

Stories of God and Life: “Clever, For Christ’s Sake”

We are looking at some of the parables of Jesus this summer. Today, let’s focus on a parable that has been called the “parable of the shrewd manager.” What do you think of when you hear the word “shrewd”? Crafty, foxy, slick, sly, shift, wily? Well, these are all good words to describe the main character of a parable of Jesus found in Luke 16. The hero of this story is a rogue, not someone you would want to trust with your best kept secret or your life savings!

The story begins in Luke 16, verse 1: “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property’”. The central player in the story is a manager, hired by a wealthy landowner, to take care of his property. Charges of mismanagement were levelled against him. “So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer’” (Luke 16:2). The owner calls him on the carpet and basically says, “You’re fired! You’re done. Turn over your keys. Clear out your desk and leave!”

At that point the fired manager starts to panic. What am I going to do? My options are limited. I’m not strong enough to dig ditches for a living. I can’t lower myself to begging, not after I’ve enjoyed the prestige of being a manager. He’s backed into a corner and knows it. But then he gets a brainy idea: “I’ll go to my customers. We’ll go over their accounts and doctor up the books a little bit. We’ll falsify the outstanding accounts so my customers are shown to owe *less than* they really owe.

“So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty’” (Luke 16:5-7). Why is he doing this? To get on their good side. So, hopefully, when he’s out of a job, they’ll somehow return the favor. The guy’s a shyster!

What happens when owner finds out? You would think he’d be shocked and furious. *Wrong!* The owner actually *praises* the rascal! Though it cost him money, he just kind of smiles, shakes his head and says, “That slick dude, he really outfoxed me on this one!”

This parable is filled with less than desirable people. The *manager* is a cheat and a liar. The *customers* (those who owed money) are quite willing to save money by fraud. And the *owner*, instead of being angry, is amused by the guy’s unethical behavior.

This is a parable of the kingdom of God. How God acts. How God rules. ***What in the world does this unsavory story tell us about God’s kingdom?*** This is a parable about “stewardship”, how we manage what God has entrusted to us. But the punch line seems to be second half of verse. 8: “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Jesus says the children of this age (those people unsaved, the ungodly) are more clever than the children of light (those who are saved, followers of Jesus). If the hero of

the story is a villain who is wily and clever *for his own ends*, then God's people ought to be just as resourceful and astute *for God's purposes and God's kingdom!*

It's amazing how foxy and creative people can be for selfish and worldly goals. We are not short on shysters today, are we? There is this help wanted ad: "Work from your home. Earn up to \$800 a week, part time." Yeah, right! (You know the old adage: If it seems to be too good to be true....."). Or the promotion you get in the mail or in your email that you won something. "You are today's big winner! A *free* 5 day, 4 night Bahamas Cruise Vacation." And if you call within the next 8 hours you will get \$200 cash to spend! (And you're thinking, isn't it wonderful that somebody I don't know likes me enough to give me a free vacation!).

Think of the *scams* that come our way today! You try to block them out on your phone but still get some, don't you? The letters you get in the mail informing you that you are a big winner in some contest you never entered.

This manager in the story fudged on the books. At least people don't do that today. Yeah, right! We've probably read of the huge scandal at Worley and Obetz that put over 200 people out of work and ruined a company.

We're thinking about being clever, shrewd. An elderly man in Phoenix called his son in Lancaster and said, "I hate to ruin your day, but your mother and I are getting a divorce. Forty-five years of misery are enough." "Pop, what are you talking about?" the son yells into the phone. "We can't stand each other any longer," the old man says. "We're sick of each other and I'm sick of talking about this, so call your sister in Chicago and tell her." Then he hangs up. Frantic, the son calls his sister, who explodes over the phone: "They're not getting a divorce if I have anything to do with it! I'll take care of this." She calls her father in Phoenix immediately and screams at him: "You are *not* divorcing mom! My brother and I are both going to fly out there and address this situation. Don't you do a single thing until I get there, do you hear! I'm going to go online and get the tickets, and we'll be out there by tomorrow evening." The old man hangs up the phone and turns to his wife: "Okay, they'll be here by this Thursday for Thanksgiving and paying their own fares. Now what do we tell them for Christmas?"

However, we can be clever in worldly ways without necessarily being crooked or deceitful.

It's amazing how sharp people can be in a business ventures, or their hobbies, or investments. Here's a golfer, or person into fitness, who keeps up with the latest in the field. Gets the newest equipment. Maybe reads specialty magazines about fitness or golf. Or a lady into home design or some type of needlework, who keeps up with the latest trends in that endeavor. Think about it, even small businesses today can be using the latest sophisticated technology. The technician pulls out this little computerized gadget, or smart phone, to do all kinds of neat things. Yet, somehow, when it comes to matters of the kingdom and eternity, we can't figure out how to understand the Bible or pray. We can be shrewd and astute in planning for retirement or managing our money, but not be creative enough to budget our spending so we have money to tithe. Jesus says, "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light" (Luke 16:8b).

I'm thinking of a leader in one of the churches I served. This man was a was Christian and loved the church. He had an engineering degree, and ran his own business successfully, using the latest technology. Yet in leading the church, he was in some ways stuck in the past. For instance, in his work in the Sunday School, he was 30-40 years behind the newest developments in Christian education. I often thought, if some church leaders ran their businesses like they want to run the church, they would go bankrupt!

I served small rural church that had (and still has) the smallest Sunday School rooms I ever saw. They were added onto the front part of the sanctuary. These rooms were so small that unless you were skinny, if you tried to turn around, you'd knock all the pictures off the walls and erase the chalk boards! I was told that the rooms built by lay people of the church, which is great, except these tiny rooms should never have been built. Some of these same lay people had large, spacious homes. One man had a garage as big as the entire church structure. And what made the whole thing even more senseless was that there was another United Methodist congregation two miles away that had room to expand. And to this day, they are still 2 separate churches congregations.

The church needs people who are as clever, creative, imaginative as people of the world, only for a different purpose! As I said at the beginning of this message, the parable is about *stewardship*, managing and taking care of what God has entrusted to us. We often connect stewardship with our use of time, talents, and money, and that is correct. But the Bible also says we are ***stewards of the gospel*** – of getting the message of Jesus into the world. It's about being as clever and creative as we can be to do that!

Thank God, some of God's people are doing this! Willow Creek Church, outside of Chicago, was one of the first congregations to use innovative ways to reach the unchurched. When it was decided to start a new congregation in that area, teams of people canvassed the neighborhood, asking people why they didn't go to church. They found there were 4 basic reasons: (1) they didn't like being begged for money, (2) they found church boring, predictable and routine; (3) they didn't think that the church was relevant to their lives; and (4) they always left church feeling guilty (the Christian message was too negative).

In response, the Willow Creek founders decided to design Sunday morning services for *non-believers* (this became known as a "seeker service"). Worship for *believers* was held on another day of the week. They put a lot of thought into what non-churched people would want from a service and concluded they want 4 basic things: (1) anonymity; (2) truth presented at an introductory level; (3) time to make a decision; (4) *excellence* in programing, creativity, humor, contemporary style worship, relevancy, etc. The rest is history, as Willow Creek Community Church grew to thousands of members and has been a teaching church for those who want to do church in a radically different way. Of course, they have been criticized, that what they doing is mere "entertainment". But over the years they have been able to do what many churches are failing to do, and that is *reach lost people for Christ!*

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are the children of light” (Luke 16:8b).

Have you been in an elementary school classroom lately? A few years ago Nancy and I went to our one grandson’s classroom for Grandparents’ Day. I was amazed! No chalk board, but a high tech wall screen. Desks not in rows, but interspersed with work space, hands on learning activities. I thought: No wonder children in church or Sunday School are bored if they sit at a table and are read to. But most Sunday School programs today do take new ways of teaching and learning seriously. I’ve seen some Sunday School classes for children and Vacation Bible School programs that are amazing, with their layout, curriculum, and ways of teaching.

Nancy and I have a 7 year old grandson named Declan. Last year, when he was in first grade, he started to learn Chinese. Some of his subjects were taught in Chinese, by a Chinese teacher! One day the class did a video link with a teacher in China – they could see her, she could see them. I thought, wow, what an opportunity! I’m Facebook friends with some of the believers I met in Kenya, in the church in Musese. We can communicate through Facebook Messenger. I email copies of my sermons to some of the church leaders. We have sent computers over there, hooked them up to wi-fi. One trip we took a video projector, so they can use the same DVD teaching tools we do! And they are in a little village with grass huts!

Churches are claiming technology for Christ and the gospel. We have a church website. Churches are using social media like Facebook, Twitter. Any church that doesn’t use the computer and internet technology is simply missing the boat on the way most people communicate in today’s society.

Ginghamsburg, a United Methodist congregation near Dayton, Ohio, is another of the great teaching churches today. Years ago, over the course of 4-5 years, we sent perhaps 20 or so lay people from our congregation to one of their convocations. It was a major factor in transforming that church I was serving. Early on, Ginghamsburg was one of the first churches to use computer-generated technology in worship. After experiencing that, we went back home and put what we learned into use. It cost money to transition to this technology, but it helped the church to grow. We put someone on staff part time to do multi-media. We did our own videotaping, making it possible for people to share their stories as part of our worship. We used film clips. Our church became one of the first in the area to do it. Now, most every church is using video technology to communicate the message about Jesus.

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God help us in the church to be bold and daring and creative and innovative, so that the message about Jesus can be shared with others.

Have you ever heard of the Christian Wrestling Federation? This is a group of professional wrestlers who are followers of Jesus. They have a wrestling match, but then afterwards give their testimony and talk about the Lord. I admit, I wasn’t too keen on this, professional

wrestling being what it is! But we had a family in the church who were really into this. And I discovered that these Christian wrestlers were reaching lost people who probably wouldn't come into a church building or respond to a typical sermon!

Do you remember Jim and Tammy Fay Bakker? And the PTL Club on TV. Yes, their ministry and lives went down in flames because of a sex scandal, and misappropriation of funds. However, one of the facets of their ministry was a Christian Theme Park. I thought, what great idea! An amusement park undergirded by a Christian message and witness. It's a shame that creative idea was lost.

I think you get what I'm trying to get across. If people can come up with clever, ingenious ideas to make a lot of money or get something for themselves, can we not in the church do some out-of-the-box thinking to get the good news of Jesus into the world?

Jesus adds a further comment after teaching this parable. It's found in Luke 16:9-12: "And I tell you, make friends of yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"

Verse 9 is a bit hard to understand. Jesus seems to be saying use the stuff of this life (money, possessions, technology, up-to-date methods, etc.) not just for earthly gain but for *God's eternal purposes*. And if we aren't faithful in how we use material, earthly things for God, who will entrust to us the true riches of eternity?

Lloyd Ogilvie is a Presbyterian pastor and author, and a former Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He tells of having a long talk on a cross country flight with one of America's most successful businessmen. This man rose from a humble background to a place of immense wealth. Lloyd asked him what was the secret of his success. The man answered with one word: "Shrewdness." Lloyd was somewhat shocked with his reply. But the man went on to say that he spends every waking hour thinking, scheming, planning, developing and putting deals together – not in devious ways, but trying to be honest and ethical in everything. Lloyd said he couldn't help but admire this man for his single-mindedness, and how he used all the creative energy he had to accomplish his goals. Afterwards Lloyd began to muse on what could happen if the people of God would put the same sort of "shrewdness" to work for the kingdom of God.

I hope and pray that more of us in the church can be that shrewd for the Lord!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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