

Shrewd

Luke 16:1-13

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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I enjoy preaching Scriptures like this passage today. So misunderstood! – but so full of good things when you dig deep. I always wondered why Jesus would tell this parable, about an apparently dishonest manager, and what seemed like a dirty trick to save his own skin. When you get to the truth of it, it makes all the sense on the world. And it carries a real warning for you and me.

Lots of translations say that this steward had “wasted” his owner’s money. NRSV and NASB say that he had “squandered” the money. The “God’s Word” translation even goes so far as to say that he had “cheated” the owner out of the money! But as I look at the original language, I see something different. I usually don’t like to actually give the Greek words, because that sounds too high-falutin’ to me. In this case, hearing the original is quite instructive. The word is διασκορπιζω, and its root σκορπιζω comes from the word *scorpion*! Yes, they actually called those nasty little creatures by that name in the Greek. This verb means a very random, very helter-skelter kind of scattering in a hurry – just like you do when a scorpion shows up! The δια in front of the word intensifies it and suggests purposefulness. This is deep-down, full-blown scattering. What you have here is not a steward who was cheating his owner, but who was a rank *incompetent*. I support that by digging deeper into what the owner actually says in the original. Every translation says either “you cannot be” or “you can no longer be” my manager. But again, the word in the original has a depth of meaning we miss. The actual word in the Greek is δυναμις, a word that basically means *ability*. The owner is

saying, "You've lost your ability to do this job!" Put these together, and you see that this is about the steward's incompetence, not cheating or embezzling.

How many people have you known like that? Who got their job because a relative owned the company, or who had been their so long, that, poor old Ebenezer, you just hate to *fire* him, what would he do? Maybe we get all soft like that nowadays. But again, as you go deeper here, you see that it was more than just the money. The word in the original language is broader, and you could literally translate it that this incompetent steward had scattered and left in disarray his master's very *existence*. Maybe not just the money, but his owner's good name, too. If you wanted to put it in more modern terms, you could say that this incompetent steward was putting his owner out of business! That would be right, when you consider what followed.

And what followed was a very honest taking of stock. "I can't do any digging," he says, "and if I had to beg, I'd rather die." So he comes up with a plan. Now, understand, you only hear about his personal motivation here. He wants to be welcomed into people's homes, since he's sure he's going to be unemployed. So he calls in the people who have outstanding bills.

Wait a minute! Isn't that what he should have been doing all along? Here's where the story kind of gets away from us. *By calling in all those outstanding debts, this manager is FINALLY doing his job!* AND he's doing it in such a way as to both ingratiate himself to the people he's dealing with while at the same time bringing in some quick cash for his owner.

Now, I've manager businesses for a long time, most all of them in retail. We had a saying: "Fast nickels are always better than slow dimes." You get the point, right? Better to have some money coming in than to go broke waiting for the big money. Here, our incompetent manager has become quite competent, thank you. He even makes it all legal and above-board. Having the ones owing money write on their bills a new amount, and do it *right now*, means he's accounting for the money coming in. In those days the person who owed the money would write down in his own hand the original amount when he made the purchase. When the time came to pay, he would write it again, and everyone could see that it was his own writing, and that everything was legit. This manager has managed to pump in some fast nickels, and, apparently, a lot of them. The way the original reads, it implies it wasn't only this first two. It's like reading a list, and you stop because you know what's on the rest of the list.

Now, at the end of the day, what does the owner do? He LOVES what his suddenly competent manager has done. But how can that be? Didn't this manager give away something that wasn't his to give? I say, probably not! I say that because *no owner would be happy and praise somebody who killed off all his profit*. This owner, according to the original language, literally *applauds* the manager for what he's done! Here's what you have to do: put aside all your assumptions about things being crooked or wrong, and take it this way: the owner still made a profit, and now he had money, thanks to the suddenly very shrewd efforts of this "revived" manager.

The problem is with that word *shrewd*. It's from the same family of words we get the word *shrew* from, a very negative connotation. Most of the time, we liken it to words

like “cunning,” “clever,” “canny,” words that have a sort of negative spin. In fact, the word in the original has no such spin at all. It means either “prudently” or “wisely.”

But I think I know why this manager has gotten such bad press over the centuries, It’s because Jesus takes believers to task at the end, and us believers don’t want to hear it. Jesus says, and I’m retranslating it here, “the children of *this world* are wiser *or* more intelligent *or* more practical than the children of light,” meaning us believers.

Then Jesus goes on to say that we are to make friends for ourselves by means of *mammon*, literally, or “dishonest wealth,” as NRSV puts it, or even “dirty money.” Make friends!? Now what does that mean? Here’s another shocker. When Jesus says in a context like this, “make friends,” he means, “Make some new believers.”

Whoa. And you thought this was going to be fun.

Jesus piles it on to the believers: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much; and whoever is *unrighteous*” yeah, that’s right, that’s what the original actually says, unrighteous – “unrighteous in a very little is also unrighteous in much.”

Let’s back up again. You remember what it means to be “righteous,” right? It means to be in the proper relationship to everyone, including God, in every way you are in relationship. Which includes money. But here it’s much, much more. Because Jesus goes on: “If you have been unfaithful with *money*” – just MONEY, folks, the *very little* thing – then “who can trust you with the true riches?” – in other words, with the things that matter *much*. And then the clincher: “And if you have not been faithful with” – and here I’m inserting the correct meaning – “the [material things] that belong to another,

who will give you what is your own?" That last bit, my friends, is about our gift of eternal life. It is the one thing that is truly "our own" as Christians.

In other words, if we can't be trusted to do what's right and practical with money, in our devotion to Jesus, how can we be entrusted with something much more important? Which "something much more important" is, in fact, the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ. *That's* why Jesus praises the "children of this world" for their practicality and wisdom in dealing with money. They know it's only a means to get to their end. While Christians, on the other hand, get hung up with things like money, and with other worldly things that amount to "a very little." You can almost hear Jesus saying, Why can't you be more like that shrewd manager!?

The major point to get from this doesn't really have much to do with money. It's really a question from Jesus to us: How willing are you to stop getting hung up on worldly things, and ready to use them to further my Kingdom? He's asking us if we're ready to have a right relationship with him, which means using whatever is at hand, just as the manager in the story did, to further the goals of our master, Jesus.

There is a warning at the end, just as I said at the beginning. The last thing Jesus says here is, "No one can serve two masters, you will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and unrighteous wealth" – in other words, the things of this world. When we give too much power to things like money or position, we're in effect serving them. When we refuse to be practical with the things of this world, and use them as means to our end –

establishing the Kingdom of God, or at least making new disciples – then we have chosen them over our Lord.

So who will you serve, and what will you use to do it? I say to you what I think Jesus might say: Serve shrewdly. And as you do, never forget to pray for the guidance you need to be shrewd in all things.

So, maybe wed better pray.