



Are You a Godly but Shrewd Manager?

I will begin by stating that my study of this parable has been exhaustive in terms of my own time. My study of this parable began in the midst of an oasis in the poorest country on earth, Sierra Leone. It was during a teaching trip in 2006 that the Lord gave me what you are about to read. I began by trying to understand a parable that I struggled with every time I read it. I was not looking for a new meaning or interpretation, nor have I found a new meaning. However, I think it worthy of note that this approach to understanding the meaning was given to an insignificant leader in one of most insignificant places on earth. That Biblical consistency alone gives me the boldness to share it, even though I shudder to think if I am in error.

The meaning of the parable clearly is focused on what we value... God or money, and how we use money in preparation for our eternal dwelling place. Most everyone agrees on this meaning but many have different viewpoints on why they believe it means what it means. However, I do believe that the following leads us to this interpretation in a more logical manner raising new examples of how we can function with this knowledge and belief. Based on how I see God teaching these meanings, it behooves us to begin to manage differently, especially with those we do business with. I believe He is also exhorting us to consider the survival of anyone we hire or negotiate prices with. It is an "others as much as me" when it comes to the approach to money. Here is how I believe God is helping us see this through this parable. I would suggest that before you read the following exposition, you first read the parable a few times on your own in its entirety.

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Luke 16:1-2 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.' NIV

In the first minute of my study and as I began to read these first 2 verses, an immediate thought came to me that caught me completely by surprise. The initial thought was this: "Begin to study the parable as if the man were honest." As I reread these two verses it is consistent with the text. For at this point the man has only been "accused". In fact up to this point the man is only accused of poor management, not dishonesty. To understand this interpretation of this parable it is important that you begin with two key considerations.

1. That the rich man had a view of how he wanted the manager to conduct himself as manager, and that his view was the wrong view in Jesus' teaching.
2. That the manager had a style of management that would "appear" to be wasteful to the prominent world view manager and that is why he was "accused" of "wasting" the rich man's possessions.

Think now for a moment how the average rich man would want his business to be conducted and how a godly man would conduct himself. A godly manager would value his relationships with his vendors and people under his management. Would it not be consistent that a godly man might consider his vendors future ability to survive (hold this important thought for later) and in doing so might concede to a higher price? Would it not be also consistent that a godly manager might consider the workers under his authority with high value and treat them in a manner that might cost a bit more of the rich man's money?

I believe that these key presuppositions are the key to understanding this parable in a more complete fashion. In fact as we go further, it is the most logical approach to understanding why the rich man later commends this man.

Verse 3-4 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."

At this point the manager understands that the rich man is never going to understand or accept his style of management. In light of the fact the manager really will not adopt the rich man's approach; he knows his job is on the line and that he will probably lose his job. Here again this passage supports the fact that the manager has not done anything illegal or dishonest up to this point. For if he had, the rich man would have most likely fired him immediately and there would have been no time for the manager to do what he was about to do. (Some believe the man was being fired at this point in the story, but it states that "when I lose my job". It would be hard to believe he was already fired since I know of no one whom; when being fired, retains ANY authority over money or vendors.)

Now read what the manager did while the rich man was considering if and when he would replace his manager.

Verses 5-7 So he called in each on 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.'

Here you must consider that these actions, while now crossing the line and beginning to be dishonest, his actions were well within the manager's authority in this story. Nothing illegal had happened. That is why it is referred to in the next verse as dishonest. If it were illegal I would suggest that the debtors would not have participated in the negotiations.

Let us stop for a moment and address the meaning of "shrewd". While most would lean toward a negative connotation, the dictionaries first definitions are all positive in nature. Dictionary.com's defines "shrewd" as: "astute or sharp in practical matters, keen; piercing, artful." They then list the negatives: "Malicious, bad, shrewish". As we can see with these definitions, the distance between what is good in being shrewd and the bad in being shrewd is only a thin line. Friends, it is the same in our leadership and business life. I believe God is showing us in this parable of how, being good managers, we can become bad. I believe it happened momentarily in this manager and it can happen that fast with us. Beware.

The "good so far" manager was using his godly "others too" management practices, but now begins to succumb, beginning to exaggerate the techniques and using them for his own benefit. It is now the ultimate irony.

Verse 8 "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

The cunningness of the manager was what the rich man commended him for. He was wishing that the manager had used the same cunningness to save him more money instead of paying too much, and in his view, "wasting" his riches. I don't believe he has lost his job. I believe he was still working and that the rich man eventually let him continue to work for one of three reasons:

1. He just was impressed with the guy's shrewdness, probably more impressed with the "bad" side of his shrewdness than the good. He liked the guy and hope his shrewdness would help him in the future.
2. He finally understood the "future earthly" benefits of the manager's style. Again, maybe understanding that if he himself lost his riches, he would want to have some friends that might help him.
3. One last possibility is this. The master rich man finally got it. The good values and eternal blessings of the manager's good management is finally revealed and understood by the rich man. As he understands the full benefits to himself of these actions, he then looks at the manager, smiles and says "pretty clever, nice job. I did not think you cared about my possessions but now I understand you were doing it for my own good and maintaining my future success." This is what might have been said during the time he was "commended".

It makes no difference which view you take on what the rich man finally understood. Jesus goes on to summarizing the supporting sub-point of his teaching by contrasting an unbeliever's shrewdness with the believer's craftiness. The results set up the teaching that follows in the next verse.

Verses 8b-9 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.

Jesus points to the goal of being “welcomed into eternal dwellings” and tells us to prepare for our eternal relationships by “sharing” earthly wealth with each other. I believe the manager in this parable was a believer and was managing the master’s possessions with a futuristic goal which was on the horizon, both for himself and his master.

Friends, if you are an owner of a business and believe this approach to interpreting this parable, it will transform your business practices with your vendors, and with your employees. It would bring caution to constantly choosing the lowest price, or hoping to take advantage of people. We should want our believing business associates to have fond memories of us when we meet each other in paradise.

Be shrewd ... but be fair.

Ron Porter
Founder - TheChristianLeader.org