

Being a Shrewd Steward

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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Luke 16:1-13



Okay, let's just say it up front: this is a difficult parable. All our children and youth Sunday school classes, and one adult class, use the same text that we use in worship, and more than one of the teachers of these classes has found a way to say to me, "What is up with this parable? Do you have any insight?" To which I respond, "I was hoping you did."

Turning to biblical scholars is not much help either. One says, "On the face of it the steward looks like a junk-bond artist who not only saves his skin by defrauding his master, but wins praise for doing so." Another says, "Jesus seems to be holding up a criminal act as an example to be emulated." Luke Timothy Johnson says, "The problem we face is that although Luke consistently talks about possessions, he does not talk about possessions consistently." How's that for a bit of New Testament Zen?

Everyone seems to agree, even those with a lifetime of study: this is a difficult parable.

So forgive me if I venture what may seem a foolish possibility, given all this consensus. What if this parable is really quite simple? What if we make it difficult because we do not in the end really want to hear what it says to us, what it summons from us? What if in the end the parable, like all of Jesus' parables, is about the grace of living in the light of the kingdom of God as disciples, a grace that is not cheap, but grace just the same, the pathway to the kind of life Jesus calls abundant?

I don't know that I would ever have seen it this way, had it not been for *Schindler's List*.

I'm sure many of you remember that difficult movie that came out in 1993. It detailed the life of Oskar Schindler, a Czech businessman and member of the Nazi Party; a vain and greedy person who becomes an unlikely humanitarian when he feels compelled to turn his factory into a refuge for Jews.

He is distasteful in every way. In 1939, he watches the disestablishment of the Jews and sees at first not an injustice, but an opportunity for cheap labor. The Nazis are closing Jewish businesses, forcing them into ghettos, stripping them of all their money, and Schindler sees this and thinks, “Here is an entire group of unemployed workers desperate for a few bucks. I can hire them for a quarter of the pay of other workers. I’ll make a killing.” Thus he becomes a participant in the oppression of a whole group of people. But as the saying goes, “It’s not personal, it’s business.” He is an opportunist in every way.

When he sees the death camp at Auschwitz, something shifts in him – we might call it grace. It causes a crisis of conscience for him. He responds by turning his shrewd mind away from his own gratification and toward others. He begins bribing the Nazis and buying goods on the black market in order to feed and clothe his workers. He ultimately moves his factory from Poland, where the workers would most certainly have been killed, to the Sudetenland, where they were ultimately saved. By the time the war was over, Schindler had no money to his name, having spent all his profits in bribes and black market purchases for ever-larger luxury items as bribes for the Nazis.

He is a complicated figure, not any less shrewd by the end of the war than at its beginning, but his cleverness has been redirected toward others, rather than himself, toward life rather than death. He empties himself in order to save others. And even though he was a member of the Nazi Party and someone whose business was built on the back of oppressed Jews, in 1963 the Nation of Israel named him as Righteous Among the Nations, an honor given to those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. He was the only member of the Nazi Party to receive this honor.

And now look at the manager in this parable. He is the middle man in an enterprise in which the rich exploit the poor. The rich property owners are owed money by the poor farmers who work their land. Landowners allow farmers to build homes and farm on their land for a cut of the profit. Of course, the cut of the profit is enough to forever keep these forerunners of sharecroppers dependent and forever in debt.

Keeping track of this arrangement is carried out by managers, also known as stewards. They are hired by the master, the landowner, to collect their debts and manage their properties. The managers collected the debt owed to the owner, plus a commission. The managers made their living by sticking it to the farmer a second time. And it was all legal.

And then, a crisis emerges in the midst of this arrangement. The landowner gets word that the manager is mismanaging his property. He confronts his manager, who

doesn't dispute the charges. He is about to be fired. The tension of the parable revolves around this one question: what will the manager do in the moment of crisis?

He is shrewd, which in the Greek can also mean discerning, clever, or prudent. He sees the crisis clearly. He comes up with a plan.

He goes to the people that owe his employer money and reduces their debt. How does he do it? It seems from all the evidence we can find in the parable that he eliminates his own commission. Now, instead of owing one hundred jugs of olive oil, one debtor only owes fifty; and instead of one hundred containers of wheat, another owes eighty.

In one bold move, the manager has turned these farmers into his friends, people who will have favors to return once he is unemployed. The landowner commends the manager for his cleverness. Far from being angry (after all, he's not going to be out any money), he recognizes smarts when he sees them.

Then the parable is over, and Jesus makes the comment that serves I believe as the key to interpreting the entire passage: "The children of this world are shrewder than the children of light. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that you may be welcomed into the eternal homes."

Placed in the context of Jesus' other teachings on wealth in Luke's Gospel, it is clear that what one preacher wrote of wealth remains true: "it begs to be served." We can use it to enrich ourselves and make people beholden to us, or we can use it to make friends and serve the eternal God. We can utilize our resources of money and time and energy for the Kingdom, or we can put them to work for ourselves. We can be discerning, clever, prudent, and shrewd in serving God or serving money, but the whole point of the parable is that we cannot do both.

Jesus is saying, "Church, be equally as clever as this manager, *he* as criminal, *you* as one who is a citizen of the Kingdom of God."

The thing that is praised about the shrewd manager is his ability to tell the time. When his Master comes to him, he knows it is a crisis that demands a response. For him, the crisis is such that he is willing to lose his money in order to gain friends, so that he might have a place to go when he is unemployed. The only thing really to emulate there or praise is his awareness, and his willingness, once aware, to put everything on the line to save his skin.

Jesus, remember, is talking to his disciples now, not the crowds. And so these words are for those who follow him, the ones he calls “the children of light.” The parable asks them, “Do *you* know what time it is? Do you realize the Kingdom of God has drawn near?” If so, we are face to face with our own crisis- what we might call the crisis of grace.

After all, this is the crisis Jesus brings – the awareness that we are not our own, the awareness that all we have and are is a gift, the awareness that our lives, our next breath, our time, our wealth, our world, all of it, down to the smallest molecule, all if it is gift. Gift. We who are so keen on self-preservation, we who can get trapped in the illusion of being self-made, we who can so easily believe that the only way we will make it is if it is by our own shrewdness, we are encountered with a crisis of awareness in Christ. The world is not upheld by us, by our power or smarts or resources. At the deepest level, the world is upheld by grace alone.

Frederick Buechner’s definition of grace remains my favorite and I believe captures the spirit of this parable. “The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.”

To reach out and take it. That is the invitation of the parable, that is the crisis of grace. Who knows what it will cost us? Who knows where it will lead us? Maybe to building houses with strangers who become friends, maybe to the darkest corners of the earth or people’s lives, where the children of light can illuminate, maybe even to the doorway of death, where we can proclaim life, abundant and eternal. Who knows? That’s the invitation of the parable.

The kingdom has drawn near in Christ. We are his managers, his stewards in the world. Let us take the risk of following. Grace will lead us home. Amen.