

**“Get Smart!”**

**The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13)**

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'*

*Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.*

*I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'*

*So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'*

*He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'*

*Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'*

*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*

*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"*

*No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

It's another parable from Jesus. We continue today with our extended series in the Gospel of Luke, and it's one more story that Jesus tells his disciples to illustrate the kingdom of God. It's a challenging story about a corrupt and dishonest manager who needs to get smart. Get smart. It reminds me when I was a sales manager at Macy's and we had a store manager who, when sales were down, would become angry and say to his managers, *"I'm telling you, you'd*

*better get smart!"*

Jesus appeals to his audience's understanding of commerce and the economy of the time and tells his story through the vantage point of a manager, a typical middleman. Middle management is the same yesterday and today. These are the ones who move the goods from those who have them to those who need them; and they make a living by hook or by crook in that in-between place. But in today's story there's a situation:

*Jesus says to his disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property."*

Fired!

Caught. Called on the carpet. The jig is up; and the party is over.

*So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'*

In other words, "Hand over the books. You're finished." He's fired. Just like that. It happens. Now he is in a tight spot. He is up the creek, as they say, without a paddle.

*The manager says to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.'*

He had it made. He was in a position in which he could make a lot of money for himself, increasing profit margins as much as he wanted; or so he thought. And now he is in big trouble, and he needs to *get smart*.

And then it comes to him—the light bulb goes on. It's the *ah ha!* moment:

*"I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."*

He's got a plan!

Forgive the Debts

We all would like our bills to be reduced, correct? We all want our debts forgiven, right? This is the thought that occurs to the manager. This is what he is going to do. The middleman makes his move.

*So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asks the first, "How much do you owe my master?"*

*"A hundred jugs of olive oil."*

*He says to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty."* What?! He cuts that bill in half!

*Then he asks another, "And how much do you owe?"*

*He replies, "A hundred containers of wheat."*

*He says to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty."*

He's like Crazy Eddie—his prices are insane! But he is determined to secure enough good will from his clients so that when he is put out on the street, he might find a place to stay!

Well Done!

But now the rich master is back in the scene. Word on the street gets back

to him and he wants to see the manager again. But then something surprising happens. Jesus says,

*“His master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.”*

He acted smartly, craftily, strategically. He figured it out! He went about forgiving debts; making good with the people he had been doing business with. Those reductions he is giving back are likely the dishonest manager’s own greedy margins. He has long cheated his customers with his margins; but now he sees the wisdom of going to each and making good and improving his master’s reputation in the process. Brilliant. This is the kind of move that will make the master say, “Well done!”

Yet while Jesus is complimentary of the dishonest manager, he then delivers a rather tough indictment to his listeners

*“For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”* Wow. Take *that*, disciples.

The manager is a child of the age; meaning he lives and operates within the system of the age. But according to Jesus at least he knows what he is doing when it comes to dealing with the people of his generation. The children of the light, however, the people of God, the Church, are apparently not as smart. And it’s time to get smart.

#### The Lesson of the Parable

To be shrewd means to be smart. And it’s time to get smart about some choices.

*“I tell you,”* Jesus says, *“make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”*

In other words, you better think about the future, and do whatever it takes to secure your wellbeing. In this case, faithfully make friends even through dishonest wealth because here’s the point: And these are the words of Jesus,

*“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”*

Then Jesus delivers the ultimate lesson of the parable: *“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”*

Don’t be hung up on the word “wealth.” Expand the meaning and know it’s not merely money at issue here. Wealth in this context represents the entire system—the economy of the age that cheats some and benefits others. When you are running the system, you work it to your advantage as you look out for yourself. The spirit of the age is not just a rigged system keeping power and wealth in the hands of a few, it is an entire paradigm that isolates, divides and alienates us one from another, with narrow self-preservation guiding our lives. It is the opposite of the self-giving kingdom of God. These are two different

systems. In the end, you cannot live in both systems. You will either serve God, or you will serve yourself. And when we only serve ourselves the day comes when all is stripped away and we find ourselves in a tough spot.

#### The Lesson for Us

But there is good news. First, like my old store manager used to say, we need to:

**Get smart.** Realize the predicament we are in, and know the time for change has come. The Spirit of God is always drawing us to make this move. That is the grace of God. And the move is to:

**Repent.** It's the *ah ha!* moment when we realize we must make things right; when we turn from serving ourselves to serving God and others. And the foundational action that undergirds our repentance is to:

**Forgive.** It's the way of life for the disciple of Jesus Christ. It's embedded in how he taught us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The manager in today's story makes it his business to call upon all the debtors and to, one by one, forgive their debts. And we are able to forgive others because—and this is the good news—God has forgiven us. What happens then is our natural response:

**We serve God.** This is the ultimate aim that guides the spiritual quest we are on. This is our coming to terms with the creator of the universe. This is acknowledging the reality of Jesus Christ, the forgiver of all debts. This is our salvation, our connection to the divine. This is our restored relationship with the Trinity, which informs our relationship with each other in community. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—our model of a loving community which becomes the way for us as we make our way through this life with each other.

There are opportunities for us to serve God that always present themselves in how we serve each other. When we get smart and come to the realization that serving others is far more rewarding than serving ourselves, we return to the one-ness of creation and hear the Creator say, "Well done!" Amen.