

*Not Shrewd*

A Sermon on Luke 16:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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Our gospel passage speaks directly to the situation we see in the world today. Today we see great turmoil in our nation and in our world. We see many people suffering. We wonder what to make of the violence and the cruelty we see.

Jesus would not be surprised by the violence and suffering we are witnessing in the world. Jesus knew all about the hatred, the violence, and the lies. Jesus was preaching a message of Good News exactly for the kind of things happening in our nation today.

You and I were shocked to learn that the governor of Florida performed a cruel trick on a group of refugees from Venezuela. He sent his managers to the state of Texas to lure these refugees onto an airplane. The refugees were promised jobs and places to live in Boston. These were lies.

These refugees had already suffered terribly. Some of them were tortured in Venezuela. Some of them suffered abuse or torture during their journey. They walked most of the way to Texas, because they had heard of this nation, America, where the rule of law is followed, unlike in their home country. They journeyed to America, because they wanted to be safe and to be treated with respect.

But in America they were vulnerable to the lies of people whose one and only concern is to gain more power for themselves. The refugees were not flown to Boston. They were not given places to live or jobs. They were flown to Martha's Vineyard, a small island with a shortage of housing.

The governor of Florida spent \$600,000 in taxpayer funds to perform this lie, this cruel stunt. He was proud of himself. He felt he was very shrewd and clever. He was proud of the lies that he told, and that others told on his behalf.

You and I were surprised that someone could be so cruel and dishonest. Jesus would not be surprised. Jesus told his disciples the parable of the shrewd dishonest manager.

People are often confused by this parable. The key is that this is not an isolated story. In order to understand it, we need to read it in the context of the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus begins by telling his disciples, "*There was a rich man who had a manager.*" If we know anything about the Gospel of Luke, little red flags should already be going off in our heads. We have an important clue about where this is heading, because Luke is especially concerned with the dangers of wealth for Jesus' disciples.

We know the rich man was extremely rich because of the quantities of commodities in the parable. Someone owed the rich man 100 jugs of olive oil. The twist is that each of those jugs was about twice as large as my giant five-gallon bucket from the Home Depot. Someone else owed the rich man the equivalent of 1000 wheelbarrows full of wheat. The rich man was extremely rich, and his manager was extremely powerful.

What is the meaning of this story? It is helpful to remember the beginning of Luke. In chapter one the themes of the Gospel are announced by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist and by Mary, the mother of Jesus. These are the two longest speeches by anyone in the Gospel of Luke, aside from Jesus himself. Zechariah talks about God saving a people who are dwelling in darkness. Zechariah talks about God's mercy and God fulfilling God's promises. Mary tells the story of a God who casts down the proud and who casts down the mighty from their thrones. Mary tells of a God who lifts up the lowly and the poor. Mary tells of a God who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.

These themes of God's mercy for the poor and warnings for the rich are repeated throughout the first sixteen chapters of Luke. We see these themes in the Sermon on the Mount, in the parable of the

wedding banquet, and in the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Each passage tells of God's mercy for those who have suffered, and those who have lived in poverty. Each passage tells of God's warnings for the rich and powerful.

What is the meaning of this story? Given what happens in the rest of the Gospel I am quite sure Jesus is not asking us to follow the example of the rich man and his powerful manager

In the Gospel of Luke, God's Kingdom is often revealed in opposition to the actions and values of the rich and powerful. Jesus does not want us to follow the example of the dishonest manager. The manager in the story is a negative example; he is an example of dishonesty and selfishness.

The evidence for the dishonest manager being a bad example continues to pile up as the story progresses. The manager in the story was fearful. After the owner of the business told him that he would be fired 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 am ashamed to beg.* So the manager begins to lie in order to save himself.

Jesus concludes his parable by saying, *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.*

Jesus says there are two groups of people. The first group are the children of this world. The ways of power in this world are depicted by the actions of the dishonest manager. He is dishonest. He is selfish. He is shrewd. People who are following this way are using any means necessary to gain and hold onto power. Jesus calls the second group the children of light. The children of the light are the people who are following Jesus. They are following Mary's example and Zechariah's example.

Let's pay attention to the way the manager's values were revealed in a time of fear and danger. That is Jesus' point. Our values will be revealed in times of temptation and test. We see this in the world today. Many people claim they love America. We show we love America when we follow the laws of our Constitution. We show we love America during a difficult time, such as when our favored candidate loses an election. Jesus' point is that our values are revealed in a time of temptation and test.

At the end of the passage Jesus says, *No servant can serve two masters.* We have to make a choice. We can either follow the ways of power in this world or we can follow Jesus' way. We cannot do both.

Even though the parable is a story of lies and cowardice, there is a powerful message of hope for us in Jesus' teaching. Jesus says, *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. If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?*

Whoever can be trusted with very little, can also be trusted with much. Take some very small actions to build trust and goodness in the world. Bring some food to the Open Pantry. Help a neighbor. Say thank you to someone. This is Jesus' path of faithfulness and love.

When you hear of stories of violence and suffering, do not be disheartened. Jesus would not be surprised. Jesus was walking this same path, trying to love and care for other people in a time of violence and suffering. When you hear stories of people breaking the law and telling lies, do not be discouraged. Jesus encourages us to follow his example of building relationships, and building trust with other people.

We follow Jesus' way of goodness. It is not shrewd. It is not clever. It is not about promoting ourselves. It is a simple, humble way of living. It is the way of building trust. It is the way of truth telling. It is the way that begins with doing one small good deed.