

The Shrewd Secret to Our Success

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. ² 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.’ ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ 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.’ ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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.”

Ever watch a show where you find yourself rooting for the crooked character? Sure, they might be dishonest or participate in some shady dealings, but they are also likeable and witty and shrewd. What we may have once labeled clearly as a bad actor becomes more and more complicated once we begin to see know their deeper story. Jesus tells a story about an irresponsible manager. He has participated in some shady transactions and during audit time his boss calls him onto the carpet. He knows he going to be sacked soon so he starts making deals with customers. To top things off, at the end of the story Jesus tells his disciples to be more like that guy! I mean, listen to it: “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.” What does that mean? Is Jesus really commending the dishonest steward, or is there something deeper going on?

Begin with context. In Jesus’ day, Jewish law forbid anyone to charge anyone else interest on a loan. But there’s always a way around God’s law isn’t there! So if someone wanted a \$1k loan, a wealthy proprietor would simply write an invoice for \$1,200 worth of corn and the extra \$200 would be inflated to cover the interest. Interest is where the money is. Sort of like how we get ads from credit card companies selling a 4.9% interest rate. But then there’s those three little letters APR (above the principal rate) and suddenly it’s inflated to 15% interest. It’s a racket! Did you know: If you had used \$1k in credit and only paid the minimum payment every month—assuming no late fees and you bought nothing else—it would take six years to pay it off and the 1k loan would cost \$1500. If you had \$5k in credit and made minimum payments it would take 13 and ½ years and cost \$8k. How does a poor person ever get out of debt? Interest is where the

money is. We punish embezzlers, but not those who dehumanize in the name of good business. It's a racket, but interest is where the money is. In Jesus' time and in ours.

But see what the shrewd manager does? He knows he's about to get sacked. So he looks down at his smooth hands and says, "These hands are not going to do much manual labor." Then he looks at his smooth pride and says, "I'm not going to sit on some street corner with a cardboard sign." So what does he do? He marks down the bills by taking away the interest. Now of course, it's a CYA move. He figures he better make friends because after he's canned, he is going to need someone who will take pity on him and hopefully he can cash in on the favor.

Well, to our surprise how does the boss respond? He approves of the manager, not because he's dishonest, but because he is shrewd. Shrewd might sound like a negative thing but it is about being astute, reading the current situation and acting accordingly. Did you ever hear the joke about outrunning the bear? It goes something like this: *Two friends are in the woods, having a picnic. They spot a bear running at them. One friend gets up and starts running away from the bear. The other friend opens his backpack, takes out his running shoes, changes out of his hiking boots, and starts stretching. "Are you crazy?" the first friend shouts, looking over his shoulder as the bear closes in on his friend. "You can't outrun a bear!" "I don't have to outrun the bear," said the second friend. "I only have to outrun you!"*

The owner approves because the manager is being astute. He knows how to read the situation and act accordingly. Some might say the church has to be shrewd these days. We have to look at our situation realistically and act accordingly. We have to restructure our committees and reassess our priorities regarding how we are going to function as the church moving forward. The dishonest manager in the story acts shrewdly and perhaps it is his astuteness to reality that Jesus is commending. Perhaps.

But notice what else is going on. Jesus says, "If 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?" Again, what is he talking about?! The parable is not Jesus' best. It's confusing and complicated. But then it hit me. You see, the manager has to trade in his dependency on wealth for a dependency on something else: other people. He has to trade in the illusion that his wealth and privilege is a security, for a deeper reality that when the rubber hits the road, we are interdependent on each other. The true riches aren't when we strike gold, but when we awaken to the beautiful truth that God has given us one another. To walk with. To work with. To worship with.

Now that we are officially in fall, means we are traditionally in stewardship season. Except, stewardship has often been about one thing and only one thing: money! I mean, sure, we say it is about time, talents, and then treasure! But we all know when we say this we are burying the lead. Except, the shrewd secret to our success isn't we need to build up the bank account, or build more programs that attract people. The shrewd secret is simply one thing and only one thing: building relationships with each other.

When we hear the story about how our Fellowship Hall was built, I marvel at how a small congregation could pay off a \$750,000 bill in four years. I once asked Bill Raiford what the

secret was. And I'll never forget what he said. We got it done for two reasons: 1) Necessity as we were tired of eating in the narthex, 2) we knew we belonged to each other. It's the shrewd secret. Our true riches are in the relationships we build across languages and generations, genders and orientations and faiths. And when we invest in deepening our sense of belonging together, the secret is that the money part takes care of itself. If you don't believe it, just look across at the Fellowship Hall.

So this stewardship season—as we emerge out of the pandemic—perhaps we become shrewd. We will focus on one thing and only one thing: deepening our sense of belonging together. So here's an idea: this year we will launch a “Deepening our Relationships” campaign. You can write your name down on a piece of paper (folks on zoom can write their name in the chat box now—or send me an email telling me you'd like to do this) and during the offering time you can come forward and place your offering in the basket and your name in the baptismal bowl. And if you put your name into the bowl, you can draw a name out of the bowl and that will be the person you walk with for the next few weeks or so. We will check in with them, pray for them, go out for coffee with them, get to know the stories about why we like each other. And we will have a sheet with all participants name on it and after you meet with one person for a while you trade names with someone else.

Jesus says, “If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you with the true riches?” It is the shrewd secret to our success. And when done intentionally we will have discovered that what we have is the truest riches of all: each other. And all God's beloved people said, “Amen.”