

Luke 16

Let me tell you about a politician. He was coming close to the end of his term of office and knew he was unlikely to be re-elected. So to give himself a chance at a future after politics he started giving government contracts to certain companies. He started pushing to get tax deductions for the companies he knew, so that he could get a job with them after politics. Now this sounds a bit dodgy doesn't it? He sounds like a dirty politician? Although this particular story is made up you could quite easily expect to see it in a newspaper or magazine but doesn't it also sound similar to the parable that we just read? We don't normally expect that sort of story in the bible do we.

The whole parable seems so unusual. It sounds so uncharacteristic of Jesus. It sounds so unlike him. Here he is saying good things about a bad character. Here he is holding up a scoundrel as a good example. Here is one of these financial scammers that Current Affair programs like to expose on television. And yet Jesus commends him! He tells us to be like him. Surely, this can't be right. As I've been looking into this passage in Luke, I've found out that this parable is often regarded as one of the most difficult parables to understand. Thanks Bruce.....

So to help us understand this unusual parable this morning/evening, I want to do two things. First I want to go carefully through the story again and try to show what it is and what it isn't saying and then second we will go through the points of application that Jesus gives to his disciples.

Just before I start and in case you are thinking, well this is going to be too hard and I may as well switch off, I would like to point out that although this parable can be confusing, the topic of this parable is one of Luke's and Jesus favourite themes, the right use of wealth and riches. You might remember Bruce saying last week that we are currently doing a three week stretch of sermons on wealth from Luke. So it is obviously an important topic for us to think about.

So Jesus' story starts off with a manager who was put in charge of a large estate. This is what happened in the first century, A manager with all the legal privileges and responsibilities took care of their masters money. Well, this manager was summoned by his master one day and was accused of wasting his master's money, and that he was going to lose his job. Now this manager thought to himself, what am I going to do? I'm not a labourer. I don't want to be unemployed... and so he decided the only thing that he could do in order to make sure that he would have future employment was to reduce the bills of the people who owed his master money. You see the society that this manager was in had the culture of, I'll give you a favour, and I'll expect one in return. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. We're thinking what's this manager doing? He's ripping the boss off. I'm imagining the Master when he find out sitting on the other side of the desk fuming and saying I'm taking that money off your pay out. But with a final twist in this parable the master compliments the manager on being shrewd.

and This brings us to the first big question doesn't it? Why does the master seem to compliment the manager for doing a bad thing? Well, there has been a lot of debate as to whether or not the manager has done the wrong thing. I can tell you I have read over a dozen

different scenarios as to what the manager did when he reduced the debts. And basically it boils down to three options, either (1) the manager was reducing the debts by the amount of interest that the master was charging, which for the Jews based on commandments from Deuteronomy was illegal for the master to charge anyway, so the master was at fault not the manager, or (2) the manager was reducing the debts by the amount he was to get as a commission so that it in no way affected the master so it was fine for him to compliment him, or (3) he did reduce the debts illegally and scammed the master out of some money.

I don't agree with the first because I don't think the master is the focus of the story. And with regard to the second two, to some extent it doesn't matter. You might be saying, wait a minute, how can it not matter. Well read again with me what the master says in verse 8 "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." It doesn't say the master commended him for being dishonest, it says the master commended him for acting shrewdly. So even if it is the third option, it doesn't mean that the master is suddenly commending dishonesty, it could just mean that he is grudgingly acknowledging the shrewdness of his manager.

Actually, Jesus often uses bad characters to illustrate his points based on some other aspect of their behavior. So this wouldn't necessarily be unusual. For example, in the parable of the friend coming at midnight, where Jesus tells us of a friend who knocks on his friend's door at midnight to ask for bread, Jesus is not teaching us to be rude, nor in the parable of the unjust judge where Jesus tells of a widow who persistently bothers a judge until she gets her way is it teaching us to show lack of respect. Instead Jesus uses these negative examples, to show other positive traits that we should follow.

So having told this parable, emphasizing that it is good to be shrewd, Jesus then gives some application based on the parable.

In the second half of verse 8, Jesus first point of application is to focus on the shrewdness of the manager. Listen to Jesus' explanation once again in verse 8 "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." Jesus focus is on shrewdness and how the people of the light, that is Christians, often are not as shrewd as worldly people. Now shrewdness may seem a strange word which we don't use often, but it simply means to act wisely, cleverly, to be resourceful. Jesus also uses it in Matthew 10:16 where he tells the disciples to be shrewd as snakes, but innocent as doves.

So what does Jesus mean. What does he mean that the people of this world are shrewd. Well before going to Bible College, I did a business degree. And a large part of the business degree I did was how to be shrewd with your money. Whether at a macro level for the government, or to a medium level as a business or even as individuals. A lot of it was how to be wise with your money. They showed us different techniques, put options, futures, investment portfolios, negative gearing. Deficit spending. All ways of being shrewd with your money. And I am sure that its not just business degree students that know some of these terms. As a sign of how important being shrewd with our money is, I am sure most of you will have heard of at least

some of these terms. That is why we see ads for financial advisers, accountants, money managers on TV. The world today is very focused on being shrewd with its money and of course even more focus is given now that we are in the world financial crisis.

So Jesus is pointing out that the world is very shrewd when looking after itself and that Christians don't seem to be as shrewd when looking out for Christian matters. Jesus is saying your average person is far more dedicated to looking out for number one – ME and my family, than most Christians are to the work Jesus gave us. Imagine if we tried to fill the pews in our churches with the same enthusiasm we try to fill our bank accounts. Think about what would happen if we were as determined in planning to win people to Christ as we were to plan our next budget, or our next holiday. Are you being as shrewd for the kingdom as you are for yourself?

Jesus then goes on to explain, how can the people of the light, us Christians, can be more shrewd? You see, Jesus has told the parable to show a person of this world, who when faced with a crisis for his future, becomes shrewd and works hard to make friends for his future. And in verse 9 as Jesus talks to his disciples, he says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Jesus parable showed that this manager had won for himself friends by being shrewd, now Jesus is saying to his disciples that they are to use their wealth shrewdly to make friends, not just for the immediate future, but by using their wealth to bring friends into the kingdom of God. In other words, let's use our wealth to bring people to know and love the Lord Jesus. Do you want to be smart with your money, really smart? Then use it to help people become a part of God's family so that when you are in heaven they will welcome you. Don't just make investments for retirement. Make investments for eternity.

There are a great number of ways in which Christians can be more shrewd. Have you thought about how sometimes less thought and planning can be given to how we teach Sunday school than teaching in "our academic schools". Or perhaps we think that the church will simply administer itself, or that its acceptable to inefficiently run church meetings rather than insisting on at least the same quality of professional standards as a secular workplace. Do we put as much effort into our Sunday school, church administration, meetings, ministries and other events as we do into the worldly activities in our lives? Christians should apply themselves to honour and serve God in their actions as much as secular people apply themselves to obtain prosperity in this world. The idea is that our wealth will not last. Rather than rely on it, we should put it to beneficial use. Use our wealth, all that we have in a way that pleases God and serves him.

Now you may be thinking, hang on a minute this sounds a bit like works based salvation, but I would like to point out that Jesus focus in this parable is not to explain how you can be saved. After all it says at the very beginning that he was addressing his disciples. The way of salvation is explained in the previous chapter where Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. But now Jesus is speaking to those he has found. Verse 9 does not contradict, the principle of salvation by faith but reminds us that true faith works, especially in

the area of giving. Jesus words seem to resemble James in chapter 2:14-17 14 when it says, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Jas 2:14-17 (NIV)

OK, so we've seen that Jesus wants his followers to be shrewd with their wealth, to help people come to know God. What does it mean practically for us to use our wealth? What does it look like? Well one of the first things that possibly comes to mind is how much money do we give for the work of the kingdom? Neither Jesus nor the NT ever quantifies how much a Christian must give, although as Bruce has mentioned here previously 10% is always a reasonable place to start, though of course some can give far more and others can afford less. But today I want to challenge you with a different % other than 10%. 100% Now before you panic, that doesn't mean that I want you to give all your money away. The work of the kingdom doesn't just mean giving money to the church, but what it does mean is that all our time, all our money, all our resources need to work for the kingdom of God. You see everything we do and everything we own is on loan to us by God so that we can further his kingdom here on earth. Whether it is by giving money to church, giving up our time to help in the many different ministries, or even how we care for our families. From our perspective, all belongs to God. We are called to be good stewards of 100% of what he has loaned us. Having said that Jesus does realise that money tends to be the hardest for us to give up.

Notice Jesus' careful choice of words in verse 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." He does not say that you **may** not serve God and money. He says that you cannot. It is an impossibility. Notice too that he isn't saying you can't be rich. In the Bible there were lots of rich believers – think of Job, Abraham and Solomon for starters. It's no sin to be rich. But it is a sin to serve money. So how do you know whether you are serving God or money? The question is not really that hard. How much money are you prepared to give away? Are you giving God just the leftovers? Are you giving God just your spare cash and loose change on a Sunday morning? Or are you a shrewd investor? Are you investing in kingdom enterprises? Are you using your money to make forever friends

I am sure you have heard of recovery groups for alcoholics or drugs, where people get together to ask each other the hard questions, to keep them on track and to keep them accountable. Maybe we need to add a new group where people will ask us the hard questions about our money, our expenditure about our shopping. To help us keep accountable to how we spend our money.

So who is your master? I hope that it is God. If an outside accountant examined your family budget, your account details and transactions and credit card statements and compared to a non-christian neighbor in similar circumstances, would they recognize the difference? Would

they say you are doing a good wordly job of building up more wealth and possessions or would they see something different, would they see you building up the kingdom of God.