THE SHREWD STEWARD
Come Invest in the Kingdom of God
Text: Psalm 113; Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7

The Dishonest Manager

The parable Jesus tells in Luke 16 hits like a brick, dazing and confusing most of its readers. Jesus tells his disciples: "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."

So far, we get this story, don’t we? We know from our own experience that not everyone to whom management is entrusted always proves faithful or competent. In this case, the poor manager sees that he has been found out and is about to be Donald Trumped. “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.'"

You can see him pacing about and rubbing his head and tossing in bed and filled with dread at the thought of telling his wife. And then, just as suddenly as the shadow fell upon his job, a wave of inspiration sweeps over the manager.

Jesus says: "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' [the customer] replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'" A fifty-percent discount! "Then he asked the second [client], 'And how much do you owe?"' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied." "Well, you've been a great customer," he says. "Let's just knock off twenty-percent as a professional courtesy." "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'"

You can see what he’s doing, can’t you? He confesses it in verse 4: "I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses."

Do you see why some traditions have labeled this story the Parable of the Dishonest Manager? This guy seems like the purchasing agent at a company who awards a cut-rate contract to an inferior vendor in exchange for a future kickback. He’s like the politician who cuts an ethically questionable deal so that some big industry will make a future campaign contribution. He seems like a babysitter who lets the kids get away with murder, in hopes that their friends will wrangle her more jobs downstream. Our natural reaction is to condemn this manager! So what is Jesus getting at when he goes on to say that: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted
shrewdly.” Has Jesus lost his mind?

The Shrewd Steward

No, he’s just trying to help us find ours. In classic Jesus-style, he throws this brick of a story at us, in an effort to shake up our thinking. Anticipating the confusion of his listeners, Jesus supplies this key: “The people of this world,” he says, “are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light” (Luke 16:8). In other words, there is a focused intelligence to the way that even some very corrupt people operate, from which my disciples can learn. Think about this with me. What might you and I actually learn from the example of this controversial character in the story Christ tells?

For ONE thing, he understood that he had been charged with RESPONSIBILITY as a steward. The biblical word used for “manager” here is the word “oikonomos” from which we get the word “economics.” It literally means “steward of the house.” In the ancient world, no one other than the Master himself had greater authority than the “oikonomos.” The “oikonomos” was someone to whom the Master had delegated almost complete control of his property. He’d been given a lot of resource to work with and a lot of latitude in how he used it, so long as he remembered his Master’s interests.

In trying to help the Corinthian Christians understand their identity and mission, St. Paul said: “Think of [yourselves] in this way, as servants of Christ and (oikonomous] stewards” (1 Cor 4:1 NRSV). In other words, Jesus has made us managers of his resources. I can’t pretend that the resources I have are only for my own security or comfort; I am responsible for the Master’s household. I can’t tell myself that I’ve no control over the money – the credit card companies and banks own me; I am responsible for the choices that got me there.

Even the worldly manager understood his responsibility, albeit to a lesser employer. And he understood that with this responsibility came ACCOUNTABILITY. This is the SECOND thing we can learn from him. The manager might have momentarily fooled himself into thinking that the household was all his and that he could do anything he liked with it. But he eventually came to see there comes a time when the true Owner of the riches comes home and says: “What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management.” So it will be for all of us, says Jesus. The message of the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard, and of the Parable of the Talents, and of the Parable of the Shrewd Steward, and of many other stories Jesus tells, is that there will clearly come a day of accounting.

God wants that to be a wonderful day for you and me. His deep desire is that it will be a time of rejoicing and the conferring of even greater resources and
responsibility. God wants to say: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matt 25:21,23)

But here we learn a THIRD thing about stewardship from the example of even this Dishonest Steward. Because of this accountability, and since he’d been lax in his responsibility, the manager shows appropriate HUMILITY. He doesn’t ignore the mess he’s in, as if it could be escaped by denying it. He doesn’t blame his problem on somebody else. He doesn’t make excuses of any kind. He simply goes into a creative crisis and says, “What shall I do now?” (Luke 16:3) Given my circumstances, how can I behave to bring about a brighter future?

Many Christians today need to have a creative crisis like this. We need to do a better job of preparing for our future. Most of the “people of the world” are unabashedly preparing for a future where success and security will be measured in terms of how many comforts they can accumulate for themselves. Meanwhile, Christians SAY that they are heading toward a future where success and security will be measured in terms of how faithful one was to the call and concerns of God.

Yet, this is where things go whacky. As Jesus points out, we “people of the light” don’t seem to be as shrewd in preparing for the future we say we believe in. For example, God calls us to commit at least 10% of our income to the work of his Kingdom; yet research indicates that the average Christian commits barely 1-2% in this way. God calls us to be a community that truly shares the weight and privilege of ministry together; yet 80% of the cost of sustaining a typical local church’s ministry is carried by only 20% of the congregation. God calls us to be his hands that “raise the poor from the dust and lift the needy from the ash heap” (Psalm 113:7); yet the average church mission fund rarely seems to grow very much.

In our lectionary reading from Amos 8, the prophet reminds us that God takes very careful note of those who invest heavily in their own commercial interests while neglecting the concerns of God. “I will never forget anything they have done,” says the Lord. (Amos 8:7). Jesus amplifies this in Luke 16: “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)

What is most disturbing is that we do not appear to be terribly troubled by this. We should be. I ought to be on my knees in profound humility before the Master who gave 100% to meet my needs and toward whose concerns I struggle sometimes to leave what most of us would call a very bad tip. The way
some of us mismanage the resources entrusted to us, we ought to be crying, "What shall I do now?"

This is the FINAL and most important thing we can learn from the manager in Jesus’ parable. **Stewardship implies Responsibility, Accountability, Humility, and MUTABILITY.** MUTABILITY is just an SAT word meaning capacity for change. Did you notice the nature of the change in the manager’s pattern? Don’t get stuck on the fact that he appears to have bilked his boss to do so. That’s not the point of the parable. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that this man changed from investing in his immediate needs to spending in a way that protected his long-term interests. He knew his present position was terminal, so he starts doing things to increase the prospect of his well-being in the next season of life.

He finally realizes that the only treasure he can keep is the kind he stores up in the coin of relationship. He bets that his stunning generosity to these various debtors might be rewarded by kind treatment from them when he really needs it. In the best possible light, he bets that his bold acts will gain his Master a reputation for generosity that will please him too. And, from the response of the human master in Christ’s story, it appears like this imperfect steward has finally managed closer to well.

**What’s Your Management Plan?**

A young executive was racing down a city street in his new Jaguar when a brick suddenly appeared out of nowhere and smashed into his side door. Screeching to a stop, the driver leapt out of the car and managed to collar the kid who’d clearly thrown it. They boy was genuinely apologetic. “I’m very sorry mister, but I didn’t know what else to do to get someone to stop.” With tears welling in his eyes, the youth point to a spot just beyond a parked car. “It’s my brother. He rolled off the curb and fell from his wheelchair. He’s hurt and too heavy for me. Can you please help me lift him up?” The young exec hung his head in humility. “Of course I can,” he said, hurrying over to the crumpled child. It was a long, slow walk back to the Jaguar, but something in the man had changed. He made the decision that he would never repair that dent in his door. He needed it to remind him: “Don’t go through life so fast and faithlessly that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention toward what truly matters.”

Please forgive me for throwing the brick of Christ’s teaching at you today. Believe me, it struck my car too. So let me ask you in closing: What’s your management plan going forward? Are you conscious of being responsible and accountable for what you have and the way you use it? Are you humble enough to recognize that you may not have been managing in the way our ultimate Master has in mind? The evidence of those three qualities will be the presence of the fourth: You will be mutable. You will be willing to change the
way you manage resources.

You’ll realize that the only treasure you get to keep is what you have racked up in the coin of redemptive relationships. If you are a shrewd steward, you will prioritize relationship with your Master, your Church, and the needy people of this world. You’ll start aligning your spending and giving to the reality of a kingdom of light whose center is a very compassionate, generous, relational God.

As we read in 1 Timothy 2: “God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” That’s why in Christ Jesus he “gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Tim 2:4). “No longer do I call you slaves,” Jesus once said to His disciples. “A slave does not know his Master’s business, but all my Father’s desires I have told you that you might pursue them as my Oikonomos. You are my friends, if you do what I have commanded you” (John 15:14-16). “I tell you,” said Jesus, “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9).