

How To Be Really Shrewd...

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[0 : 00] 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 a manager any longer. The manager said to himself, What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job.

I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will 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? Three thousand litres of oil, he replied.

The manager told him, Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifteen hundred. Then he asked the second, And how much do you owe?

[1 : 03] Thirty tonnes of wheat, he replied. He told him, Take your bill, and make it twenty-four. 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. I tell you, Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Whoever 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.

So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

[2 : 11] You cannot serve both God and money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

He said to them, You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Ruth, for reading.

So, again, with it being Giving Sunday, we're taking a week away from our normal morning sermon series in Acts that we've been working through together to think about Jesus' teaching on giving.

Our focus is financial giving, but as we think about God's word to us on that area, it does apply.

Whatever I'm about to say and what we think about as we listen to God on this applies more generally to our giving as we think about the gifts God's given us, the time, the ways we can serve in all kinds of different ways.

[3 : 20] So if you could keep your Bibles open at page 1049, that would be a help to me. Again, there's an outline in the notice sheet if you find that helpful to follow. And let's pray.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

So, Lord Jesus, we pray that you will be at work in our hearts as we turn to your word, that you would enable us to receive your teaching as true freedom.

In your name we pray. Amen. So the backdrop to the story that Jesus told that we've just had read by Ruth is a sobering one.

It's that the most religiously devout people in Jesus' day, the ones who were known for their Bible reading and prayer and their godliness, they were enslaved to money.

[4 : 23] We see that in verse 14 at the end. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. But he said to them, you are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of

others, but God knows your hearts.

It is an alarming thought, isn't it? That the religious people could be face to face with Jesus and his challenge to them is, you sneer at me because you love money more than God and you don't care because all you care about is what other people think of you and you don't care what God thinks of you.

And I've said it before at St. Sal's, I've used this story before, but it was very striking to me a year or two ago getting an update from a missionary family in Niger and we know that Niger is a place of terrible spiritual darkness.

But they report back on their time there. They said, the church here in Niger is completely under the influence of animism and the occult. And that was really no surprise to hear that.

We hear that and that's a desperate situation. But they said this, the church here in Niger is completely under the influence of animism and the occult in much the same way as the church in the West is completely under the influence of chasing after wealth.

[5 : 45] Very challenging from somebody out of our culture looking back in at the Western church. And Jesus says in verse 13, no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. So it's good to recognize that Jesus taught a lot about money and when we look at his teaching about it, we may feel very challenged.

We might feel very threatened. And that might just be because we have enslaved ourselves to money. And so we believe lies about money, promises that it can't keep, and we feel threatened by someone who might actually be liberating us from those lies.

So we're going to think about the story Jesus told and we're going to think about the implications for us. So the story, I think, is in three parts. We've got a sacked manager and then an outrageous plan and then an extraordinary compliment.

So first of all, a sacked manager. And we meet him in verse 1 of chapter 16. There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.

[7 : 01] 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. So he's like the CEO of the family business or the chief financial officer.

He's allowed to make deals on behalf of his manager. Sorry, on behalf of the rich man. He manages the money. He's a money manager and things have been going well for him.

He's got the corner office. Yes, that's what everyone wanted at the law firm where I was. I mean, who's getting the corner office? Maybe you watch Suits. Harvey Specter sitting back in the corner office looking out over the business district.

That's this guy. But he's been up to some dodgy dealing and the rich man calls him in and he fires him. But crucially for our story, he doesn't say, clear your desk now.

I mean, when you read what he does next, you see why people say that, don't you? I don't know whether you've met people. That's happened to. That's happened to me in the city that guys got sacked, especially from investment banks.

[8 : 05] You get told that your job's finished and you're not allowed to go back to your desk. Security come and they escort you out. Well, maybe they've read Luke chapter 16, the bosses, and they think, right, let's get them out of here.

So anyway, the money manager knows that his days are numbered and we get the second point, an outrageous plan. So there's no universal credit and he thinks to himself, what on earth am I going to do?

I can't beg. I'm too proud to beg. I can't bring myself to ask other people for money. I can't bear the shame. And I can't go and work on a building site. I'm not strong enough. I haven't got the muscles for it.

And then it occurs to him, he can do something now that will change things for the future. So we pick things up in verse 5.

He calls in each of his master's debtors. He asked the first, how much do you owe my master? 3,000 liters of olive oil, he replied. So he says, hand over the bill, the credit note, and he scribbles out 3,000 and he writes 1,500.

[9 : 08] And the man skips home. It's the best day of his career. Waiting in line outside the office is a man who owes 30 tons of wheat. And he says, pass over the bill.

And he crosses out 30 and he writes 24. And he goes round, all the debtors, wiping down the debts. If you're going to think about it in modern terms, he is the dream creditor, isn't he?

He's the one that all the struggling household names wish they had. You know, Clinton Cards, Toys R Us, HMV, Mother Care. How different things could have been if their money, if their money had been borrowed from this guy?

Fly B, wish they knew him last week. He's making himself the most popular man in town. And then he has his leaving drinks on the Friday night and his friends are around him and the rich man drops in and says goodbye.

There's no love lost between them. And he's on his way. And the rich man thinks to himself as he goes home, I'm glad I've got that problem out of the way. I can just move on now.

[10:14] And then we get the third point in the story, an extraordinary compliment. See, that night, the rich man gets a call from his accountant and he says, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've been checking the accounts and there's been some significant irregularities.

And he explains what he's found. And the rich man realizes all this money has gone. And he's really angry at first and he thinks about the margins he's lost and he's pacing up and down and thinking, I can't believe he's done that to me.

But once he's calmed down and he's got himself a stiff drink and he sits down and he recovers and he breathes deeply, he says, you know what? Fair play to the guy.

He's done something really shrewd there. He's been dishonest. He's stitched me up. But I've got to hand it to him with the cards he dealt with, hats off to him. He was shrewd.

That's the story. And then Jesus moves the spotlight from that man and his framework and his life onto us and how we think about our money.

[11:22] Verse 8, he says, in verse 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.

So, do you see what Jesus is doing? He's speaking to the people who trust him, who he wonderfully calls the people of the light because we trust his words and we follow his words. And in order to teach us how to handle money wisely, he takes a man who in terms of his own framework was shrewd and he says, apply that shrewdness to your framework, your spiritual framework.

And I think there are three implications for us. The first is, we are managers of money that isn't our own. Secondly, we're looking to a city that will never fall. And thirdly, we can invest towards friendships that will complete our joy.

So first, we're managers of money that isn't our own. That's integral to the story, isn't it? Do you see that? The rich man is God. We are the managers. And it's a complete revolution in how you think about your money.

We hear a talk about money or someone stops us in the street and we think, this person wants me to give them my money. The reality is, it's God's money.

[12:44] God gave us the money. Everything belongs to him. And God has appointed us as his fund managers. One day, we will stand before the Lord Jesus and he will know exactly what we've done with our money and he'll hold us to account for it.

And we might object and think, well, hang on. I earned this money. I worked hard for it. I worked hard in my job or I worked hard in other ways to engineer my circumstances to get that job.

Other people didn't do that. It's my money. But we need to ask, well, who gave you the talent and the skill and the health and the opportunities and the influences around you that enabled you to get the job that you have and work in it to get the money that you have?

If you'd been born in the 13th century in Mongolia or 150 years ago in a tenement slum in Glasgow, your life would have looked extremely different no matter how hard you worked.

And that's all from the generosity of God towards us. And that reality invites us to view our giving through a completely different lens. Instead of asking, how much do I have to give?

[13:58] So that I can then get on with keeping the rest for myself and enjoying it. We should be asking, how much do I have to keep so that I can then enjoy giving the rest away with God's big purposes for the world in mind?

It's his money. I'm his fund manager. He's been generous to me. He's trusting me. What am I going to do with his money? In 1 Chronicles 29, we get an example of that.

As the people of Israel gave generously to the building of the temple and King David is overwhelmed by how much is given and he prays to God, he says to God, but who am I and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this?

Everything comes from you and we have given you only what comes from your hand. So that's our first point. We're God's fund managers. He trusts us with the money he's given us to use what we need for our own needs and the needs of our dependents as well around us and to give the rest towards the big thing he's doing in the world today.

And as we've been looking at acts together as a church, we've seen the big thing that God is doing in the world today is between Jesus' resurrection and the next big thing that will happen, his return. [15:16] He has commanded us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, preaching the gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as we tell people who Jesus is and what he's done.

And God is at work in that. His unstoppable word is going out through his church to make disciples. So that's our first point. We're managers of money that isn't ours. The second implication is we're looking to a city that will never fall.

The shrewd manager is wise. Why is he wise? He's wise in his own framework because he's using his money now for the future. He asks, what shall I do now? And in verse 4, he says, I know what I'll do so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.

He's looking beyond his current situation. And it's in his framework that is shrewd. And Jesus wants us to think like that as people of light. So Psalm 46, a psalm a number of us are praying through at the moment with the coronavirus threat.

But Psalm 46, let me just read this. Think about what it says about our future. God is our refuge and strength and ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and form and the mountains quake with their surging.

[16:36] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her. She will not fall.

God will help her at break of day. Now, it's a psalm originally with Jerusalem in mind as the city of God but clearly, ultimately fulfilled in the new Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth, what we might call heaven.

It's our future, the city of God, that it will never be shaken. It will not fall. And Jesus, in Luke here, describes that future for us when he talks about our homes there as eternal dwellings, places that we'll call home that will last forever.

But our lives in this world are not going to last, are they? And the shrewd manager's shrewdness starts with realizing his time is limited in his job. It's about to end.

His days are numbered. And for us, we know that our money and possessions in this life, they don't last. You can't put them anywhere that will last except towards the Lord's work.

[17:47] It's as simple as that. Everything else is going to come crashing down. It will get lost to inflation. It will get lost to crime. Things just wear out and break, don't they?

Our wardrobe, my wardrobe with clothes in. I remember being really excited when I got my wardrobe four years ago. I opened it this morning to get my shirt out. The door just cracked into two. It's ruined.

How silly to get excited about it. It's just wearing out. Everything's wearing out. That's what everything is like. Or the stock market goes down and it's all lost.

Or house prices fall. Or, you might be lucky enough to keep it all, to keep your riches and wealth and then you'll die. And you can't take it with you and it'll just get spent by somebody else.

Somebody else will enjoy it. But the temptation is there for us to believe lies about money, isn't it? Why do we hold onto money instead of being radically generous with it?

[18:49] We think money will buy us security. But it doesn't do that. If you've got hundreds of thousands of pounds to your name, millions, it doesn't guarantee you good health.

That's one of the things we really worry about, isn't it? It doesn't guarantee you that. what you need in life when the chips are down are friends, not cash. And for us as Christians, we're looking forward to eternity.

Our life here, like we say in the liturgy at funerals, it's like the flower of a field. Even when we flourish, we're like the flowers of the field and the wind blows over it and then it's gone. Just imagine that you went on a break, you went away for a few nights in Scotland to a nice hotel and you spent

the whole time you were away redecorating the hotel room.

You went out shopping to get some nice cushions to put around and you chose some nice pictures to put on the wall of the hotel room. It would be madness. But when eternity is our perspective, are we investing too much of our time and money on things to make us comfortable in this tiny speck of time when we're going to have all of eternity to come?

It's just a helpful perspective isn't it to remember when the people around us we see extending their homes, refurbishing them, the new bathroom, the new kitchen, buying a second home, looking for somewhere else or investing for a holiday filled retirement.

[20 : 20] Eternity is what matters. This is just seconds. So when you think about it, Jesus here is redefining shrewdness for us because there is a type of behavior in the church today somewhere like Glasgow that people think of as shrewd and it's this.

Let me describe it. It's you look around the church at the people who go to your church and you think you know it's nice to be in a church where I can see there are people around me really going for it.

These people who seem to be serving in different ways living quite simply so they can give their money but at the end of the day you don't want to be quite so into it as them.

They've got really into it. As for me I'm shrewd. I'm a Christian sure thing but I'm not so into it that I've lost track of what really gets you far in the world today.

Money, success, comfort. The shrewd thing to do is just to hold back. Stay in second gear as a Christian. That's the worldly way of thinking of being shrewd.

[21 : 24] Jesus says it's totally foolish because the shrewd manager has realized the life I'm living right now is about to come crashing down. What do I do now for the future?

And we need to view our life here through that same lens. Send your money ahead. So what would that look like? That's our third implication. We can invest towards friendships that will complete our joy.

So look with me at verse 9. Jesus says in verse 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.

So the shrewd manager used his money to make sure he had friends in the next season of his life. As Christians how do we use our money as shrewdly as that?

Well I think most of all we respond through giving towards work that makes Jesus Christ known. If we can use our money to ensure that people hear of Jesus and receive him as their saviour and lord then their eternal future is transformed.

[22 : 38] Of course there are other ways we can give towards God's purposes giving to help the poor giving towards social justice giving to help poor Christians who we might not see in this life but who can thank us for that in the new creation.

But supremely as we give in a way that makes Christ known we are enabling people to trust him and be with us in eternity to welcome us in to eternal dwellings.

And Jesus I think here just is inviting us to daydream about how wonderful that could be. What it would be like to meet people on the new earth who welcome us and greet us and thank us because the way we gave our wealth contributed to them becoming Christians so that you might be approached by someone in the new creation who says you know you don't know me and we never met but thank you that you gave to support gospel work because Jesus took the gift you gave and he used it to save me.

And presumably there will be an incredible web for each person in the new creation for each of us as well but that we might give money and it helps somebody grow as a Christian here in Glasgow in our church family through ministry and activity and encouragement and then they share their faith with someone here or in a different country and through that the kingdom grows and we meet someone in the new creation who benefited from the fruit of that giving and they say you know for you it probably wasn't such a big deal but I am so glad that you gave it changed everything for me and friendships are hugely important to us aren't they but the friendships we have in the new creation will be even more special than the best of friendships here they will be friendships where we love people without any sin and any self-interest friendships where people love us in return in purity and for who we really are for who God has redeemed us to be and our friendships will always be ones where we're sharing joy we're not having to carry each other's sorrows and burdens and our friendships will never be taken away by death and we can invest in them now so folks

Jesus says this is how to be shrewd God has made us his fund managers which is passing through this world how could you use the money he's given you here and now to secure for yourself a warm welcome in heaven and as we do that of course we're just reflecting what Jesus did for us that he changed the future of the new creation for himself when he took all his spiritual riches and he laid them aside to become spiritually poor that we through his poverty might become rich so as our eyes are fixed on him and his costly sacrifice and every spiritual blessing it gave us as a gift from him it spurs us on to be generous as his people let's pray together heavenly father we praise you for the living hope you've given us of a glorious future in raising Jesus Christ from the dead we thank you that it is for freedom that Jesus Christ has set us free help us to stand firm in that freedom help us not to be burdened by legalistic commands on what to give but also help us not to be burdened by a slavery to money and to the lies that we're told about money heavenly father thank you for entrusting us with wealth thank you for the money you've given us the jobs you've given to many of us the talents you've given to us by your spirit help us to be good stewards of all that you've given to us help us to be shrewd and as we do that would you work through us in every way as well as through our giving to transform people's eternal destiny as they hear of Christ and turn to him and are saved for we ask for your great glory

[27 : 01] Amen