

Kingdom Tips from a Bunch of Crooks

Luke 16:1-15

Last month in Pensacola, Florida, two men were arrested for car theft. They took a 1994 Blue Ford Escort off the parking lot of a Parade Gas Station where the car's owner was employed. An hour after the car was reported missing, these criminal masterminds noticed that the car was low on gas. It never dawned on them *NOT* to fill it up at the same gas station where they had stolen the car. The owner of the car was sweeping the parking area when she saw her own car pull up to pump #7. Typically, as citizens of God's kingdom, there is not much of use to be learned from the criminal element. So, it is a bit odd that one of the parables of Jesus actually draws its lessons from the behavior of a crook.

¹Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So 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."

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 - ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses."

⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

⁶"Eight hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied.

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

⁷"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."

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

As parables go, this one is a little strange. The cast members are shady. The main character from whom we derive our "lesson" is a crooked manager of a property who fiddles with the books to his own advantage. The people with whom he relates are dishonest. And, far from being a symbol of God, the master in this story is, at best, an out-of-touch victim, or worse, the most twisted character in the story.

According to this world's values, there can be a fine line between unethical behavior and shrewdness ...

An art collector did a double take when he noticed a mangy cat lapping milk from a saucer in the doorway of a store. He recognized that the saucer was extremely old and valuable. He casually entered the store and offered to buy the cat for two dollars.

The storeowner replied, "Sorry, the cat's not for sale."

The collector said, "I need a cat around the house to catch mice. I'll pay you 20 dollars."

The owner said, "Sold!" and handed over the cat.

The collector continued, "Hey, for the twenty bucks, why don't you throw in that old saucer. The cat's used to it and it'll save me from having to get a dish."

The owner says, "Sorry, but that's my lucky saucer. So far this week I've sold 68 cats."

Jesus worded this parable of a crooked manager to His disciples. They knew Him well enough to know that He would never endorse low ethics. He was simply presenting a lesson on the value of being shrewd in the pursuit of an end. The parable's meaning hinges on verse 8b, "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light."

Certainly, this manager has poor values, but he is no hypocrite. He loves money and his own self-interest and he behaves accordingly. He uses his God-given creativity to pursue his passions, so that even though he is a crook, Jesus uses him to teach His disciples the value of resourcefulness. Can God's people really learn anything from this bunch of crooks? Let's find out ...

I. The Behavior of the People of this World (1-8a)

A. Consider the Manager

The word for "manager" in verse 1 is the word we also translate "steward". A steward has no ownership in a property. He simply manages the belongings of another. In the context of our Christian walk, the term "stewardship" means that we accept that God is the owner of all things. What we allegedly possess has in reality only been placed in our care. We are free to do with these things as we wish, but eventually we will have to account to God for how we used them.

When the manager's irresponsible use of his master's wealth was exposed, he became desperate. He was worried about his inability to provide for himself after he loses his cushy position which he has evidently exploited. His wastefulness may imply some criminal conduct but not necessarily. Of course, it is always tempting to be less tight-fisted with another person's money than with one's own.

His head is on the "chopping block" as he considers his options. He has lived by his wits up to this point in his life and he admits, "I am not fit for physical labor." He is too proud to beg. No doubt, He has lived more lucratively on the master's tab than he could have with his own resources. He never told his buddies and his "lady-friends" that all those fancy dinners were on the company credit card.

"Digging ditches? Naah! I'm too weak for that! And, nobody's gonna see me begging for crumbs! I know what I'll do. I play to my strengths – scheming and stealing. I'll cook the books and rope my master's debtors in as accomplices." And, that is exactly what he proceeds to do.

B. Consider the Debtors verses 5-7

These debtors were most likely land tenants who paid their leases on the land in produce commodities according to some percentage of what the land yielded. The business of this manager was to know how fruitful each land tenant had been, to document the yield of each field and to collect his master's cut. This is why it was absolutely essential that such a manager have the full confidence of his master.

This particular manager was now working out his notice. He had no prospects for future employment, but he did have a scheme. He went to an olive-producer. That season's yield showed a debt to the landowner of eight-hundred gallons of olive oil. "Quick! Tear up your records and report a crop that reflects only a four-hundred gallon debt." He persuaded a wheat farmer to do the same thing. There may have been only two tenants, or these two may represent many tenants willing to falsify their yields.

Ultimately, what did all of this accomplish? The manager might appease the boss by collecting a huge amount of revenue at once, if not all that was owed him. The manager might keep his job, but even if he does not, the tenants now owe him a favor. If they don't play along, they risk the wrath of the landowner who might decide to take action against them or simply find new tenants. Under the auspices of doing the land tenants a favor, the manager has indebted them to himself. They won't talk.

C. Consider the Master verse 8a

“The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.”

This master is a hard fellow to understand. He was “ripped-off”. Still, he “commended the dishonest manager because he acted **shrewdly**.” I suspect the master knew he had been taken to the cleaners, but something cynical in his nature kind of liked it. He may have been the biggest miscreant of the bunch. “Good job young fellow. You remind me of myself when I was a little younger.”

Tip O’Neill, the late speaker of the House, liked to tell a story about Henry Ford when he visited Ireland. Three priests asked him to make a contribution to a hospital. He agreed to give \$15,000, but the next day, the newspaper printed that Ford had pledged \$50,000. The priests apologized, explaining, “We will retract the story tomorrow and correct it to say \$15,000.”

Ford said, “No, no, I’ll give the other \$35,000, provided you put an inscription over one of the entrances.” O’Neill insisted that the inscription actually appeared which said:

“I was a stranger and you took me in.”

This master was victimized by dishonesty, but he savored the manager’s “style”. Jesus was not asking His disciples to be impressed with the man’s character. He was clearly a rogue. Rather, Jesus draws our attention to the man’s “trueness” to what he was and then, He raises the question of why God’s people are not so shrewd and true to their nature in their endeavors as children of light.

II. The Lessons for the People of the Light (8b-13)

A. God’s People Must Live Whole-Heartedly as God’s People verses 8b

“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

This parable calls us to **consistent living**. The characters in the parable are not heroes, and Jesus does not depict them as such. They are simply men of low morals behaving just like men of low morals are supposed to behave. They aggressively pursue that which has meaning to them. Their gods are money and self-interest, and they love their gods precisely the way Jesus taught His disciples to love their God, with all of their hearts, all of their souls, all of their minds and all of their strength. They seek first the kingdom of self with all the energy and creativity they can muster. Jesus suspected that His disciples were not always so passionate in their pursuits of the Kingdom of God or of the will of their Father.

This parable also calls us to **creative living**. The dishonest servant was pragmatic and far-sighted. He was a rascal, but he had an objective and he pulled out all the stops to meet that objective. God desires that His people would care passionately about His mission in this world and pull out a few stops themselves. In ways never tried before, we could die to ourselves that Christ might accomplish great things in us. God can do great things in us if our creative “shrewdness” is at His disposal.

To “shoulder a cross” for Jesus (Luke 9:23) or to become His “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) doesn’t mean that our uniqueness as people ceases to exist. It means that everything that makes us unique is given over to Christ rather than to selfish causes. Our bodies are His vessels. Our strength is at His disposal. Our minds are wholly-given to the work He has given us. We are not to be mentally listless or passive in the work of the kingdom. On the contrary, Jesus told His servants to be as “shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Instead, we often choose to address this present world order as militant crusaders or as impractical moralizers who do not understand what it means to battle with the temptations or the fears and desperations people in the real world face.

The New Testament commentators *Robertson and Plummer* put it this way: “There is a great lack of intelligence, not to say stupidity in the cooperative work of the kingdom.” Might they be talking about our apparent assumptions that impure and divided fellowships are not detrimental to our efforts? Might they be talking about the exaltation of our traditions, governing structures and sacred-cows to the point that we render ourselves inefficient and irrelevant to the very people we desire to reach? Might they be addressing the strategy of pushing for legislation to force pagans to behave themselves rather than lovingly laboring to persuade one neighbor at a time of the transforming power of the cross of Christ?

As the people of light, we are challenged to be as diligent, as resourceful, as clever and as creative in affecting this world as others are in fulfilling their own agendas. And think about it, if only we were as resourceful and creative in pursuing the health of our souls and of those around us as worldly folk are in pursuing wealth, influence, amusement and popularity. Jesus’ crooks were whole-hearted, money-grubbing crooks. Are God’s people whole-hearted, genuine, kingdom-seeking disciples of Christ?

B. The Shrewdness Christ Desires from Us Is an Ethical Shrewdness verses 9–13

... ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.”

Lest any of His disciples remain confused and suspect that He might be winking at the unethical behavior of the characters in His story, Jesus began to speak of the highest ethical use of resources. His listeners would quickly be clear on the fact that He was endorsing only the shrewdness of this cast and not their values. The shady manager used money to buy some shady friends. People of the light should use their resources to minister to the needs of others, not merely to secure them as friends, but to lay up for themselves treasure in heaven, thus demonstrating that they are living with an eye on eternity.

To a Christian, money is just one of many God-given commodities to be managed to God’s glory. Money cannot be served as a master, but neither is it an enemy. We all know that the church of this age is publicly scandalized on occasion because of the financial shenanigans of a few celebrity preachers. On the other hand, church history is colored in equally unflattering ways by characters who took bizarre vows of poverty only to become little more than beggars as well as by communities of faith that hoarded resources in spite of need all around them. There are many ways to misuse God’s resources.

Money is value-neutral - neither good nor bad. We should view money and the ability to acquire it as provisions from God to be managed in such a way that He will be honored. Here, Jesus said, "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves" (verse 19). We are not to "buy them" with the motive of "indebting" them for future favors like the dishonest steward. Jesus simply meant that money should be used to help others. Not only will we win the affection of those we help, we will also win our King's affirmation as He welcomes us into eternal dwellings. Jesus describes the scene to come:

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' - Matthew 25:34-40

C. Conspicuous Religion Is No Substitute in God's Eyes for Compassion verses 14, 15

¹⁴The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

The Pharisees sneered. They considered themselves to be pious, so Jesus' lessons on righteousness drawn from such a bunch of misfits amused them. Now, His moralizing about the proper use of money was downright laughable – big talk from a guy that never seemed to have any money. They loved money and they convinced themselves that their wealth was some sort of proof that God preferred them to poor people. Little did they understand the responsibilities that came with their wealth.

True commitment to God is not measured with loud prayers, well-advertised fasts or public displays of religion. That was the religion of the Pharisees. It meant everything to them, but God despised all of it. Commitment to God is measured by how we respond to others who like us have been created in God's image. Commitment to God is measured by our kindness to the hurting and our grace to the sinner.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. - James 1:27

One dishonest manager was shrewd enough to provide for his own life as he understood it. His understanding of life was pretty miserable but he lived as he believed. Eternity is what we are living toward. May each of us as children of light be so wise in our preparations for eternity.