

Jesus' Greatest Hits

The Shrewd Manager

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[VIDEO: THE LENNOX BUILDING]

Have you ever been laid off? If you were given two-weeks notice, your bank account was low, and you weren't eligible for unemployment ... what would you do? What if you had access to company funds, and you could cut yourself a check? You wouldn't do that. In the parable of The Shrewd Manager, we meet a man in a similar situation who creates his own generous "severance package".

Jesus told 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.' 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 - I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' 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,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' 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.' 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. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. - *Luke 16:1-9 NIV*



People have a problem with this parable because it sounds like we're supposed to imitate the dishonest manager. But, Jesus likes to do this; to use scoundrels to engage His listeners. Remember the persistent widow who had to plead with the unjust judge? Jesus compared that to prayer!



Parables are not "allegories" (where every detail has a particular meaning (i.e. The Chronicles of Narnia).

They're more like a cross between a joke and a riddle.

- A. Riddles, because they're intended to make us think.
- B. Jokes, because you either "get" them, or you don't.

We shouldn't get too caught up in the details.



We're also told that: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thes. 5:2). But that doesn't mean He'll sneak in a window! "Hey, honey, better lock up the jewelry; Jesus might be coming!" "We should probably beef up our security!"

And, like a good joke, many of Jesus' parables contain an element of surprise at the end, to shock his listeners. Remember the vineyard owner who pays equal wages to unequal hours? Or, the despised Samaritan who comes to the aid of his enemy?

Today's surprise is when the master compliments the shrewdness of his dishonest business manager. But let's notice, the boss commends his cleverness, not his crookedness. He used what was at his disposal, with what limited time he had left, to win friends, influence people, and secure his future. And for whatever reason, it's clear from the story, that the master is either unable or unwilling to undo what the manager has done. There are two fun theories for why this might be:

- A. The Great Rebate Theory (There's no indication the men receiving these rebates knew they were involved in something unscrupulous).



It'd be like buying a car, and a couple months later, the manager calls and tells you about a rebate he'd overlooked. He takes care of the paperwork, and you get a huge refund! You'd be impressed with his integrity, AND you'd recommend this dealership to all your friends and family.

Now, if this happened to several customers, and the owner demanded the refunds be returned, he'd hurt his business' reputation. So, he'd suck it up and just enjoy the good P.R. He might even think twice about firing the manager that people are now going to ask for by name.

- B. The High Interest Theory (Some theologians believe the manager refunded the interest that had been paid on business loans).



Ancient interest rates were extremely high. Business risks were high, and returns on successes were high. In fact, 50% interest on a commodity loan was actually quite typical!

However, Mosaic Law forbids a Jew from charging interest to a brother Israelite (Deut. 23:19). To sneak around this, some would hire non-Jewish managers to charge it, and collect it. If the shrewd manager was refunding interest, the boss' hands would've been tied. He won't re-charge it, and he can't even complain about it without incriminating himself!

I can see that ol' boss heading into the marketplace for a final meeting to settle accounts with his business manager. Suddenly, men begin rushing up to him,

bowing and embracing him, shaking his hand, kissing his cheeks, shouting their praises, proclaiming his generosity and his godliness! Meanwhile, the manager just sits back, sips his drink, and smiles. Whether it was a rebate, or an interest refund, he got to stick it to the boss, secure his own livelihood, and stay out of prison in the process. It may have been shady ... but it was sure shrewd!

Q: So, what's the basic "punch-line" we're supposed to "get"?

Jesus' primary point seems to be how much more deliberate and resourceful worldly businessmen are with temporal investments, than believers are with eternal ones.

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. - *Luke 16:8 NIV*

Jesus expects His followers to use spiritual wisdom just as shrewdly - smartly, creatively, skillfully, even cunningly - as the world uses secular wisdom.



You know, that's why we put a chair on the roof! We want to capture attention, and make people curious. And we do all of this, so that we might later have an opportunity to show them how generous our "boss" is. Have you been using that ol' chair as an opportunity to talk to your people about what's going on in your church?

And then Jesus follows it up with some riddle-like advice:

I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. - *Luke 16:9 NIV*

Now, this makes you stop and think. He's obviously not telling us to be deceptive, or that we can buy our way into Heaven. So, what is His point? Think ... think ... think.



The worldly possessions that I "convert" my cash into will eventually fade away. But the relationships I invest in are eternal! I can't take it with me, but I can send it on ahead.



For instance, if you were going to move to a country where they traded nuts instead of money, how much of your cash would you convert to nuts, in preparation for your trip? I think Jesus is saying that Heaven is kind of like that. We'll have to leave our money behind, but, we can take as many "nuts" as we can convert!

The shrewd manager made some friends in high places (these were high-end business loans; think Jerusalem Wall Street). Jesus says we should make friends in the highest of places: Heaven! Who's going to be on your welcoming committee in Heaven? If you're making money and losing friends, you're going about it all wrong. Take Jesus' hot investment tip: convert your cash into eternal treasure by using it to convey God's love.

Ever see an avid fisherman whose garage is so overrun with his passion that it looks like a sporting goods store?! How much do you invest as a fisher of men?

There are three things we can learn from The Shrewd Manager:

1. He wasn't the owner: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions." - *Luke 16:1 NIV*

The word, "wasting" is the same used in "The Prodigal Son," when the son "wastes" or "squanders" his inheritance on loose living. It suggests self-indulgent squandering. He wasn't fired because he made a couple bad investments; he was fired because he was squandering the money as if it was his own! Likewise, we are managers who'll be called to account.



God is the owner, I am the manager. My top priority should be to accomplish the goals of the owner. We're much wiser and more cautious when we use something that belongs to someone else. That's why we should keep in mind that we'll be held accountable for how we handle God's property.

2. He acted swiftly: "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'" - *Luke 16:6 NIV*



We're called to live a life of joy and peace, but not a life of leisure, with no managerial obligations or responsibilities. He knew he was facing a deadline. Our mission isn't frantic, but it is urgent. Our time is limited.

3. He acted shrewdly: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." - *Luke 16:8 NIV*

Not because he was dishonest, but because he was shrewd. The wages of sin is death – this is the debt mankind owes to God. But, as His managers, we can offer the ultimate rebate: not just the interest that incurred, but *total* debt cancellation! And those whose lives we touch in His name (using the resources we've been put in charge of) will be overjoyed, they will embrace Him, and bow to Him, and shout their praises, and proclaim His glory. And Jesus is warning us not to let our opportunities just pass us by.

Let's see how well you've been listening; answer true or false when I ask the questions. In this passage, we've learned that:

1. Jesus wants us to be more like the world ... in shrewdness.
2. I must remember that I'm the owner and God's the manager.
3. The best investments are relationships that last forever.
4. One of Heaven's rewards is a big ol' welcoming committee.