

3. The Shrewd Manager

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[0 : 00] I'd be very glad if you turn to Luke chapter 16, our reading for this evening, page 875 in the Church Bibles.

Luke chapter 16. Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem.

He's teaching the great crowd following and his disciples. Verse 1. He also said to the disciples, there was a rich man who had a manager.

And charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called them and said to him, what's this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management for you can no longer be manager.

And the manager said to himself, what shall I do since my master is taking the management away from me? I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm ashamed to beg.

[1 : 03] I've decided what to do so that when I'm removed from management, people may receive me into their houses. So summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, how much do you owe my master?

He said, a hundred measures of oil. He said to him, take your bill and sit down quickly and write 50.

Then he said to another, and how much do you owe? He said, a hundred measures of wheat.

He said to him, take your bill and write 80. The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth. So that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

One who's faithful in a very little is also faithful in much. And one who's dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you've not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

[2 : 13] And if you've not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters. For either he'll hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. This is God's living word and we thank him for it.

I cannot think how many times I have heard it said on TV, on radio, indeed all over the place, that one of the big problems of this age is that the young people of this age lack good role models.

You've heard that, haven't you? The great trouble is, where do we find some decent role models for people of this age to emulate? Well, I've no idea what your choice would be of a popular role model that you think would be helpful for the young people of this age.

[3 : 33] But I don't imagine for a second that someone like the person in the story we just read from the lips of Jesus would get anywhere near your top five.

Turn to Luke chapter 16 if you're not there already. The man in this story is a devious man. He uses devious means to make things good for himself in the future while he can.

If this story were not in the Bible, you could not possibly imagine that it would be. It is so not what you would expect to find in a religious book as an example.

And this is just another reminder that Christianity is not like anything you'll hear anywhere else. And Jesus is nothing like anyone that you will meet anywhere else in the world.

Is it not true that all your life people have been telling you to be good? Your parents told you to be good since you were very, very small.

[4 : 33] Your aunts and uncles and grannies reiterated that message at every opportunity. Your teachers told you to be good. Your boss at work tells you to be good.

It's possible that the policeman has told you to be good. The politicians are always telling us to be good. We kind of expect really that Jesus must be telling us to be good because that's what everybody is telling us to do.

And that when we open the Bible, it'll be telling us to be good. We have that deep down thought, really, that religious things are all about being good.

Sometimes that expectation is so deeply ingrained that we can't really hear anything else. You may be sitting here this evening thinking subconsciously, I'm sitting here in a church.

There is a minister over there talking. I know that all ministers tell you to be good. Therefore, this minister must be telling me to be good. Well, wake up and pay attention because this is so not that.

[5 : 36] Jesus says, Jesus says that the man in this story is a good example to follow. Do you believe that possible?

You don't believe that possible, do you? Well, look at verse four. I have decided what to do, says the man in the story, so that when I'm removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.

And now look at verse nine, where Jesus comments on that idea in the story. I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Whatever that means, it certainly doesn't look like the same old be good message, does it? This is not the normal how to live a good life sort of instruction.

But how intriguing it is, is it not? What can he be talking about? Well, let's have a look. Let's begin by meeting the man in the story that Jesus tells.

[6 : 44] First thing to say about him. He is really a very surprising role model. Of course, there are so many things that are not positive about this man and not exemplary.

Look, for example, at verse eight. The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. Yes, this behavior comes from a dark world.

It's not bright and light. So why is it a good example? Well, I think the controlling sentence is verse nine. Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

And I think that in light of that statement, there are two things about this man that are exemplary. First, he takes his chance while he can.

He is a man who has an opportunity with worldly wealth and he grabs it. There was a rich man who had a manager and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.

[7 : 57] And he called him and said to him, what is this I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management for you can no longer be manager. We're not told whether the accusation is true or false.

It looks pretty much as though it's true to me, doesn't it to you? But we're told two things about this man facing this termination of employment situation. One, he is realistic.

What shall I do? My master is taking the management away from me. He knows the game is up. He knows that his time is limited. He's on his way out. Something must be done.

He is also resourceful. What shall I do? I don't fancy being a laborer. And I don't fancy sitting in the street begging either. But I'm not welcome here anymore.

I know I can do something that will get me a welcome elsewhere. He's resourceful. He's resourceful. And he's very clever. He doesn't steal his master's money and run off with it.

[8 : 57] No, he does a number of quiet deals with those who owe things to his master. What were you going to pay with? Oh, oil. Okay. And how much did we say you owed?

A hundred. Oh, well, let's make that 50, shall we? Just a special deal for a good customer. No problem. Maybe we can do some business again. The next one comes in. What were you going to pay with?

Oh, wheat. How much did we say? A hundred. Well, let's make it 80, shall we? Special deal. No problem at all. Maybe we can do some business some other time.

Now, it's not absolutely clear what precisely is going on here. Maybe the first price had a big markup that he was raking off for himself.

Maybe the first price was the real cost and he's just reducing it on the quiet without his master knowing and signing it off as paid. Whichever, he takes his chance while he can.

[9 : 57] What happens? Verse eight. The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Now, that might mean a number of different things. It might mean that the master, when he eventually found out about this, thought, though no doubt being pleased, couldn't help but admire the opportunism.

Sometimes people are admired in this world for their opportunistic brilliance, even in doing wrong. Or it could mean that the master had the wool completely pulled over his eyes by this and was glad about this apparent burst of industry from his formerly wasteful manager and getting the debtors to pay up, little knowing that he was being conned in the process.

Or it might mean that the master was actually glad to see that his debtors were no longer being conned. No longer was the rake off added to the bill. Whichever of those.

That's not. This is a man who has an opportunity and takes it while he can. There is an urgency in this parable, isn't there?

The end is coming. Something needs to be done. And let me say that matches. The urgency. In this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus is on a journey.

[11 : 14] He's heading for Jerusalem. He knows that for him that means death on a cross for the sins of the world. Beyond that lies a great victory celebration.

He's spoken of it in chapter 14, a great banquet that will involve him and all who truly follow him. You see, the end is coming.

The king is coming into his kingdom. His enemies will be overthrown. Those who belong to him will be vindicated. The end is coming. Be ready, says Jesus.

Follow me while you have the opportunity. Don't underestimate what that will involve. He's been teaching people. But do follow. And so here we have a story of a man on whom judgment is about to fall.

Who takes his chance while he can. That, says Jesus to them, and of course, to us. Is worth paying attention to.

[12 : 22] The end is coming. The king is coming into his kingdom. His enemies will be overthrown. Those who belong to him will be vindicated.

Take your chance while you can, says Jesus. Second thing about this man. The second thing about this man. He realizes that his future lies in friendship.

Not in stuff. This is a man who does have material resources at his disposal. He may, in fact, by this point, be a rich man.

But for all his financial shrewdness, he knows that actually life, including, I guess, financial security, relies on relationship. Look at what he says in verse four.

So that people may receive me into their houses. There's a relational thing there that he recognizes is important for him to have. His future will depend on the relationships that he's made.

[13 : 28] And he uses his resources to benefit others so that they, in turn, will benefit him. Now, of course, in many and various ways, we human beings recognize that relationships matter more than stuff.

We do. We all pity the person who dies rich and has no friends. There is something less than human about having things but not people in your life.

And this man grasps something of that. Two things, then, about this very surprising role model.

First, he has an opportunity with wealth which he grabs.

And second, he uses it to gain friends for himself. Now, this leads us into a closer look at verse nine, which I think is the main point of this illustration.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

[14 : 31] Use worldly wealth to gain eternal friends. That's Jesus' instruction. Let me say that that is a very surprising instruction, is it not?

Is he saying you can spend your money now in such a way that you can get friends who will get you into heaven? Is it a way of buying a ticket to heaven?

Spend your money now to get in in the end. Well, I think if we've been with the story so far, you'll know that that has not been what Jesus has been saying. Back in chapter 14, the celebration banquet that he describes is entered by invitation.

And for free. You can't buy tickets. And you can't pay your way in. I think the point is more about the attitude that a person has to life now.

Because of the fact that this great celebration, this heavenly banquet is coming. The way we use our money and resources in this world says something about our eternity and the future that will belong to us.

[15 : 48] Just as this manager has temporary access to wealth, so the disciple has temporary access to wealth. Jesus calls it here unrighteous wealth.

I take it that means it's just the stuff that belongs to this unrighteous world, which is coming to an end. There's a window of opportunity in which we have the world's resources to use.

It will not last forever. So, says Jesus, grab the opportunity to use the world's money while you have it.

Because you can't use it when it's gone. And, says Jesus, the right thing to do while you have it is to gain friends. Not friends who will welcome you into their earthly homes, but friends who will be glad when you arrive in eternal dwellings with them.

In other words, when Jesus returns and makes everything new, when that great celebration day dawns, will there be people in that celebration who are just delighted that you've turned up at the door?

[16 : 59] Because in this world you used your money and your stuff in a way that was of eternal benefit to them. Perhaps people who you entertained in your home.

People who, when they first came through the door, didn't know anything about Jesus, but you became friends and you shared your life. And after a while they became interested and they came along and found out about Jesus. And they ended up in eternity because of that.

On the right side. Or people in your church family who you gave gifts to in times of difficulty. And were generous to and encouraged them with material things to keep trusting the Lord Jesus.

Or perhaps people you never knew and met on earth at all. Maybe you've given money over the years to Bible translators in far away places. And lo and behold, there's a whole bunch of people from over there who had the Bible in their own language in part because of your money.

And when you turn up at the door of the great celebration, they just can't wait to say hello. Because you are part of them coming to there. When that great celebration comes, will there be people there who are so glad to see you because of the way you've used your stuff in this world?

[18 : 29] Why you had the opportunity in this world. Sometimes parties are like that, aren't you? You go along, you go through the door, there aren't very many people you know there.

And you're beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable. And then, amazingly, wonderfully, a good friend turns up. And you're so delighted that they're there. That's the picture that's in view here, I think. People who are so glad to meet each other again or maybe even for the first time because they've become precious to one another. And in part, because of how they've used their material resources in this world.

A brief opportunity to use the resources of this world. What are we using them for? And straight away, we come to a note of warning in Jesus' teaching.

And the warning is that there's a choice to be made here. I think it's at its sharpest in verse 13. No servant can serve two masters.

[19 : 39] For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he'll be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

There's a choice to be made. We live in an age of financial opportunity. You might not feel like that. But it is really. We live in this world.

And it has money and things. In verse 13, there are two alternatives. Only. You use money or you serve it.

You control it. You control it. Or it enslaves you. You spend it for heaven or serve it as Lord. And Jesus says, use worldly wealth.

To gain eternal friends. No one, verse 13. No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve. Both God and money.

[20 : 35] Here's the warning. The warning on the journey. The money that can be such a useful tool. The cause of such rejoicing in heaven.

Because of how it's used. Can also be a dreadful master that keeps you away from God. And out of those heavenly residences. This is a warning we need.

Do we not? You see, I find verse 13 very hard to believe in practice. Deep down, I would like to be able to be devoted to God.

And devoted to money at the same time. I'd really like it if it worked that way. And I need this warning. I'm ready to believe that those two might live quite comfortably together with one another. Love of God and love of money. But Jesus says, no, it isn't that way. You love one. You hate the other.

[21 : 39] But there's not just warning here. There's help here. Real assistance. Because before verse 13, in 10 to 12, there are two perspectives on money, which are a real help, I think, in putting it in its proper place.

Here are these perspectives first. The stuff you have is not your own. It really isn't. This emphasis is there all the way through the passage.

It's in the story Jesus tells. It's in the explanation that Jesus gives. Look at the story. It's about somebody who is entrusted with the possessions of another.

They're not his own. It's not his own money he's using to gain friends for himself. It's his master's money he's using. He knows that he only has it for a while. It's not his own.

It's there in the explanation as well. Look at 10 to 12. One of you who's faithful in very little is also faithful in much. One who's dishonest in the very little is also dishonest in much.

[22 : 46] If then you've not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you've not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

Do you see that at the end? Entrusted with things that belong to somebody else, but in the future, given things that are really your own. The implication is that what we now have in this world is another's stuff entrusted to us.

Someone else's. It doesn't really belong to us. That actually the resources we have are entrusted to us by God for a little while.

Now, let me say that is an entirely different perspective on the things that I have to what I normally think about the things that I have. Much of the time, I live under the illusion that the things that I have are my things.

And it's easy to see why this illusion is something close to us. Often the things we have are the product of our own labors. We work for them. I spoke a couple of years ago at the funeral of a neighbor of ours.

[23 : 57] Somebody stood up and gave the usual. He was a good fellow and somebody stood up and spoke about him. And he said this in the words that he said, it was a lot of hard work to get what he had in life.

Of course, he didn't really get it, did he? For he had to leave all the stuff he'd acquired behind. It wasn't really his in any ultimate sense.

Often, however, the things we have are the product of our own labors. We think they're ours, therefore. We also have control over them. We think they're ours. It doesn't seem as though anyone is going to call us to account for the things that we've had in this world.

God does not give the impression that he is looking over our shoulder all the time, seeing what we're doing. We can't see him doing that. Of course, the proof that these things are not really ours is that we have to leave them behind.

They don't go with us at the end. And if we're going to be followers of Jesus, we have to take him seriously about this. And it is not easy to think like this.

[25 : 14] I think of my job, my career, our possessions, my computer, my house, my hi-fi, my iPad. Whatever the things you are that you think of as being my thing.

If I'm going to be a follower of Jesus, I need to ask this question. Does the way I use this thing reflect in any sense the idea that it has been entrusted to me by another for a while?

Put it the other way around. If you'd made a generous loan of all sorts of good things to another person, a really generous loan, not a loan that was meant to be burdensome, meant to be enjoyed, but you'd let somebody use long-term something that was yours, what they did and didn't think, did

and didn't do with that, would say something about what they thought about you, wouldn't it? If the thing was used well, actively, vigorously, used up and enjoyed, and especially if its use reflected something of your own concerns, well, you'd be glad about how it was used. If, on the other hand, the thing was squandered, misused, abused, for things that you didn't like at all, that would be a different ballgame.

[26 : 40] Says Jesus, it's not your own. The stuff you have is on loan for a while, and you'll have to leave it behind. Second thing he says, and it's an encouragement, the stuff of this world is much less significant than it really seems.

Verse 10, do you notice there's a running contrast here? Little, much. Little, much. Unrighteous wealth, true riches.

Someone else's, your own. Do you see that contrast running all the way through? And the point of these contrasts seems to be that even though wealth may look big and splendid and grand and powerful and enduring, actually, it's really very small indeed when compared to the wealth of heaven and eternity.

Now, that, again, is a very difficult thing for us to believe, is it not? Because wealth can seem so substantial. However, it is really very small, even the biggest of it, because it only belongs to this phase of existence.

You see, human beings enter this world and pass through this world and exit this world. We enter the world with nothing, bare and possessionless.

[28 : 21] We pick stuff up on the way through, we put it down at the door, and we exit the world, bare and possessionless. People pass through this world.

Stuff stays inside this world. Nothing of it exits at the other end. Money stays in this world. You don't bring it in, you can't take it out. It only belongs to this tiny little life. Lived here for a while. Handling money in this world and possessions is a bit like playing rugby. But with an important difference. Unlike a rugby ball, the money and stuff ball cannot cross the line. It cannot leave the pitch.

Now I know, being Scots, we are well used to rugby, seeming very like that, that the ball cannot cross the line. But let me assure you, friends, in the rules, it really can.

[29 : 24] However, in the money game, the money and stuff ball cannot leave the pitch. You can't kick it into touch. You cannot get it over the try line with you.

You can play with it while you're on the field. There are some benefits to having the ball in your hand while it's in your hand. But you can only do it while you're on the field. And when you leave the field, the ball stays on the field. You enter the world with nothing. No matter how much you acquire on the way and how long you hold the biggest of balls in your hand, you will leave the pitch with nothing.

None of your stuff of itself will count in eternity. None of it. It's not as if it will, in any ultimate sense, benefit your friends and family either.

Of course, you have the illusion that you're leaving it to them. But it won't do them any more good in the coffin than it does you in the coffin. It looks substantial and worth having.

[30 : 32] And it is of benefit while you have it. And it can be used well. But it is not yours to keep. And therefore, it is much less impressive than it looks.

Over the last year or so, I've become quite familiar with the inside of Glasgow International Airport. It doesn't take long to become terribly familiar with it.

One of the things you notice in the airport is the advertisements, which are slightly unusual advertisements. I think they think that people traveling through Glasgow Airport are rich and have loads of money.

I think they've got that wrong, actually. But anyway, I used to pass on a regular basis, on a regular frequency, an advertising board, advertising watches.

One particular watch used to catch my eye every time I walked past it. I'd never seen one before. But the watchmaker, the name of the watchmaker is a Patek Philippe.

[31 : 35] Now, I don't know if you've passed that notice board. You might like to look on it next time you arrive through Glasgow Airport. I have to say, it's a terribly attractive-looking picture.

The watch in the picture, you see it from the front, and you see the insides, and you see it close up. And it's a good-looking watch, let me tell you. It's solid-looking, it's well-engineered, it's beautifully shiny.

And I think to myself, every time I pass that, you know, that looks like a nice piece of kit. It must be very pleasing to own one of those. And it looks so substantial.

They've obviously put a lot of work into that watch. The strap line on the advertisement says this, you never really own a Patek Philippe.

You just look after it for the next generation. Now, that is a clever line, is it not? Because it implies something solid, permanent, something of quality.

[32 : 36] It's not going to break down. The sort of watch worth investing in. However, I've thought harder about that strap line. You never really own a Patek Philippe.

You just look after it for the next generation. And I thought to myself after a while, who would want to own a watch that you never really own?

Who would like to invest all that cash in something you can't really call your own? You buy it to become its caretaker for a while before you pass it on to somebody else.

Of course, it would be nice to own something like that while you had it. It'd cost you an arm and a leg. But it would look good on the wrist of your false arm while you had it. But you don't really own it. And it won't look nearly so good from the grave. You just pass it on to one generation and they pass it on to the next. And they pass it on to the next.

[33 : 41] Jesus says, there is wealth on offer that is real wealth. Your own.

And it's real wealth because it belongs not to this passing world out of which nothing can pass but to eternity.

There is wealth that belongs to this world and there is, verse 11, true riches. There's property on loan.

You pick it up when you enter. You put it down when you leave. And there is property that can be your own forever. Sound hard to swallow in this materialistic age?

Well, let me say it sounded hard to swallow then. Look at verse 14. The Pharisees who were lovers of money, interestingly, religion and love of money often go together.

[34 : 43] Heard all these things and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men but God knows your hearts for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Two things that are very easy to do with Jesus' teaching here. First, to sneer at it. Well, that all sounds very well. I mean, that all sounds very well but we all know that money makes the world go round.

Rather grand sounding but naive, isn't it, Jesus, to say this? Can I say that the lover of money will be quick to find some way of avoiding this uncomfortable teaching and this uncomfortable reality that everything you have you put down at the exit door before you leave.

It's easy to sneer at Jesus' teaching but that means detaching yourself from reality. Pretending that what is only temporary is actually more use than that.

The second thing that they do and that it's easy to do is to think that God can be as easily fooled as people can. You are those who justify yourselves before men but God knows your hearts for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

[36 : 08] You see, the lover of money knows that people are easily fooled about our inward motives but God, of course, is not fooled at all. These are people who put on a good show of being in the right with God.

No one would look at a Pharisee and think that there was anything other than a devoted follower of God there but God sees what you love, says Jesus.

God knows what we love. Love has very much been the running theme of the last few weeks.

Chapter 15, God loves it when sinners repent but the Pharisees don't.

They don't love the people that God loves and actually that shows they don't love God even though they look like they do. Here, the subject matter is money.

Our money will tell us. Last week, it was our attitude to people will tell us where our hearts are, where God. Here, it's our attitude to money and material things. And so, we have an example.

[37 : 17] A man who has an opportunity with money briefly and takes it. A surprising instruction by Jesus, invest your money for eternity in people, for the gospel, for something that will last.

And a striking choice, you really cannot do both, loving God and loving money. Our money is not ours, we'll put it down in the end.

And therefore, it's much less impressive than it looks. And it's very easy to take these words lightly, to sneer, to think that God will not really know, but God knows.

Let's pray together. As always, with these words from the Lord Jesus, there is great challenge, but also great comfort.

The challenge that the things we think are so substantial really aren't. The comfort that there is something of real substance to invest in, even in this passing world.

[38 : 42] God's word. Just a few moments in the quiet to respond to God's word. country, God's experience of thing.

I tell you, says Jesus, speaking to those following him, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, as it will, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for the clarity of the words of your Son. We thank you for the realism of them. We recognize when we look at the things that the world has and owns and offers that they only last for a short time.

And we pray that you would help us to be wise in response to what we've heard. Help us not to think that we can both love you and set our hearts on those things as being of real wealth.

Help us, rather, to invest the things you've given us in this world for what comes beyond this world.

[40 : 19] We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.