

Jesus' Parables in Chronological Order

Parable #32 — Luke 16:1-8 — The Shrewd Manager

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

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— ⁴ I 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.’

⁸ “The master 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. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Parable #32 — Luke 16:1-8 — The Shrewd Manager

1. Who is the audience for this parable? (Luke 15:1-2, 16:1)
2. Who did the Rich Man's creditors think was being generous to them? Why would the shrewd manager gain from lowering the bills of his master's creditors?
3. After the manager lowered the bills, what choices did the master have?
4. What does "shrewd" mean? Is it bad to be shrewd?
5. What are some possible interpretations of this parable, especially Verses 8-9? (Hint: there are at least 6 interpretations, perhaps more.)
6. Is Jesus commending dishonesty? (16:8)
7. What is Jesus saying about (or to) "the children of the light?" (16:8, Matt 10:16)
8. Why is it so difficult to keep a proper perspective on money?
9. Is there some way that God wants you to change the way you handle your resources? What resources do you have that you can use to help people in need?

Parable #32 — Luke 16:1-18 — Shrewd Manager — Notes for Leader

1. From 15:1-2, we know that Jesus has been speaking to “tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the [Jewish] law.” To this audience is now added disciples, probably meaning Jesus’ followers, not only the 12 apostles. Literal Bible translations (KJV, NKJV, etc.) add the word “also” before disciples. “And he said also unto his disciples...” (Young’s Literal Translation). Readers who don’t look at Luke 15:1-3 can find the parable difficult, if not impossible, to understand.

4. Is it bad to be shrewd? Not really. To be shrewd is to be keen witted, clever, or discerning in practical affairs. The dictionary equates “shrewd” to “common sense.” It is a mistake to associate being shrewd with bad things, like being selfish, stingy, greedy, or hard hearted.

5. At one level the meaning of the parable is straightforward enough, and is provided by Jesus himself: “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.” Many early church writers enlarge upon this and add that you should use your advantages in this world to gain favor for yourself in the next. One says, “When, therefore, any one anticipating his end and his removal to the next world, lightens the burden of his sins by good deeds, either by canceling the obligations of debtors, or by supplying the poor with abundance. By giving what belongs to the Lord, he gains many friends, who will attest his goodness before the Judge, and secure him by their testimony a place of happiness.” Personally, I have my doubts about this expanded meaning.

As you look deeper, the parable gets more confusing, since on the face of it Jesus appears to be commending dishonest behavior. Virtually every commentary I’ve found admits this is a difficult passage to interpret. Here are a few theories as to why the rich man commended his manager’s actions:

1) Equate dishonesty with being “streetwise.” In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Verses 8-9 as follows: “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

2) Some scholars believe the manager cut out the interest that was being improperly charged by the Rich Man. In those days, records of a loan were sometimes inflated in order to get round the Judaic prohibition against usury (Deut 23:19); thus a loan of four hundred gallons of oil might be written up as eight hundred, so that the loan would appear to be without interest. The manager thus might be reducing the loans to their original amount.

3) Others believe the manager eliminated his own commission. This would not have affected the master negatively. The editors of the New Jerusalem Bible state “It was the custom for a steward to take a commission on all sales of his master’s goods as this was his only means of making a salary. In the present case the original loan was presumably 400 gallons of olive oil and 800 bushels of wheat. In reducing the debtors’ bills, he is not depriving his master of anything, but only sacrificing his own immediate interests by forgoing his legitimate commission. It is for this that he is praised as ‘astute.’”

4) It could be a combination of 2 and 3. That is the manager jacked up the price without the master’s knowledge and now he was deducting the excess profits he himself had tacked onto their accounts, earning the gratitude of the debtors and the admiration of the master. The master is not being cheated and he commends the manager’s shrewdness in getting in the good graces of his customers who owed him money.

5) Another theory is that although the master was affected financially, the incident improved his image as well as the manager’s. Why else do business owners have sales?

6) Jesus is not commending the manager’s methods, but rather his motives. Even as a wicked manager, he has the foresight and ‘wisdom’ to plan ahead and look out for his own future. He knows that his job is ending, so he prepares a path forward so he will be provided for and looked after by others. This leads into Verse 9 about being welcomed into eternal dwellings. Here, Jesus says, if even the wicked can plan for their future in their selfish and narrow minded ways, are you planning for your future? Are you shrewd enough and clever enough, and do you have enough foresight to plan for the real future?

Depending upon where you are in your Christian life, any or all of these could be the “right” interpretation. No matter which interpretation you lean towards, the important thing is to apply the parable to your life today.

6. In this parable, Jesus clearly is not praising dishonesty. Nor is he saying that the ends justify the means. Put another way, Jesus is commending the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, not the shrewd manager for his dishonesty, i.e., the manager's principle is the right one, even if he goes about it in the wrong way.

7. I think he is trying to say, "Even the crooks of the world know that money is a tool and not an end in itself, why can't you people of faith understand that? Use your resources, whatever they are, and even the resources of others, to benefit those in need—and you will be rewarded at the final judgement."

Matthew 10:16 - "Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves." (NLT)

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