

The Shrewd Manager

Stories along the Way: A Sermon on Luke 16:1-8

Let me begin with something of a disclaimer! The Parable of the Shrewd Manager has – notoriously – inspired very many different readings over the years. When telling people which of the parables I'd be speaking on this week, time and again, friends have focussed in on this particular parable and asked me, 'So Tristan, what does it actually mean?' The commentary I used when preparing for this talk places a bibliography immediately before each section of commentary, and the bibliography for these eight verses was – I kid you not – four pages long. Every man and his dog has an opinion on the Shrewd Manager! So, in giving you a sermon on it I want to emphasise that what I'm giving you what is only a tentative reading, and certainly not a definitive reading of the parable, although I will try to flag for you at least some of the reasons why people have come up with such different takes on the story. Most of the difficulty in interpreting this parable, however, has to do with how vv. 1-8 relate to the subsequent teaching on worldly money, or unrighteous Mammon, in vv. 9-15, and my second disclaimer this morning is that for the purposes of this talk we're going to leave vv. 9-15 entirely to one side, and concentrate just on the parable itself. Now, I must confess that I'm not entirely happy about having done this, and if you would like to chat more about how vv. 9-15 comment on themes raised in the parable itself, I would love to chat with you over morning tea!

This will be a sermon in four parts: in Part One we'll be looking at the beginning of Jesus' story with the master's demand that the steward give an account of his dealings on his master's behalf. In Part Two we'll be focussing in on the risky plan the steward concocts when faced with the loss of his job and his honour. In Part Three we'll spend some time thinking through the master's commendation of his manager, and in Part Four we'll finish by asking the question: Just what was Jesus aiming to teach his disciples by telling them this parable? Let's dive in!

PART ONE

Called to Give an Account

Read with me from v. 1:

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.””

The Gospels of Luke, Mark and Matthew have much in common, and frequently tell the same stories if in slightly different ways. The Parable of the Shrewd Manager, however, appears only in Luke. The material unique to Luke is traditionally called ‘Special Luke’ or L for short, and one of the characteristics of this material is its fluent and accomplished storytelling. Notice how quickly Jesus sets the scene, then plunges us into the story itself: He gives us a rich man, the size of whose estate necessitates the employment of manager, an οἰκόνομος. Someone alerts the man that his manager has been mismanaging his affairs, although in precisely what way remains unstated. The master is a man of action: he summons the manager into his presence and fires him on the spot. He does, however, give him one last job to do, and that is to give him an account of his management, which in the context must mean something like a statement of how his affairs now stand: who owes him money, and how much, for example.

Stepping beyond the confines of the story for a moment, it’s worth asking what *religious* connotations, if any, a rendering of accounts would have had for a Jewish audience in the first century AD. In the Ancient Near East, people kept books for two main reasons: religious instruction and for purposes of administration, or book *keeping*, if you like. The imagery of accounts or bookkeeping is often used in the New Testament to talk about God’s judgement of individuals at the end of history. ‘Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God,’ as Paul puts it in his letter to Christians living in Rome.

My point is, then, that the situation the manager finds himself in at the beginning of this parable would have had for its first hearers an inescapably religious connotation. Jesus’ hearers would have known that, just like the manager before his master in Jesus’ parable, all of them would one day stand before God and give him an account of what they had made of the life he had given them. What Jesus adds to this commonly accepted belief, if only implicitly, of course, is that, again, just like the manager, our accounts are in a mess! Because all of us have failed to chase up things which were our responsibility; all of us squandered the master’s property; all of us have reason to be uneasy!

PART TWO

A Risky Plan

Faced with eviction from the master's house, and the loss of his livelihood, the manager comes up with a risky plan! Read with me from v. 3:

“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.”

“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?”

““Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,” he replied.

“The manager told him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.”

“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.””

How you assess the plan concocted by the manager depends on just what it is you think he’s doing! Now, some readers of this parable think that, faced with dismissal from his job, the manager has been shocked into an eleventh-hour repentance. He calls in his master’s debtors and forgoes his commission. The idea behind this reading is that in the Ancient World it was common practice for administrators to take a percentage of their client’s profit from the financial dealings they undertook on their behalf. Sometimes the ‘commission’ they took could actually amount to quite a substantial proportion of the total debt, as would be the case here, of course! Foregoing his own commission would therefore allow the manager to speedily recover money from the debtors, who would be glad to pay substantially less than they had bargained for, as well as please his master by presenting him with a balanced set of accounts.

Other readers of this parable, including me, by the way, think that the manager is not so much repentant as rascally! On this reading, the manager looks on his job as already lost: winning it back never enters his mind. Neither does concern for his master play a role in his decision-

making. His focus is firmly on taking care of himself! He decides to cook the books, colluding with the master's debtors against the master himself. The manager is a ratbag! And this makes better sense, I think, both of the manager's interior monologue in vv. 3 and 4, and Jesus's own description of the man as 'dishonest' in v. 8. So if the manager really is such a ratbag, why is praised by his master in v. 8?!

PART THREE

The Manager Commended

Read with me v. 8:

‘The manager commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.’

If we're right in how we've interpreted what the manager has done in the preceding verses, and in our assessment of his motives, then, as the eighteenth-century commentator Bengel put it, he is triply guilty before his master. In the first place, he has squandered his master's possessions. In the second place, he has falsified the master's accounts. And thirdly, he has clearly placed his own self-interest above the loyalty he owed to his master.

So has the master, then, been hoodwinked by his employee? By no means! The master's praise is the sting in the parable's tail designed to shock Jesus' disciples into getting the urgency of his summons. Let me explain what I mean!

I've already had cause to describe the master as a 'man of the world' back in v. 2: there he took decisive action to rid himself of an incompetent employee. And as with his dismissal so with his praise: he commends the manager for acting shrewdly, *φρονίμως*, an adverb that in the Bible can have both positive and negative overtones. On the one hand, it's often used positively to describe wise conduct, and where it is sometimes contrasted with folly or naivety. On the other, it could have quite negative connotations: for example, in the Greek translation of Genesis, the Serpent who tempts Eve is said to be shrewder (*φρονιμώτατος*) than all the other wild animals. The master's praise is therefore a tribute such as one man of the world might offer another. The master, I suspect, is perfectly well aware that his manager has acted dishonestly, but pays his tribute not to his employee's dishonesty but to his calm and resourcefulness when faced with catastrophe. It's also possible, of course, that the master is relieved to have had *any* repayment

on loans he might otherwise have had to write off entirely, not knowing of their existence, but that's not what the parable is stressing, in my opinion.

Two things are shocking about this parable. The first is that the person set forward for the disciples to emulate is such a rotter; the second, even more serious, is the admiration felt for him by the character who represents God—the master of the house. Two features of how parables work are helpful in easing the tension that many Christian readers feel at this point. Firstly, it's helpful to remember that Jesus told several parables where the characters who represent God would have been unsavoury to their first hearers. Some parables have Hellenistic-type kings as the character who approximates to God, characters who fly into a rage at the slightest provocation and are forever threatening to chop their subjects into tiny pieces, and if there was one thing that united Jews of all stripes in the first century it was their hatred of Hellenistic kings! Needless to say, that is not the God of the Old Testament, who is slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness, as he tells Moses on Mount Sinai.

Secondly, it's helpful to remember that Jesus' parables are not, with one or two exceptions, allegories. That is, we can't simply map every single feature of a parable onto an aspect of spiritual reality, as one can with a genuinely allegorical parable, such as the parable of the soils, for example. Most parables don't work like this, preferring instead to communicate one of two main points using the vehicle of a brief story.

When we remember these two features of Jesus' parables we can see that the Parable of the Shrewd Manager is not seeking to praise every aspect of the manager's behaviour far from it but is actually trying to say that for all his many faults the manager nonetheless did get something right, and that is that when faced with catastrophe he was able to take decisive action at the eleventh hour. That's what his shrewdness consisted of, and that's what Jesus is putting forward for his disciples' emulation.

PART FOUR

So just what is it that Jesus is teaching in this parable?!

Jesus thought his generation was sleepwalking its way over the edge of a cliff. If disaster was to be avoided, urgent action would be required. Our generation, too, is sleepwalking its way over the edge of a cliff. There were any number of 'cliffs' or problems Jesus could have identified for the benefit of his hearers: religious hypocrisy, economic exploitation, terrorism. These were all

pressing issues in the Judea of his day, and Jesus addressed them all in his teaching. But none of these, in Jesus' view, constituted his listeners' biggest problem. We, too, in our time, have no shortage of problems confronting us: climate change, structural racism, aggressive nationalism, government erosion of individual and religious liberties, to name just a few. These are all real problems, and working out how God would have you respond to each of these problems will definitely be time well spent. But these problems, however big and scary they may be, are not our biggest problem. Our biggest problem, to put it in the language of this parable, is that we've been asked to submit our accounts and our accounts are in a mess. Or to put it in more traditional terms: we are not ready to stand before God on the Day of Judgement and justify what we've made of our lives before him. Just like the manager in Jesus' parable, we're all facing disgrace, and it's high time we started looking around for somewhere we might find a welcome once we've been turfed out of the cushy job we've made a mess of!

A few weeks ago I finally got round to reading a book called *Night*, by the Hungarian writer Elie Wiesel. The book describes Wiesel's experiences as a teenage inmate of Auschwitz and Buchenwald during the years 1944 and 1945. The book begins with a description of a man named Moishe. Moishe, a childhood friend of Wiesel's, had been rounded up with a number of other Jews in their town by Hungarian police in 1942, put on a train travelling west then handed over to the Gestapo after crossing the Polish border. The Gestapo forced their captives to dig their own mass grave, then executed them using machine guns. Moishe was the sole survivor of the massacre. Injured in one leg, he nevertheless managed to make the long journey back to the Wiesel's town in Hungary on foot, only to find on his return that none of the Jews remaining in the town would believe his story. Life had gone back to normal. Except that in the spring of 1944, fascists seized power in Hungary, and invited German troops into Hungarian territory.

Like many readers of this book, I suspect, I had nightmares after I finished reading it. And one of the things that gave the book its nightmarish quality was the realisation that had Wiesel's father acted on Moishe's testimony, he and his family could have escaped to Palestine. In 1943 there was still a brief window for Hungarian-born Jews to escape the camps.

I offer Wiesel's book as an analogy to Jesus' parable only with great hesitation. The Jews of his town were innocent, and the Gestapo and Hungarian fascists criminals. God will act will perfect justice on the Last Day, and we won't be tried on the basis of our ethnicity but with regard how we have loved him and cared for others. But we *are* like Wiesel in that a catastrophe is coming, and will only be averted if we take radical action.

Jesus calls this radical action repentance. It means making an honest review of your life and acknowledging those areas of your life which you've been living your way, and not God's way. It also means that we stop trying to come before God on the basis of our own goodness or achievements, and instead relate to him solely on the basis of Jesus' perfect righteousness, and the death he died on our behalf. This is what Jesus asked of his disciples.

And this is what he asks of us. Now, normally, when I preach on a passage where the obvious implication of the passage is to consider becoming Christian, I hedge my appeal with all sorts of caveats, telling people not to rush their decision, and generally trying to give people space to make their own decisions. I do this because I want people to know that I respect them, and I don't want to manipulate people. But if I were trawling for a justification somewhere in the Bible for all those caveats I think I'd quote those passages where Jesus invites people listening to him to count the cost of becoming a disciple before taking the plunge themselves.

But this passage is making quite a different point, and it's a point to hold in tension with those passages of Jesus' that speak of counting the cost. The point which the Parable of the Shrewd Manager is making is that there's a finite window facing anyone thinking about making their peace with God. Decisive action is what the situation requires. One day that window will close.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

All of us have made a mess of our lives in one way or another, and none of us will stand before you except on the basis of what Jesus has done for us on our behalf. But you love us and call us home all the same. Help those of us who know this intellectually to believe it with every fibre of our being. And in your kindness please give wisdom to everyone here exploring Christianity to know just when and how to resolve for themselves the tension between counting the cost of becoming a disciple and the urgency of Jesus' appeal for people to become disciples. In Jesus' name, Amen.