Money can't buy us everything. It can extend our lives a little bit, but it can't buy off the Grim Reaper. Money can't erase our sins. It can't forgive us and bring us into the kingdom of light.

And it can't really buy us friends. But—and this is really important—we can use our money, as well as our time, our energy, and whatever resources we have, to help others. We can use what God has given to us to care for other people, to help comfort them and to help ease their suffering. And if we really care about comforting others and helping them avoid suffering, if we

really love them, and if we really love bringing glory to God, we will use whatever resources we have to tell people the good news about Jesus. We will tell them there is a way to be reconciled to God, to have forgiveness of all that we've done wrong, to be adopted into God's family, and to live in God's kingdom of love, light, and life forever.

There are many ways that we can help advance the gospel. Telling others personally is the best way. But we can use our money to support the church, to support missionaries, to buy Christian books and Bibles for friends, to support translation of the Bible into languages that don't yet have a Bible translation. We can use our time to tell people about Jesus, to offer to read the Bible with them. We can use our online platforms to tell people about God and invite them to church. I have asked people to like and share the church's Facebook posts and only a handful of us have ever done that. Are we really using what God has given us to advance the gospel? The world outthrusts us. They are more clever at using every opportunity to sell a product, to turn the conversation to something that is infinitely of less value than the message of Christianity.

I'm reminded of another example of how the world uses every opportunity to advance their goals. Years ago, I used to watch more television than I do now. Usually, I tuned into late-night talk shows. I remember watching an episode of *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. He was interviewing Jim Belushi, the younger brother of John Belushi. John Belushi was the one who was on *Saturday Night Live*, the one who starred in the movies *Animal House* and *The Blues Brothers*. John Belushi also died at the age of 33, due to a drug overdose. Jim, John's brother, appeared in several movies and, at the time of this interview, was on his own sitcom, *According to Jim*. At one point in the interview, Conan O'Brien asked Jim about his friendship with Arnold Schwarzenegger, who recently became governor of California. Jim and Arnold appeared in a movie together called *Red Heat*. Jim said he learned a lot from Arnold, including marketing. Conan was curious about this. He learned marketing from Arnold Schwarzenegger? Jim said Arnold was great at marketing movies and he taught him how to turn every question into an opportunity to sell his movie. Arnold asked Jim what question he hated the most when he was being interviewed. Jim said interviewers would often ask him if he missed his brother John. So, Arnold says, "Ask me that question and I'll show you how to answer." So, Jim, acting as a reporter, says, "Do you miss your brother John?" And Arnold, acting as Jim, says, "Yes, of

course I miss my brother . . . but not as much as he's going to miss my new movie, *Red Heat*.”³ We Christians could learn from the world how to turn our conversations into gospel conversations. Remember what the apostle Peter says about why God makes Christians his people: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Jesus' point is that we should use what we have in this life to make sure that other people can join us in the next life. And we should use our money that way. The things that we pour our money into won't last. Our houses, our clothes, our gadgets, the experiences that we get from vacations and going out to eat won't last. It's not wrong to have those things, but we should consider putting less into those things and more into supporting the church, supporting evangelism and discipleship and Bible translation and anything that helps people understand God better. If we do that, perhaps we'll be greeted in heaven by people who will say, “Thank you for helping me get here.”

Jesus goes on to say that if we're faithful with how we use even the little things that God has given to us, he will entrust more to us. And he warns us that our loyalties cannot be divided between our love of money and our love for God. Let's read verses 10–13:

¹⁰ “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

We may wish that we would have more money, or a better job, or something else along those lines. But we should ask ourselves, “Am I faithfully using what God has already given to me to serve him?” If we're not being faithful with a little, why would God give us more? If we're not faithfully using whatever God has given to us, why would he give us eternal responsibilities in the new creation, in which we rule and reign with him forever? All that we have is a gift from God. Our talents, our abilities, and, yes, our money are entrusted to us by God. God has given us

³ The interview can be seen here: https://youtu.be/BnLYwe_qZR8. I changed the wording of the dialogue to make the point clearer—and funnier.

all of those things to manage for him. Are we going to waste these gifts or will we use them shrewdly?

What often keeps us from using our money for God's glory is our love of money and the love of all that money gives us. Because we believe money will give us comfort, we spend it on entertainment and pleasures. Because we think money will bring us security, we surround ourselves with possessions and things we think will make us feel safer and more secure. Where we spend our money reveals where we have placed our treasure. We can't have it both ways. We can't treasure God *and* treasure our stuff. We can't serve God and serve money. Which will you put your trust in?

When Jesus was teaching these things, he was still in front of not only his followers, but also the religious leaders of his day. When they heard what Jesus said, they didn't follow his advice. Instead, they made fun of him because they loved money more than God. Take a look at verses 14 and 15:

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

I'll probably read these verses again next time I preach. But I read them now because I want you to see how not to respond to Jesus' message. It would be easy to dismiss what Jesus says here. It would be easy to say, "I'll spend my money, my time, and my energy how I want, thank you very much." But if we do that, we're just showing what we truly love, what we truly trust and obey. The Pharisees, a group of Jewish religious leaders, loved money more than God, so they rejected Jesus. They tried to justify themselves, to make themselves right, in the eyes of other people. They didn't care what matters most, which is being right in God's sight. They exalted themselves, and their pride and greed were an "abomination" in the sight of God.

The children of the world exalt themselves. And this is where they aren't so clever. All the social media stars and so many of the rich and famous are trying to make themselves great. I suppose a few are Christians and use their platforms to honor God. But most are in it to make themselves great. And this is foolish. Their fame and money won't endure. It will last for a short time, and it will then be gone. They will have to stand before God in judgment and given an account for their lives. And I'm sure God will ask why they didn't use what he had given to them to honor him.

Today, I urge us all to think about eternity. Everything you have is from God. How will you use it for things that matter for eternity? How will you glorify God with your money? How will you help others know God with the way you use your money? How can you use what you have to make room for friends, for brothers and sisters, in the eternal dwellings?

Imagine what it will be like to go to heaven and to live in the new creation with God forever. We won't just see Jesus face-to-face. We will also see a multitude of other children of light, people who have been redeemed. And if we are faithful with what God has given to us, imagine the reception we will have from others who might say something like this: "Thank you for giving to that church, who helped me come to know Jesus. Thank you for helping support missionaries. That missionary that your church supported told me about Jesus. Thank you for taking time to share the gospel with me. I know you thought I would never come to faith, but I did many years later. Thank you for giving to that ministry that translates the Bible; because you gave, I could finally read God's word in my own language." Friends, if you're not a Christian, turn to Jesus now. Everything else will fail you. Christian friends, use your money and everything else you have so that others can know Jesus, too.

As Charles Studd wrote:

Only one life 'twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.⁴

⁴ Studd's poem can be found at http://cavaliersonly.com/poetry_by_christian_poets_of_the_past/only_one_life_twill_soon_be_past_-_poem_by_ct_studd.