

## **The shrewd manager.**

My first sermon, nearly eighteen years ago, was on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It was a good place to start. A good story, that is reasonably easy to relate to, that is relevant to us that has a fairly clear application for us, and has interesting things to learn about God, people, human relationships, and how life was in Jesus' time.

I remember reflecting at the time that it was a good place to start, I could understand it pretty well, and I could discern and deliver a faithful message to the congregation... and I wondered what it would be like to preach on a different passage. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector isn't one of the most famous parables after all – what would it be like to preach on the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan? Doesn't everyone know all there is to know about those. And what would it be like to preach on Christmas or Good Friday or Easter Sunday?

And what would it be like to preach on some of the harder parts of the bible to understand. Some of those Old Testament stories are 'out there' – think about the story of Lot offering his disciples to the men of Sodom for sex (Genesis 19), or Balaam's talking donkey (Numbers 22), or the Jesus' cursing the fig tree (Matthew 22) or pretty much the whole book of Revelation. How could anyone preach on them?

Well, today's parable is one of those harder parts of the bible – one of the hardest parts to understand of Jesus' teaching (though there may well be some parts of Jesus' teaching for us to apply! Because it's one thing to discern Jesus' meaning, it's another to take it to heart.)

Last week in church we heard and reflected on the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, and then in the last part of Luke Chapter 15, we have the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We're familiar with those, most of us will we've heard them all many times, and we have a reasonable understanding of – they are all related – seeking and finding what is lost and joyous celebration when what is lost is found. There's a bit more to the Prodigal Son story, of course, but that's the essence.

And then we get to the beginning of chapter 16, the reading that we've heard today, and are confronted with the Parable of the Shrewd Manager – or in some translations the Parable of the Unjust Steward. The tone has changed. It's not about lost and found and joy, it's about... well what is about? This parable is regarded as the hardest of Jesus' parables to understand, and yet, here it is. It is Jesus' teaching.

Unlike the last three parables, which come back to the themes of lost, found and joy (and maybe resentment in the case of the prodigal son's brother and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law), the themes of this parable are more diverse.

Jesus begins by telling us "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 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.'" (16:1-2)

In the society of the time, rich people would hire a manager to look after their affairs – property, finance, and so on. The manager would virtually have free rein to run things as he desired, and one of the things he would do is look after himself – he would take a cut. Much like the tax collectors of the time would take a cut of what they collected before passing it on to their masters. These days, shareholders appoint boards who appoint managers – and managers these days get their cut, too.

This manager seems to have taken a little more than he should have – more likely, perhaps, a lot more than he should have. And the rich man was not happy. There wasn't going to be another chance for the manager – the rich man was definite: "Close off the books and move on."

I guess these days, they'd bring in some forensic accountants to go over the books, but the only option for the rich man of Jesus' story was to tell the manager to finalise things.

I think the first things we might take from this parable is that when our trust is betrayed, when we are taken advantage of, we should withdraw that trust. Don't throw good money after bad. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice shame on me, and on the other side of things, if we are given trust – like the manager was – we should honour it and we should not take advantage of it. Dishonesty has a way of catching up – and dishonesty has a way of building up too.

This manager had done well for himself. He clearly hadn't saved for a rainy day, though, he must have been living well, but it was suddenly going to come to an end. He didn't think he was strong enough to be a manual labourer – to work for a living – and he was too proud to beg.

What to do? Well, he was still manager for a short time. And just like he had used that position to his own benefit before, he did so again.

In accounting terms, he discounted the accounts receivable. He called in the debtors and discounted what they owed the rich man. We only hear the details of two of them, but the implication is that he did it for all of them.

Eight hundred gallons of olive oil was written down to four hundred. A thousand bushels of wheat reduced to eight hundred. Significant amounts. Significant savings for the debtors, and a considerable loss for the rich man.

In reducing those debts, the manager had built up his reputation among the debtors. They'd owe him one – or more than one. He'd do well out of it.

Of course, the rich man should be upset... but he commends the dishonest manager for acting so shrewdly.

And we might rightly wonder if Jesus is commending dishonesty here. What do you think? How do you feel about what the manager did? Was it okay for him to do this?

People often jump to equating the rich man of this parable with God, like we equate the father in the story of the Prodigal Son with God, but there is no indication of that in the parable. The parable doesn't begin "The Kingdom of God is like a rich man whose manager..." I suggest here, that Jesus is teaching us not about God, but about people.

The rich man may have benefited from the manager's quick action and exit, too. He may not have been too happy about the debt reduced, but he could recognise the cleverness of the manager's action.

Jesus said, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly," and if Jesus had ended there we might think he was commending dishonesty, but it doesn't end there. Jesus went on "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light."

People are great at acting in their own interests. If you think that this world is all there is, why wouldn't you take every opportunity, fight for every cent, push others aside to lift yourself up, and act dishonestly or unfairly to secure your future?

That's the people of this world... but then, there are also the people of the light. Believers. Members of the kingdom of God. Those who would come to be called Christians. They are not as shrewd with dealing with their own kind – which might sound like a bit of an insult, I guess, but they (hopefully we!) do sound much better to deal with. If we are following God's ways, then we won't be following the ways of the world. We won't be exploiting others, taking advantage, acting dishonestly and so on. We will be honest and fair and compassionate – our efforts may fail, of course, but that's our aim.

Even if we, as followers of Jesus, as the people of the light, are contrasted with the people of the world, we are still very much in this world: We need to deal with the things of the world and we need to deal with the people of the world. We need to deal with money. We need to deal with the realities of twenty-first century attitudes to money. We need to deal too, with the necessity of money in our society in the twenty-first century... just as the disciples had to deal with the necessities of first century life.

Jesus tells the disciples, the people of the light, us “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” (16:9)

Now that's odd. Shouldn't we be giving money to the poor? To mission? To bible translation? To refugees? They are all good things to do with our money... but here Jesus says something different: use your money to gain friends.

It does seem odd, but it is a contrast to what most people in the world use their money for – which is to make more money (make your savings work for you!), for security and for influence and power. Instead, Jesus says, use your money to make friends.

The dishonest manager of the parable used the rich man's money to make friends, so he would be welcomed into the debtors' houses after he was out of work.

And as we make friends, we will be welcomed into the houses of our new friends, and they can get to know us as people of the light. Not as people who sit in solemn churches and disapprove of what those outside the church do, but as people who are filled with the light – and love – of Jesus. People who have joy in their lives – and people who share that joy.

I don't think it's about 'bribing' people to be our friends, but it's about generosity. Buying lunch or a coffee or a beer. Giving a gift. Sharing a meal. Going on the trip and meeting new people and sharing with them. Joining a club or contributing. Accumulating a huge amount of a certain Danish building block and sharing the joy in that with children and their parents and grandparents and great grandparents. Taking people for a ride in your boat or four-wheel-drive. Using your expensive musical instrument to bring joy to others.

Jesus said, “the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light”. The people of the world will go to great lengths for another dollar... but will the people of the light go to such lengths to share the good news of Jesus? At one level, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, we have the sort of security that the people of the world might long for and strive for... so we do need to strive and work and be shrewd and cunning in the same way, but we should be responding to what Jesus has done for us.

“I tell you,” Jesus said, “Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” (16:9)

When it is gone. When your wealth is gone. When it is" gone, what is there? You can't take it with you. As we heard in our reading from Ecclesiastes (5:15a), "Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart." Or, as I heard it said recently, "Hearse's don't have a luggage allowance." You might have a nice plaque or monument somewhere. Donate enough money and you might get something named after you. Maybe.

We can go back to the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-31) we looked at a few weeks ago, where the rich fool had such a huge harvest he resolved to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, but where God came to him and said, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' – and Jesus concluded, "[That] is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

I think we need to be on our guard against misusing the money – the wealth – that we have. I think it can start with the small things – always letting other people pay, or overstating deductions or whatever it might be. Jesus said "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. 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?"

Our actions with our money, as individuals and as a church, have far-reaching consequences. They are seen by God, of course, but also by other people. They will know we are Christians by our love... and one of the ways our love is seen by those around us is our generosity. There is much resentment in broader society of the amount of wealth accumulated by parts of the church.

Jesus sums up his teaching here in the final verse – which I'm sure we've heard many times – "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."

In the end, it is a choice. We can't be people of the light and people of the world at the same time. But the choice is ours... what choice are we going to make?

Amen.