

[\[Link to audio recording.\]](#)

If I were to rank the parables of Jesus from the most confusing to the most clear...this parable about the “shrewd manager” would be right up, if not at the top of the list.

The first time I can really remember reading it was when I was in college, working at camp one summer. The curriculum that year was using this parable for one of its daily themes about justice. In the materials to create bible studies, it was clear that the curriculum writers wanted us to talk about forgiving debts, like how the manager cuts the debts of the people he encounters to ingratiate himself with. And, okay, I can get that.

But still, I have always had a very hard time getting past this notion that Jesus might be calling us to dishonesty or underhandedness, even if the final results are good. Do the ends really justify the means?

Some of the trouble here, I think, comes with the translation. When we hear “shrewd,” we usually have a lot of negative connotations: underhanded, conniving, sneaky. When I look at my Greek New Testament and find this word, I see only “wise” and “clever,” with none of that negative baggage. Even the word in verse nine translated as “dishonest” is more commonly translated as “unrighteous” or “unjust” in other places in Luke’s Gospel—it doesn’t make the manager’s actions *right*, but it does adjust the hearing.

As I mulled over these things and gathered with other pastors and deacons in text study this week, one of them lifted up a really helpful passage from a book they’ve been reading. The book is “The Voice of Luke: Not Even Sandals,” by Brian McLaren. It’s a paraphrase of the Gospel of Luke with devotional notes.

This is how McLaren chooses to re-tell the story. See if you can hear how it shifts:

“Once there was a rich and powerful man who had an asset manager. One day, the man received word that his asset manager was squandering his assets. The rich man brought in the asset manager and said, ‘You’ve been accused of wrongdoing. I want a full and accurate accounting of all your financial transactions because you are really close to being fired.’

The manager said to himself, ‘Oh no! Now what am I going to do? I’m going to lose my job here, and I’m too weak to dig ditches and too proud to beg. I have an idea. This plan will mean that I have a lot of hospitable friends when I get fired.’

So the asset manager set up appointments with each person who owed his master money. He said to the first debtor, ‘How much do you owe my boss?’ The debtor replied, ‘A hundred barrels of oil.’ The manager said, ‘I’m discounting your bill by half. Just write 50 on this contract.’ Then he said to the second debtor, ‘How much do you owe?’ This fellow said, ‘A hundred

bales of wheat.’ The manager said, ‘I’m discounting your debt by 20 percent. Just write down 80 bales on this contract.’

When the manager’s boss realized what he had done, he congratulated him for at least being clever. That’s how it is: those attuned to this evil age are more clever in dealing with their affairs than the enlightened are in dealing with their affairs!

Learn some lessons from this crooked by clever asset manager. Realize that the purpose of money is to strengthen friendships, to provide opportunities for being generous and kind. Eventually money will be useless to you—but if you use it generously to serve others, you will be welcomed joyfully into your eternal destination.”ⁱ

Parables are meant to be open for debate, discussion, and interpretation, and McLaren’s retelling of Jesus’ words here helped me to break this parable open in a new way.

If we think about most of Jesus’ parables, we tend to think about them allegorically, right? Jesus tells the story and we assign the roles of God, or Jesus, of the righteous or the unrighteous, of the ones who “do the right thing,” who we connect ourselves to, and “the ones who do the wrong thing,” who we connect anyone *but* ourselves to.

But the more that I think about this parable, the more I am convinced that trying to allegorize it is a fatal error. The only redeemable characters here are the people who have their debts reduced. The rich man doesn’t seem to care that he is holding people in debt and, when his manager goes behind his back, he takes this as a *good* sign, that now this manager’s cleverness can be put to good use for him. The manager, yes, reduces people’s debts, but he does it either to hurt the rich man, who will now have to honor those debt reductions or lose face, or to save himself when he is fired. Do we want God to stand in for either of those people? Do we want *ourselves* to stand in for either of them?

I don’t know about you, but for me, the answer is no.

And so I get much more out of this parable *not* using it as an allegory, but instead using it as a way of understanding God’s bigger picture. Parables teach us something about God and this story teaches us about how God would prefer we use our money and think about our money.

The manager uses and manipulates money and wealth to create relationships with others so that when he is without a job he will have people who will take him in. If even an unrighteous man like this can use wealth to build relationships, why can’t we?

We can use the resources we have to create and strengthen relationships, to build community, and to support one another.

The Gospel of Luke does not shy away from these conversations about money and the underlying theme is always that money, wealth, these treasures we have on earth, are not actually ours. They are God's, given to us to stewards and shepherd for a period of time.

And *because* it all belongs to God, it is not our job to hoard what we have been entrusted with, or to enable unsustainable and damaging debt because it might line our pockets. No, what we have has been given to us to serve one another, to support the Body of Christ, and to care for our fellow human beings and the fullness of God's creation.

As a congregation, we see that play out in the ministries that this congregation supports, ministries like Richmond Friends for the Homeless, our food pantry's, Lutheran World Relief, and more.

Beginning next Sunday, several members of LCOS are going to be sharing with you about why they, personally, feel it is important to give back to God and to their community. Each of them will have their individual and personalized reasons and passions, but I imagine that there will be a connecting thread that ties back to this idea: because God gave it first.

We give because God gave first.
We forgive because God forgave first.
We love because God loved first.

Everything we have and everything we are, because God was generous first.

Amen.

ⁱ Brian McLaren, *The Voice of Luke: Not Even Sandals* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007), 111-112.