

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Luke 16: 1-15

DIG: Why would it be important for Jesus' talmidim to hear this parable? In what crisis does **the manager** find **himself**? What plan does **he** make up? In light of this deceit, why does **the rich man commend the manager**? How does Yeshua apply this parable to His apostles? What do you think the Lord is **commending** here? How do verses 10-12 help you understand Christ's point? What's the problem with trying to **serve two masters**? What describes the attitude of the Pharisees who are listening in? How does **Messiah** use the parable to speak to them?

REFLECT: How do you view your money: (a) it's mine, keep your hands off? (b) It's my creditors'? (c) It's **God's** - I just manage it? Why? How could you use it for the sake of the Kingdom? Who or what are some of the **"masters"** you've served in the past? What **"masters"** scream at you for allegiance right now? How do you deal with these voices in light of your commitment to Christ?

The one main point of the parable of the shrewd manager is the need to make ready for the great Day in which an account must be given in the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus told His apostles: **There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions** by not handling **his** finances wisely. In Jesus' day **managers** were often hired by wealthy people to care for the finances of their estate. Such **a manager** would be comparable to **a** modern-day financial **manager** or trustee who controls the finances of an estate for the purpose of making more money for that estate.¹¹²⁷ **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"** (Luke 16:1-2).

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."** In the last hours of his managerial role, **he** will do something to insure **his** future after **he** is fired from **his** job. **I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses"** (Luke 16:3-4). Notice that **the manager's** actions don't seem to benefit **his rich master**, but purely for **his** own selfish ends.

The manager had almost lost **his** livelihood and is a fitting picture of someone who faces death and starts thinking about **his** future after death. **He** recognizes that **he** faces an impossible task since **he** is **not strong enough to dig, and ashamed to beg**. **He** is unable to work out **his** salvation and often too proud to depend on another for it. But **he** was smart and resourceful, so **he** reasoned within **himself**, soon deciding on a **shrewd** plan.¹¹²⁸

So he quietly **called in each one of his master's debtors** for a private conference. **He** asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" "Nine hundred gallons (or 3,000 liters) of olive oil," he replied. The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "A thousand bushels (or thirty tons) of wheat," he replied. He told him, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred" (Luke 16:5-7).

The rich man commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly (Luke 16:8a). The reader expects **the rich master** to rebuke, judge, condemn, punish or damn **the manager** for **his dishonesty**. But the parable takes an unexpected twist, and **the master** not only doesn't condemn **him**, but **he commended** the scoundrel. **The Lord's** skill as a master storyteller is clearly shown here. But how can **Jesus** **commend** such a person in this parable? Doesn't this reward and encourage **dishonesty**?

This isn't the only parable in which people of questionable character and morality are commended. In the parable of the hidden treasure (see **Fb - The Parable of the Hidden Treasure**), **the man**, whose behavior serves as an example, obtains **the treasure** by less than exemplary means (the owner should have taken the time to examine his own property more closely). **He** may not have swindled or defrauded to obtain **the field** with its **treasure**, but it is impossible to hold **him** up as an example of one who practices the Golden Rule (**Matthew 7:12**). Likewise, in the parable of the ten virgins (see **Jw - The Parable of the Ten Virgins**) the believer is taught to emulate **the wise virgins** who did not share **their oil** with those who had need. Are we to follow this example or are we to **give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you** (**Mattityahu 5:42**)?

The problem these parables raise is due to confusion about the purpose and function of parables themselves. In the history of the Church parables have frequently been understood as allegories in which each detail has meaning and significance. This was especially true of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

But today, there is a general consensus among biblical scholars that parables are not allegories. **Parables contain one basic point.** The details are generally unimportant and should not be pressed (or not explained in detail) for meaning. The very nature of any analogy guarantees that the analogy will eventually break down if pressed beyond the basic point of comparison. For example, the kingdom of **God** is only similar to the kingdom of **God**, and no analogy can correspond to **YHVH** in all its details for no one or nothing is infinite, omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent but **ADONAI**. Therefore, if the details are not pressed in this parable, the supposed problem will disappear.¹¹²⁹

This account follows **Luke 15**, which emphasizes that **God** is seeking to save the lost. The parable of **the shrewd, or prudent, manager** is designed to show the apostles and those listening their need of responding to the graciousness of **God**. **The manager** who is being dismissed from **his** position masterminds a plan to guarantee a secure future for **himself** by introducing a plan of debt reduction to **his rich master's** debtors, reducing each debt.

In the ancient world, relationships were built on the principle of reciprocity - a favor returned. By decreasing the obligations of those indebted to **his rich master, the shrewd manager** secured **his own** future. Those who had benefited from **his** kindness, though fraudulent, would be obligated to demonstrate an appropriate good turn to **him**.

The rich master commends the manager's shrewdness in recognizing **his** need and seizing upon the opportunity that presented itself to **him**. The ministry of **the Savior** confronted people with the opportunity to do something about their future. **Jesus'** message to: **Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand** encouraged **His** hearers to be prudent and prepare themselves. The wise person will respond to such opportunity, receiving **God's** grace and commendation. **God** is even more gracious than **the master** was to the unjust **manager**. No matter what you have done, **He** will graciously forgive and receive you.¹¹³⁰

The shrewd manager had not done a good thing. But **shrewdness** need not refer to a moral quality. Here **he** had prepared **himself** for being fired by using material things to insure **his** future. **Jesus** was not teaching that **His talmidim** should be dishonest. **For the worldly have more *sekhel***, meaning *common sense, practical intelligence, or smarts* in both Hebrew and Yiddish. In Greek the phrase is *phronimoteroi eisin*, meaning *are more prudent*. So this verse could be translated: **For the worldly have more practical intelligence or are more prudent than those who have received the light - in dealing with their own kind of people (Luke 16:8b)!** Believers are to act as **prudently** with regard to divine things as unbelievers do with regard to earthly things. With this the parable ends.

Christ made **three applications** of the parable to His apostles. In the first application, He said: **I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal homes (Luke 16:9)**. Believers were to prepare themselves for the coming kingdom of God by the judicious use of possessions or **worldly wealth**. One is to use wealth for noble ends, so that their **friends** (God the Father and Yeshua the Son), may **welcome** them into their **eternal home**, just like **the manager** can expect **his** newly purchased "friends" to welcome **him** into their worldly homes. The parable, therefore, does not exhort believers to be cunning thieves, but to be at least as **prudent** as the scoundrel in the parable and make ready for the great Day in which an account must be rendered to God (2 Cor 5:10; Hebrews 9:27).¹¹³¹

Then Jesus made **a second application**, saying: **Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much (Luke 16:10)**. There is a common denominator in any form of greatness - reliability. It's the bread and butter characteristic of achievement. It's the shared ingredient behind retirement pens, Hall of Fame awards, and golden anniversaries. It is the quality that produces not momentary heroics but monumental lives.

The Bible has its share . . . Consistent and predictable, these believers were spurred by a gut-level conviction that **ADONAI Himself** had called them. As a result, their work wasn't affected by moods, cloudy days, or rocky trails. Their performance graph didn't rise and fall with roller-coaster irregularity. They weren't addicted to accolades or applause nor deterred by grumpy bosses or empty wallets. And since their loyalty was not determined by their comfort, they were just as faithful in dark prisons as they were in spotlight pulpits.¹¹³²

And whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own (Luke 16:11-12)? Our **earthly wealth** is given to us as a **trust**. We may possess **it** permanently only if we use **it** properly in the service of **God**. If we abuse our sacred **trust**, **it** can be taken away from us at any moment.

The **third application** Yeshua drew from the parable was that **no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Luke 16:13; Matthew 6:24)**. The **love of money** will drive one away from ADONAI (First Timothy 6:10); conversely, loving **God** will cause one not to make **money** the focus of his or her life.

Even though initially Yeshua addresses His talmidim, here, we learn that the Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus (Luke 16:14). They believed that a person's wealth was a sure sign of God's favor. They taught, "Whom ADONAI loves, He makes rich." He said to them: You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. In choosing David over the rebellious Saul as king of Israel, God commanded the prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem to select the son of Jesse. When He arrived, Samuel saw Eli'av (Jesse's older son) and thought, "This has to be ADONAI's anointed one, here before me." But ADONAI said to Samuel, "Don't pay any attention to how Eli'av looks or how tall he is, because I have rejected him. I don't see things the way humans see things - humans look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart" (First Samuel 16:6-7). What people value highly is detestable in God's sight (Luke 16:15). Because of the way the Pharisees responded to this parable, Jesus would tell them another parable directed at them.

In 1915 Pastor William Barton started to publish a series articles. Using the archaic language of an ancient storyteller, he wrote his parables under the pen name of Safed the Sage. And for the next fifteen years he shared the wisdom of Safed and his enduring spouse Keturah. It was a genre he enjoyed. By the early 1920s, Safed was said to have a following of at least three million. Turning an ordinary event into an illustration of a spiritual truth was always a keynote of Barton's ministry.

Now I had a friend, and his wife was a friend of Keturah; and he was a man who always had Misfortunes. And he came to me and said, Loan me a Hundred Dollars, and I will give thee my Note; yea, and I will pay thee Interest and the rate of Six Percent.

And I loaned him the Money, though I had need of it; and he paid me neither the Hundred Dollars nor the Interest. Yea, it was not according to his Principle to pay the Interest, neither was it his Interest to pay the Principle. But whenever he met me, he made many Promises and many Apologies; and when his wife met Keturah, she was Embarrassed.

Now Christmas was approaching, and Keturah said, Let us Cancel that Note, and send it to them for Christmas. And I was glad to Get Rid of it.

So I brought the note, and I sat me down, and I took my Pen and my Ink Horn, and I made figures.

And Keturah said, Safed, what are you doing?

And I said, I am computing the Interest; for it hath been Seven Years since this Note was given, and the Hundred Dollars had become Two Hundred, or there about; and I would fain discern how much of a Gift we are making.

And Keturah said, Safed, I am ashamed of thee. Canst thou not do a Generous Deed without trying to Magnify it in thine own Imagination? Art thou not willing to give without Reckoning? Then thou Knowest not the Real Joy of Giving. Yea, and thou reckon wrongly. For what if thou shalt be able by computing and compounding Interest to make a Hundred Dollars into Two Hundred, still is thy gift not increased thereby. What thou art giving is not the money thou did loan, for that is gone, and the Note is not worth money; thou art giving Peace of Mind to thine unfortunate friend. What that costeth us not is but a Scrap of Paper, but the value thereof cannot be reckoned in silver.

Now when I heard these things, I was pricked in my heart. And I said, O my beloved, daughter of all the wisest of the angels, your soul is of pure gold, and your speech is the voice of wisdom. Behold, some have called your Husband a Generous Man, but you are far more generous than I. For whoever gives and reckon has still a Smirch of Stinginess in their Generosity; but you give and reckon not; yea, and thus have you always given.

And I remembered these things, and I thought of the Good **God**, who gives, and not according to measure. And I prayed, and I said, O, my **God**, forgive the Thriftiness of our Generosity.¹¹³³