

The Parables of Jesus Lesson 11

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Leaving the ‘parables of lostness’ in Luke 15, we now turn attention to Luke 16 which begins with the Parable of the Shrewd Manager or also known as the Parable of the Unjust Steward, which is almost universally considered by biblical scholars to be the most difficult of Jesus’ parables to understand.

The Text

Luke 16:1-15 NIV Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² 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.’ ³ “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— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. “The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’ ⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸ “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. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. ¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ “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.” ¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.

Initial Questions

This parable is difficult because it could be interpreted as Jesus praising someone who is unjust and dishonest.

- We are plainly told that this manager is ‘unrighteous’ or ‘unjust’, so why would Jesus speak positively of him?
- We also see that the manager appears to compromise his masters’ resources to win the favor of others, which seems like fraudulent behavior, so it appears like Jesus is approving of this unethical conduct.
- Jesus also uses this as an example of how his followers should be when he says that *‘the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light’* and then he says to *‘use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves’*. So you can see how some could see Jesus as sending a mixed message. So how are we approach this?

In this parable the Manager (or Steward) is unjust in the handling of his Master’s possessions, but Shrewd in looking out for himself when faced with losing his job. His unjustness is condemned, but his shrewdness is commended. The point is not *what* he did, but *how* he acted: he planned ahead, acted decisively, and thought about the future. The lesson is that Believers should be just as thoughtful and intentional in *kingdom matters* as worldly people are in business.

Also, just because the manager negotiates their debts doesn’t mean he was acting fraudulent. Some scholars suggest that he was forgiving his own commission or possibly eliminating unlawful interest, without wrongdoing.

The word shrewd is spoken of by Jesus in the gospels as a positive quality. Shrew means to be wise, prudent, thoughtful, acting with foresight, and intelligence. Jesus says the 'wise' man builds his house on the rock, he said to be 'wise' as serpents and harmless as doves, and he talked about the five 'wise' virgins in the parable of the ten virgins. So this kind of wisdom is commended by Jesus. So even though this manager was unjust in his ethics, he was wise in his strategic planning and thinking.

Summary of the Parable v. 1-8a)

- v. 1 – A manager (working for a rich man) is accused of wasting his master's possessions.
- v. 2 – The rich man tells him: "Turn in your account — you're fired."
- v. 3 – The manager panics: "What will I do? I'm too weak to dig and too ashamed to beg."
- v. 4-7 – So he comes up with a plan:
 - He goes to the rich man's debtors.
 - He slashes their debts: "You owe 900 gallons? Make it 450!" "1000 bushels? Make it 800!"
 - He's trying to make friends quickly, hoping they will help him later when he's unemployed.
- V. 8a – Surprise twist: *The master commends the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly*

Jesus' Commentary (vv. 8b-13)

- v. 8b – "Children of this world" vs. "Children of light": Commends worldly wisdom but implies that disciples should act with even greater foresight in eternal matters, Basically saying that if worldly people are strategic for temporary gain, shouldn't believers be more strategic for eternal outcomes?
- v. 9 – "Make friends with unrighteous wealth": Jesus is saying to use money and other material possessions in a way that aligns with kingdom ethics (generosity, mercy). Basically saying to use what you have to be a blessing to others so that you can lay up eternal rewards in heaven.
- v. 10-12 – Faithfulness with Little vs. Much: Here is the principle of trustworthiness: how one handles earthly wealth reveals fitness for spiritual responsibility.
- v. 13-15 – Cannot serve God and Money: The traditional word "Mammon" means wealth, property, and possessions that has been personified as a master over your life. Here is where the Pharisees come into play. Verse 14 notes that they Pharisees heard this, thus this parable is also a condemnation of their attitude toward wealth, possessions, and stewardship. They used their position and possessions for themselves (like the unjust steward), not for kingdom purposes and reaching others (like Jesus is encouraging).

What Is Jesus Saying?

Jesus is NOT praising dishonesty. Jesus is not telling us to lie, cheat, or steal. He's praising the shrewdness, the urgency, and the foresight of the manager — *NOT* the manager's bad morals.

Jesus is implementing kingdom ethics, such as stewardship and accountability, eternal foresight (how our life now impacts eternity), and the ethics of wealth (Jesus reframes wealth as a tool, not a treasure), and

Application for Today

There are really three main areas that Jesus emphasizes here that we can take and apply to our lives as disciples of Christ and stewards of the gospel and the kingdom.

1. Shrewdness and Wisdom v. 8-9: Disciples of Jesus should be as intentional with eternal things as the world is with temporal things.

- Like the manager, we are called to think ahead—not for self-preservation, but for eternal impact.
- We use time, influence, and money strategically for kingdom purposes—investing in people, serving needs, building community, and advancing the gospel.
- Shrewdness isn't dishonesty—it's Spirit-led wisdom, planning with discernment, courage, and eternity in view.

Be proactive with what God has given you—your relationships, your resources, your job, your influence. Ask, "How can I leverage this for eternal good?"

2. Faithfulness and Trustworthiness v. 10-12: God watches how we handle "little things" to entrust us with greater things.

- Faithfulness is about consistency, not size. What you do with small responsibilities matters deeply to God.
- Earthly wealth and influence are tests and training grounds for true spiritual authority.
- Disciples are stewards, not owners—we are entrusted with God's resources to reflect His character.

Be reliable in how you manage your time, your words, your commitments, and your finances. Small decisions in private shape your trustworthiness before God.

3. Money and Possessions v. 13-15: You can't serve God and money (or Greed)—your heart will follow one or the other.

- Jesus shows the draw of money and riches, that money can become a rival master in our lives if we're not careful.
- Mammon promises security, status, and control, but it blinds us to the values of the kingdom: generosity, humility, and dependence on God.
- The Pharisees loved money and justified themselves outwardly, but Jesus saw the heart—and calls us to align our loyalties with God alone.

Examine what drives our lives and decisions. Is it God or greed? Is it based on fear, image, or self-preservation? Or are they shaped by trust in God's provision and a desire to bless others?