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The Shrewdness of God

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Text: Luke 16:1-13 (C — Pentecost 16/Proper 25)

This is a very curious text! In order not to miss anything, let's review the story.

The parable is about an absentee landlord who was collecting rents from his property. He had hired a manager to do it, only the manager mismanaged the property and ended up squandering the profits. At this stage, nothing is said about illegal activity — the manager has simply not dealt well with his master's property.

The owner is going to fire the manager, and asks him to tidy up the books before handing them over. The manager knows he is going to be out of a job, and will be hampered with a bad reputation. He decides he needs some friends, so he's going to cook the books and commit fraud. According to debt practices in first century Palestine, the commission and interest were added on to the principal to have one lump sum. Absentee landlords and their managers were able to milk the renters in a variety of ways — interest rates (which were considered illegal according to the Torah and called usury), high commission fees, and preying on the neediness of poor people who weren't able to live without an immediate cash flow because then they couldn't eat. The manager doesn't seem to care what he is eliminating — he just starts cutting those debts down, willy nilly, commission, interest, principal, whatever. And the tenants are happy — they probably have their suspicions of the manager's motives, but they're relieved by the lower debt level.

When news of the manager's dishonesty reaches him, the master

has to decide what to do. He can't easily refuse the reduced rates and insist his tenants still have to pay the original debt — after all, the manager is his representative, it's the master's fault if an employee is incompetent. And what redress could he find? Sue the manager for goods he doesn't own?

We don't know what Jesus fully thought of the manager. On the negative side, he called him the “manager of injustice”. In this whole section, Jesus keeps referring to money as “mammon” — meaning dishonest and corrupting wealth. There are plenty of other stories in Luke that indicate Jesus thought money was very corrupting. He told stories against hoarding, conspicuous consumption, unwillingness to share, refusal to use wealth to offer hospitality to strangers, preoccupation with money. He ends this section by saying that no slave can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and mammon. But Jesus is not quoted as saying all money is rotten; rather, here he says, use it. Use it to make friends. Be shrewd with it.

What does that mean? The fraudulent activity of the manager is mildly rejected by Jesus: Jesus follows up the parable by saying that we are to be faithful with all material possessions, and honest dealings are important if we wish to be dealt with honestly ourselves. The point of money, Jesus implies, isn't to have squeaky clean hands, to be able to say, look, I've done all my dealings fairly and squarely, so don't talk to me about how I should use my money, it's my money, I earned it, I get to decide how to spend it. Jesus instead seems to be saying, stop focussing on whether you got your money justly or not, because money isn't just; no money is; it's *all* mammon. The real point is *what you do* with that money. Do you use money to serve God, or does money use you?

The problem, though, is that Jesus really doesn't give us a lot of help in understanding that. We've been around money a long time — and yet we don't know how to use money in serving God. We are too easily corrupted by money, as Jesus says everywhere else in the Gospel of Luke. In this parable, Jesus says, “Make friends for yourselves by means of mammon so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal dwelling places.” Nowhere else in Luke's Gospel — or the other Gospels — are we told *how* to do that. We're flying blind with only one instrument operating — this parable.

That's the key question. How does one make friends using mammon so that one will be welcomed into heaven? Without being cor-

rupted by it? Based on this passage of scripture alone, I came up with three possibilities.

Maybe Jesus is talking about donating money — giving alms. This has been a popular possibility throughout church history. Giving to charities or poor people. After all, the manager cut the debt of the renters — people who owed money. This is an interesting theory, but it doesn't fit the facts. The manager doesn't cut their debts because he cares about their poverty. In fact, nowhere does it say that the renters are poor — just that they owe a lot. They could be sub-managers themselves, renting land from the landowner which they sublease to others. Who would owe a hundred jugs of oil, or a hundred measures of wheat? It would take a year's production of 150 olive trees, or a year's harvest on 60 acres. That's no small potatoes — you normally don't rack up a debt like that if you're really poor, because the owner wouldn't let debts go so high that he couldn't possibly collect them. And the rich master doesn't praise the manager for being altruistic — he's praised for being shrewd. Jesus doesn't say give alms to abstract poor people — he said, make friends by being shrewd.

So we'll look at another possibility. What about creating relationships of equality? This has also been an historic interpretation. The manager changes the relationships between himself and the renters — they aren't on unequal footing any longer, a patron-client relationship, but instead the manager allies himself with those formerly his inferiors. He shifts his solidarity from the rich master to the group of debtors. Yet I don't think this works either. The manager doesn't cut their debt out of some new-found commitment — he does it purely out of selfish interests. He's looking for a welcome. He's looking for some help and support when he's out of a job. Jesus doesn't say get in solidarity with abstract poor people; he said, make friends by being shrewd.

And that's the third possibility, that what Jesus said is actually what he meant. The manager is praised for two things, and two things only: he is directly commended for being shrewd, and his example is held up for making friends using money. Shrewdness is the method; making friends with money is the end. In choosing those, the manager rejected some other options. He could have tried to set up charity relationships with the renters — be a great philanthropist. He could have defrauded the renters, as well as his boss, and run off. He could have gone begging himself. He could have tried to start up an armed rebellion. He could

have suffered through this new-found joblessness and poverty in stoic heroism. We have seen all of those options held up as the solution in dealings with wealth throughout the history of the church. Being shrewd, however, has never made it into the top 10 list of Christian virtues.

Shrewdness is practical, hard-headed cleverness and judgement. This parable of Jesus can be seen as one of his sayings out of the Wisdom tradition, like the sage advice of Proverbs or the realism of Ecclesiastes. Be as wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves. Be shrewd.

That's a workable emphasis, but the problem is that shrewdness *per se* still doesn't resolve our central difficulty, which is the relationship between serving God and using money. Even this minimalist reading of the parable provides no answers. Verse 9, "make friends with mammon so they may welcome you into the eternal homes", remains enigmatic.

Given that the parable seems to be of no help in explaining Jesus' advice about how to use money, it's tempting to reject the parable. Is it a joke? If it is, Luke didn't get it. Maybe Jesus never expected us to take it seriously, only Luke got all excited because it was on money, his favourite theme, and ended up trying to explain it with other advice about money that he tacked on at the end.

Is it pure legalism? Elsewhere in Luke Jesus seems to have set rules about using money — get rid of it. Maybe Jesus expected people to use the parable as an example of how drastic to be with our money, to be as dramatic in giving our possessions away as the manager was, and to do this in order to get to heaven, as v. 9 implies.

Is it incomprehensible? Jesus was having a bad day, and the way he told it really made no sense at all, only Luke doesn't want to admit that Jesus could tell a bad parable?

Those possibilities can neither be affirmed nor rejected. All we can say for certain is that the parable extols shrewdness. When you add in the sayings at the end, we still have no explanation of the parable, we just have some moralistic sayings which are echoed and better explained elsewhere in Luke's gospel.

This is pretty frustrating! So what's the point of this parable? Have I just led you on a wild goose chase — a whole string of reasons of what this does NOT mean, only to leave you with no greater wisdom than when we started?

I think there are two aspects that remain grace-filled moments for us, even in dealing with this troublesome text.

One is that we have dealt honestly with what the text actually says. The history of interpretation around this text shows people tying themselves into knots trying to prove Jesus didn't like the fraud of the manager or that this parable is about concern for the poor. People have tried to prove that Jesus really didn't say use money to make friends; we'd expect that more from *How to Win Friends and Influence People* than the New Testament! Presently, a common avoidance technique is to say Jesus didn't say this, it's all been added in by Luke with his obsession about money. But if we allow the parable to stand as written, we are allowing Jesus to be more than simply a religious figure, whose message we already know, whose importance we have already decided. Jesus' speech has been so badly used through the centuries, the least we can do is let his words speak for themselves. Either Jesus or the writer of Luke came up with this parable; if we explain away the parable, we are protecting our images of either Jesus or Luke, and, therefore, we are engaged in protecting ourselves from the truth. At one level or another, somebody said something very strange. And we need to live with that. A lovely quote by that prolific writer, Anonymous, says that "Christology is a pack of tricks we play on the dead." This parable invites us to stop playing games with our image of Jesus, and instead be honest. Authenticity, they say, is one of the traits the age-group known as Generation X is looking for. If we as the Church want to be true to Jesus and honest witnesses to the world so that the world will hear us, we need to become more honest about the ambiguity of some of what our tradition holds. After all, what does Jesus *unambiguously* say to us here? "Whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much."

But there is also a second point of grace in this parable, and it is so subtly beautiful, it almost slips by us. It is a bizarre parable. The manager is a non-heroic figure, an anti-hero, even, who is an incompetent bungler, a fraudulent thief, and a self-centred boor. His one redeeming quality, being shrewd, is done purely out of self-interest. But by praising him, Jesus pulls him out of the shadows and says look, even here one can see qualities of God. God deals with humanity as we are, with all of our mixed motives, deceit and self-deceit, ambition and despair. As well as being loving and accepting, God is also shrewd. The manager, in his shrewdness, represents God. Jesus commissions him, asks him to speak

for God, to be God's representative even in his sin. Jesus values him — and us? Yes, do we see ourselves in the manager? — that much. Jesus values him that much. Even an incompetent, deceitful selfish manager can speak for God.

Amen.