

*Luke 16:1-13. In the Parable of the Shrewd Manager, Jesus told about a manager who lost his job. Suddenly, the man had an urgent need and concocted an unethical plan to enhance his future.*

*Jesus doesn't commend anyone in this parable, but uses a worldly example to make a heavenly point. Time is short. Eternity is long. Plan accordingly.*

The robber barons who built America were shrewd, often heartless businessmen driven to win. Consider Cornelius Vanderbilt who owned the only rail bridge in and out of New York City—the Albany Bridge. It was the rail industry's lifeline to the nation's busiest port at the time. When Vanderbilt shut it down, Wall Street bled. The share prices of all his rivals plunged so far and so fast that Vanderbilt bought them out at pennies on the dollar.

John Rockefeller and JP Morgan were much the same as Vanderbilt. Rockefeller bought all the goods for making oil barrels, undercut his rivals until they begged for mercy, and then bought them out. As for Morgan, there was a time when he would stop at nothing to hold the patents on A.C. electricity. So, he litigated George Westinghouse to the verge of bankruptcy and then took what he wanted.

The story of the robber barons is sickening, but it's a story neither black nor white. Business ethics? They had none. They were shrewd even cutthroat competitors in a game. Yet, many of these men were also great philanthropists. It was Andrew Carnegie who said, "The man who dies rich, dies disgraced." Having made billions in the steel industry, he made that money work for the good of others, and gave 90% of it away. Rockefeller, likely the richest man in history, gave away more than half of his net worth by the end.

It seems the robber barons left us some good lessons in giving and perhaps a few lessons in business. Good lessons sometimes arise from the worst examples, don't they? Keep this in mind as we look at Luke 16 on Jesus' parable about a shrewd, ungodly manager.

## A SHREWD MANAGER

(LUKE 16:1-8)

"Hire slow. Fire fast." It's a business maxim that the rich man in this parable didn't seem to know. He had hired a manager who frittered away his assets. Rather than fire the man immediately, he let him go back unsupervised to turn in his ledger (Lk 16:1-2). It doesn't seem so bad until you realize the manager had time to make mischief on his way out.

Being fired wasn't a brisk walk down the hall with security to clean out the company desk. In this case it meant a distant journey back to one of the boss's homes. The rich man in Jesus' story may have had many homes and needed someone to oversee at least some of them. He wasn't around, and his land needed oversight to produce a good harvest. His servants needed direction for their work. This wealthy landowner had numerous investments... and some were still in the hands of the man he'd just fired (Lk 16:1-2).

It's humorous, because it's ridiculous. Some of Jesus' parables were like this—ironically amusing. In this one, He was speaking to His disciples in a public place where many passing by could overhear. People would have been intrigued by this parable, possibly chuckling at first. The Lord was drawing a crowd. Whether you look at this parable or any other, all contain a twist where Jesus confronts His hearers.

Back to the parable... The manager had lost his job and would soon be on the streets. He knew it and said to himself: "What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg" (Lk 16:3). He had enjoyed a lofty position with great authority and the respect of many. He wasn't about to beg or work with his hands. He was too good for that, but what now? What could he do?

*Eureka! I'll reduce the loans!* A plan came to mind. Part of the man's job included lending his boss's money. He had approved applicants, negotiated agreements, even processed the loan payments. His mind went to work when he realized: *I can still modify the terms of those loans.*

The manager began to contact as many debtors as possible. One loan involved 100 measures of oil (~1000 gallons). This was sizeable to which the manager said to the debtor: "Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty." *Hurry up! We don't have much time!* To another who owed 100 measures of wheat (~1000 bushels), he said: "Take your bill and write eighty" (Lk 16:6-7). That much wheat might have required 100 acres! Huge loans were on the books, and he had the authority to approve some massive reductions. Why did he do it? To make his master's debtors indebted to him. He could say: *Remember that time when I reduced your loan? I helped you... now I need you to help me.*

Call it horse trading, *quid pro quo*, back scratching—it's how the world works. What the manager did was legal, though entirely unethical. When the landowner discovered the truth, he knew he had no legal

# A Good Lesson from a Bad Example

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recourse. He had been outdone, totally outsmarted. He could only shake his head and “commend” the man (Lk 16:8). He knew it was a well-played scheme... and of course, he hoped to never see that manager again.

## FINANCIAL PLANNING

(LUKE 16:9)

*Luke 16:8b—“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”*

Where money can be made, don't expect to find love, honesty, or even real friendships. Expect to see a survival-of-the-fittest kind of ethic where one person climbs over another for the next dollar or advantage. The manager in Jesus' parable had a need, saw an opportunity, and took it. It was nothing personal, just business.

Jesus doesn't want us to emulate anyone in the parable. He illustrates how the world works. He draws our attention to the world's shrewd planning. In this case, a crisis confronted a man as he stood to lose his income and home. What did he do? Anything imaginable to avert it. The idea is that “the sons of this world” will do anything for a future so quickly fading. In contrast are “the sons of light” whose future only grows brighter. Yet, that future often has no bearing on their present use of time and money.

If life is only four-score and twenty before you cease to exist, then *carpe diem!* But that's not the case. This life is an infinitesimally small span of time, a blip next to eternity, and yet it matters what you do with it. The thrust of Jesus' parable is to spend your time and money strategically. Shrewd businessmen spend it strategically. They agonize to do this; why don't God's people? We should invest our resources shrewdly always thinking of an unfading future in Heaven.

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**“THE IMPORTANCE OF MONEY FLOWS FROM IT BEING A LINK BETWEEN THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE”**

— JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES.

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The disciples didn't have much money, but what little they had was a gift from God. And what were they to do with it? Jesus said to use wealth to “make friends that will welcome you into Heaven” (Lk 16:9). Bless other believers with your surplus, bless your church with it, or bless missionaries as they proclaim the gospel. When someone repents and turn to Christ for salvation, guess what? All who helped reach them will have made a friend for eternity.

Be as shrewd as the manager in Jesus' parable when it comes to kingdom enterprises. Think hard. Weigh them carefully. Plan and strategize how to invest your present resources in ways that will impact eternity.

Jesus wanted His disciples to realize they couldn't take anything with them when they die. Do you have a nice home? Enjoy it, but realize you can't take it with you. A sporty car? Enjoy it, but understand it's going to rust. You won't even remember it in a hundred years from now. The world works so hard at acquiring and holding onto things it can't keep. Don't do this (Matt 6:19-21). The only thing you can keep when you die is the yield from investments you made in God's work and His people.

## FAITHFUL WITH LITTLE

(LUKE 16:10-13)

It would've been easy for the disciples to think this is all well and good... *but we don't have anything to invest anywhere.* With what money could the disciples possibly invest in God's work?

Sometimes we think in a similar way: *Lord, if I just had a million dollars, then I would really give to You.* And yet, Jesus added that “one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much” (Lk 16:10). Realize that if you aren't faithful with your current income, you won't be faithful with double or triple. If you haven't been too faithful with \$50,000, you won't be faithful with \$5,000,000. The key to investing in God's work isn't more money, but the right master.

*Luke 16:13—“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

Financial faithfulness involves saving (Prov 6:6-8), receiving counsel (Prov 14:15), caution with debt (Prov 22:7), patient investing (Prov 13:11), and giving (Prov 3:9). It also involves shrewd planning. Think strategically with the resources God has given.

The manager in Jesus' parable was driven to secure his future. The disciples, however, didn't need to secure theirs. And why? Because Christ had secured it for them. A glorious future awaited, and such is the case for all who belong to Christ.

Rather than being driven like the world to secure by any means a future that won't last, live in light of eternity. In Christ, the believer's home is certain. May we use what God has given today to add to our joy tomorrow.