

**January 31, 2021**  
**The Taming of the Shrew(d) Manager**  
**Luke 16:1-15**  
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I recall leading a bible study on this parable one time while I was still with IVCF. I was asked by one student if this was the real bible study, or if I was playing a joke with a made up parable.

This parable is not what we have come to expect from the bible. The characters are all wrong, and the manager gets commended for what looks like pretty blatant dishonesty! Are we missing something here? Was Jesus being sarcastic? Is God condoning fraud? How does being even more dishonest gain him welcome into other's homes and provide for him? Exactly how is this a lesson we can learn from the world about the use of money?

First of all, I want to go through the parable and talk a little bit about what is happening here, from a cultural perspective, because we are from a culture so vastly different than the one Jesus lived in, that we are bound to miss the point of this.

The first thing to notice is the dollar amounts that we are dealing with, and these are easy to miss because we need to do some currency adjusting. You see, 50 jugs of oil and 20 containers of wheat are both worth around 500 denarii. In today's terms, the manager just cost his master around \$300,000.

That seems like a staggering amount of money yet is only a portion of what the owner is owed! Even at the reduced rate, the owner is still going to receive some \$700,000 from his tenants.

We are not talking about a slumlord squeezing pennies out of poverty-stricken tenants, here. We are talking about the huge transactions of the very wealthy. Even to owe this much money makes each tenant wealthy in their own right. So what does the manager gain in these transactions?

How would you feel if someone came up to you and said, "My parents just paid off half your mortgage"?

In Jesus' culture, they would feel many of the same things. Humble gratitude. Obligation. Impressed at the wealth and generosity displayed to be able to forgive such a vast sum. And they would not be impressed by the manager, but by the master's largesse. The manager has set himself up to be merely the purveyor of good news.

This is also not a very private dealing. Word about this kind of generosity gets around. Transactions like this would be done either in a market or at a city gate, somewhere

with witnesses to make it legally binding. Imagine the jaws dropping on the city elder's faces as the manager wipes a third of a million dollars off his master's profits. Imagine them speaking to their families that evening and lamenting that they are not tenants of such a generous landlord.

The increase in the master's standing in the community is huge. Everyone is talking about him, and it is all good. This is the best kind of PR money can buy! Even better, the tenants are now ecstatic! They fight to remain with this landlord, and even if some of them use their wealth to buy their own land, more tenants will line up to rent from this guy. Happy tenants are productive tenants!

And the way that the manager has gone about all of this is very shrewd. The master is getting all of the glory, but in a way that makes it look like the manager was incredible. He'd done such a good job managing the estate that the master could afford all of this largesse and generosity.

And the master can't call him out on it publicly, because he would lose all of the honor that he'd just gained! Check and mate.

So, why does the master commend the manager? Is it a case of a simple slow clap, and a well played? Is the master admiring the man who has just defeated him?

I don't think so. I think that there is some genuine respect there. After all, what do you get the person who has everything?

Proverbs 22:1 helps us to understand the value system in an honor-based culture. It says, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

So, what do you get the person that has everything? You get them the one thing that money can't buy: Respect. Honor. Esteem.

What, then, is Jesus commending in this parable? Here is where it gets a little bit close to home.

You see, shrewd businesspeople understand that to make things happen, you need some kind of leverage, some kind of favour to exchange. Often, it takes the form of money. Other times it takes the form of power: giving access to something otherwise unobtainable. And still other times, it comes in the form of obligation. Yet it remains, this is how the world works. You need to be willing to exchange something that I value for me to give you what you value.

This is something that Christians, the children of the light, don't seem to understand. We try to influence events and people according to the rules of the world, without

success, because we are supposed to be playing an entirely different game. We keep score with money, trade it for consumables and stuff, and seek positions of power. We want to be private and independent, just like the rich and famous of the world. In this, we squander the material resources we've been given.

In stead, we need to be the people who recognize what is truly valuable. God, the master, literally has everything. So what in the world can we get him? What good does a full bank account do God? What good does a larger home, an early retirement, or a tropical vacation do in the kingdom of God? He already owns it all. We fail to understand that.

The one thing that God has declared must be given to him freely is relationship. He will not bring people into his kingdom by force. So, the one thing that the children of light can bring to their father is other people.

So, this is the overview of our parable today, but I fear that I've put it too gently. Look at how this story ends:

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. 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."

Oof.

Bruce was lamenting that the parables sometimes don't preach well because they are so confrontational. If we really unpack them, they are so offensive to our comfort and sensibilities that people just stop listening. These verses do just that.

What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.

Two things come to mind recently that the church in Canada values highly which are detestable in the eyes of God. Now, I've heard that one shouldn't preach about politics or money, so we are going to handle both of them in one sermon.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the world woke up to President-elect Donald Trump. Many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, bemoaned this event, asking, "How could God allow such a person to lead the free world?" On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the world woke up to President-elect Joe Biden. Many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, wailed, and asked, "How could God allow this to happen!" This is not just an American issue! November 5, 2015, the NDP swept to power after four decades of conservative power. Some Christians smiled at the dawning of the new era, others saw the end approaching. And then again, April 16, 2019, the UCP won by a landslide. Christians either celebrated the rescue of Alberta by the Christian right, or bemoaned the loss to the capitalist beast.

Friends, holding power in human systems is not the way to influence events and people. Remember Joshua, in chapter 5. The Israelites were invading Canaan, taking the land promised to them by God. And this is what we read:

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come."

This is a chilling revelation. Humans throughout history have appropriated God to their cause. Seeing a cross draped in a flag is a common sight in many places. The crusades, Residential schools, white supremacy, Q-anon. . . the list goes on.

But God is not for us in our causes. Neither is he for our adversaries. He is God. Shrewdness is us being for God.

Friends, to be a follower of Jesus is to be brought out of petty power struggles, and invest heavily in using our influence to lift up the lost and lonely, the hungry and homeless, the addict and the immigrant. As God's people, we are neither for nor against political power. We exist outside that system, using every ounce of our influence to live in contrast to the games of the powerful.

This is not to say that Christians should never serve in public office. But it is a nearly impossible predicament, to be constantly called by constituents, party and lobby to make decisions that are of no benefit to their true loyalty – what is truly valuable in the kingdom of God?

The second thing that I believe our culture has an addiction to is wealth.

The middle section of this story talks about the children of the world being more shrewd than the children of light.

When I was in Ukraine with an IV team, I saw this first hand. One of our students developed a fever of over 40 degrees, stopped eating, slept continuously, and became slightly incoherent. Obviously concerned, we took him to the hospital. After paying the admitting fee, we also paid a technician fee, a printing fee, and a diagnosis fee. All of this to have the doctors diagnose the what was a bad variant of the flu as tuberculosis, since the flu involves a lot of paperwork.

The world values money. We've proven that humanity is willing to do anything to gain money. Slavery, drugs, war over oil, murder, and unjust trade practices that result in

poverty – all of these are often economically driven. The world is willing to trade their morality, ethics, and soul to get more of what is really valued: money.

What, then does it look like, to be more shrewd as children of light?

In Canada, 58% of the food we produce, some 35.5 million metric tonnes, is lost or wasted every year. This in a world where, according to WHO statistics, 8,500 children die every day because of malnutrition. The majority of food wasted is in the global west, areas dominated by Christianity for centuries. The majority of starvation is in the global south. Experts do not want us to try to produce more food to solve world hunger. They want us to invest money in the infrastructure we need to distribute what we have. God would have us give food to those who cannot even pay for it. Because that trades a commodity for a relationship. That is shrewdness.

Did you know that God forbade charging interest on loans? Deuteronomy 23:19 says, "Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest." Interesting.

Interest is a systemic problem globally. It is simply a way of rewarding people for having money. If you have money, you have the privilege of earning more money. If you do not already have money, you pay a penalty to those who do. This is an example of systemic injustice, and it crushes people so that the rich get richer. Experts understand that heavily indebted developing countries need their debt levels reduced by up to two thirds in order to provide medical care, education, and infrastructure to meet their populations' basic needs. God would have the children of light actively give money away rather than hoarding it for interest, in the hope that people have enough to eat, clothes to wear, and medicine for the sick.

That is shrewdness.

This is what the children of light need to recognize – what humanity values is detestable in God's sight. The world will trade creation, whether it is people, the land, the oceans or the air, for crass money. Rather, the children of the light need to leverage the material wealth of human systems to gain what really has value in God's eyes: honor, status and influence based on generosity, relationship, kindness, and morality. The children of the light need to be seen, publicly, to be overwhelmingly generous, overwhelmingly caring for creation, overwhelmingly feeding the hungry and overwhelmingly using our influence for the outsiders of society.

How about it? Are we, am I, being as shrewd as I can be, but with kingdom values in mind?