

Parable of the Shrewd Manager Luke 16:1-13

If you were having a conversation next week about what you learned at church on Sunday with your friends – be they believer or non-believer – and you told them the preacher held up Donald Trump as the role model for the week, they would be perplexed, to say the least. Then again, there's so much crazy teaching and preaching in churches these days, perhaps they wouldn't be perplexed, only intrigued. Trump is known for his gaudy casinos and gaudier mane of copper hair. He has become most famous for dismissing underlings on the hit TV show *The Apprentice* with a curt "You're fired." He's pushy, obnoxious, greedy, arrogant, crude, and . . . He has something to teach the church. Don't take my word for it. Jesus lays it out in this, his most difficult to interpret parable in all the Bible. A rich man who has made his money on the backs of the poor and his unscrupulous manager are held up by Jesus as object lessons for his disciples and all the others listening to his teaching.

It's not the first time Jesus uses unscrupulous characters to illustrate spiritual lessons based on some other aspect of their character. There is the unjust judge who grants justice to the persistent widow just to get her off his back. There is the thief who surprises people in the middle of the night to teach about the need to be spiritually right with God. There is the strong man who must be bound before his house can be plundered to teach us about the victory of Jesus over Satan. This puzzling parable is another example of Jesus using unsavory characters to teach us about the kingdom of God.

Here's how the story goes.

The Story

A rich man, we'll call him Mr. Trump, has been on vacation at an island resort when he receives a text message from an anonymous source. The text reads: "Emergency. You're manager is ripping you off. Better deal with it soon."

Mr. Trump hops on his personal jet, returns to Las Vegas, and calls a meeting with his manager of finance. He says to him, "I hear you have been squandering my money. Nobody squanders my money." Trump looks to his left, to his 36 year old blond assistant, and then to his right to his 78 year old long-time legal counselor and asks, "What do you think I should do about this?" They both give a nod, a customary signal that time is up. Then Trump turns back to his manager, points a finger in his face and says, "You're fired! . . . But before you go, I want you to give me an accounting of all you've done. I want to know who owes me what, when the bills are due. I want everything. You're dismissed."

There is no "Explain yourself. Tell me your side of the story. Why did I get this text message?" This is no courtroom, it's a judgment room. There is no opportunity for defense, only a final accounting. There has been no sweating through an inquisition. The ax has been laid to the root. The gig is up. "You're fired."

The manager knows there is no point in defending himself in part, because it's true. He knows he's been squandering Trump's money. He figured Trump wouldn't miss it. He's so rich he's not going to miss a few hundred thousand dollars here and there. Parties, cars, expensive trips have been his staple diet for the past few years.

He thought he covered his trail pretty well, so someone in accounting must have unearthed the stinking mess of his debauchery. Just like in our days, the accountants are the real heroes because they are the ones who expose the biggest crooks. Let's give some love to the accountants!

The crooked manager knows that even if he was innocent, there is no point in defending himself. He knows Trump is a harsh, cunning, no nonsense guy. He doesn't have time or make the time to enter into some prolonged fact-finding investigation. Trump didn't make his millions by sweating details. He makes big decisions and bold moves and leaves the details to others. "You're fired" meant just that.

The manager picks up his briefcase, stands up, and leaves the room. He goes back to his office, plops into the chair behind his desk and thinks, "What am I going to do now. I can't get a job after being fired by Trump. I'll be blackballed throughout the business world. I'm not going to do some kind of menial labor, like some guy who's just crossed the border from Mexico. I can't beg. That's beneath me. What would all my friends and parents think if I was out on the strip?" The manager is stuck beneath a rock and a hard place.

Diverging Theories

Perhaps the crisis clears his head and he has a moment of creative brilliance. They say, "Necessity is the seed of invention." He needs a solution and he invents one. He says, "*I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me in their home*" (16:4). He will try to win friends among Trump's debtors. That way, when he's fired, he will go to their homes for shelter and perhaps employment. He will reduce their debt and they'll remember him and appreciate his act. He admits he unsuited for manual labor. And he certainly can't go on the streets of Las Vegas and beg. Managers don't beg. They manage those who beg. He has to find a way to pave the way for another executive position with another company after he is fired. So he reduces the debt of one client a whopping 50 %. He reduces the debt of another by 20%. There probably were others debtors he helped, but we only know of these two. It was a stroke of brilliance. The apprentice who was fired by Trump, made his departure an asset rather than a liability.

According to biblical scholars and experts in 1st century economic practices in Judaism, there are discrepancies about who absorbed the cost. Everyone agrees the debt was reduced, but there are disagreements about who took the hit. Some believe Donald Trump got ripped off. The shrewd manager reduced the debt owed rightly to Trump. Another theory is that the manager simply cut the interest rate out of the payment. Perhaps the manager was a good Jew and he knew the law said, "*Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest*"(Dt 23:19). If he was dealing with Jews, they might appreciate his practicing business in accord with the Law of Moses and reward him for it one day. A third possibility is that the manager simply cut his commission out of the transaction. He had the leeway to make whatever commission he could. It was 50 percent with the oil industry and 20 percent in the more competitive wheat industry.

I don't know which theory or some combination of theories is true. I don't know that it matters that much. Whether the creative brilliance of the manager resulted in losing money for the boss or the manager, I can't tell you. Jesus didn't find it important

to divulge the answer. What the parable reveals is that the dishonest manager is commended by the master. Donald Trump praised the manager who pulled off this stunt. Listen to how Jesus told it, "*The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly*"(16:8). Notice, the manager isn't commended for his dishonesty. He's commended for his shrewdness. The Greek word used here is *phronemos*, which means to act with wisdom, intelligence, and prudence. It also has the connotation of doing what's in your own interest. The same word is used in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount when he concluded, "*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and put them into practice is like a wise [phronemos] man who built his house on a rock*" (Mt 7:24). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is saying it is in your best interest, it is a wise and intelligent action to build your life on his teachings. Jesus is commending a scoundrel, not because he's a scoundrel, but because he acted with intelligence and cleverness. Jesus is saying essentially, "Look, if a scoundrel can act shrewdly to save his hide, shouldn't the children of light act shrewdly to advance the kingdom of God? Shouldn't believers be just as shrewd as unbelievers?" To put it another way, "If Donald Trump can act with monetary savvy, shouldn't Jesus' followers act with monetary wisdom as well?"

Moral Applications

Now, you may or may not agree with this interpretation of the parable. It's probably the most difficult to interpret of all 40 parables that Jesus used to teach about the kingdom of God. I can't tell you I know my interpretation is correct. It is simply one interpretation that seems to make sense of the text. But whatever theory we accept, it's clear the parable is followed by some moral and practical applications. The text reveals that we can learn some things from this master and his manager. So I will translate these moral teachings under the heading: What the church can learn from Donald Trump (and his apprentice).

1) Success requires investing in people (16:8-9)

In his television show "The Apprentice" Trump oversees the work of his young apprentices. He watches them, mentors them, and critiques their decisions. He is investing himself in people, with the long-term goal this will pay off for him. Investing in them is in his best interests. It is a shrewd strategy.

Notice the master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. Perhaps the best summation of the parable comes from another statement Jesus made to his disciples. Matthew 10:16 records Jesus saying, "*Be gentle as doves and wise [shrewd] as serpents.*" Christians are to be wise as serpents. Someone has said that too many Christians are as wicked as serpents and as dumb as doves. Sadly, many Christians are more naïve than non-Christians. They don't take advantage of the resources available to them to advance the goals of their church. This wise manager saw he was in trouble. In a week he would have no job and no income. So he immediately began to invest what resources he had in other people who could help him later. Whether he did this with his money or his master's money is beside the point. The point Jesus is making in the parable is the wise use of resources in the investment of people. The Donald Trumps of the world are shrewd in their investments. They lobby the government. They wine and dine clients. They are greasing the wheels for

future smoothness on the highway of success. Some might call this politicking, schmoozing, manipulation, or brownnosing. Jesus called it wisdom. If the people of darkness use their resources for their own good, shouldn't the children of light use their resources for the advancement of the kingdom? That's what Jesus meant when he said, "*For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light*" (16:8b).

Jesus follows this description of the world as he sees it with a prescription for the church. He says, "*I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings*" (16:9). This is the most difficult verse of the most difficult parable in the Bible. The most probable meaning for this verse, in light of the interpretive option I've selected is that we should use our money to invest in other people. He's not saying hoard worldly wealth, or covet worldly wealth, or pursue it with abandon. He's simply saying "use it to gain friends." Use it to invest in other people. Use what wealth you have to invest in other people and advance the kingdom of God, while you have it. It's going to be gone one day. Wealth is temporal. You can't take it with you. So find ways to use it to invest in others. This investment will be rewarded in heaven. This doesn't mean we can buy our way into heaven. That's a mistake and gross distortion of the gospel. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works or money or any good deeds. But our investments in others will pay off in many ways.

We do this with our children when we make sacrifices for them. We do this when we invest in divinity schools and help prepare leaders for the church of tomorrow. We do this when we invest in buildings and ministries that strengthen ministries for children and youth. We do that in our personal relationships when we take the time to invite friends over for dinner, or go on a trip together, or help them when they are in a bind. All of those investments in personal relationships are wise, shrewd, and clever. If Donald Trump knows how to make a phone call to a government official to pave the way for his casino to be built, don't you think the church can call a city official to help us pave a parking lot for people coming here to learn about Jesus? Shrewd investment in others will lead to success in any kingdom, even God's kingdom.

2) Success in small projects leads to greater responsibility (16:10-12)

This is another thing we can learn from Donald Trump. In his show *The Apprentice*, two teams of people are given a small task: selling ice cream, marketing a hair product, promoting a charity, making a real estate deal, and managing a facility in downtown New York. There are many young apprentices who hear the dreaded words "You're fired!", but someone in the group who shows street smarts, chutzpah, and intelligence will be rewarded with an executive position with Trump's company that pays \$250,000.

What is Trump doing? He's following a principle God integrated into humanity long ago. The principle is simple: **Those who are faithful in small things will be entrusted with big things.** Jesus is using money particularly in verse 12 to make the point. If you are faithful with worldly wealth, God will entrust you with things more important. You see, money is a test. It's testing us to see if we will use it to be faithful to God or if we'll simply try to enlarge our nest egg.

Most of us see our role in the Christian community as rather small. If we look at what we do each week, we don't see the big things, only the small things. Fred Craddock vividly catches the force of this verse in his commentary on the text: "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat."¹ That may be the best application of Jesus' words: "*Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much*" (16:10). And if we can do these so called "little things" faithfully, then God will enlarge our territory, and we'll be called to larger things.

As a church, this means, if we will be faithful in giving, faithful in tithing, then the Lord will enlarge our territory and empower us to have greater influence for the kingdom of God in our community, and in our world. Jesus might say today, "If evil men will invest their money to train others to go on suicide bombings, shouldn't the children of light invest their money to go and make disciples of all nations?"

3. You're either for me or against me (16:13)

The last verse of our text reveals one more principle that Jesus teaches that has been co-opted by Trump. The principle is: You're either for me or against me. There is no neutral ground. There is no Switzerland in the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "*No man can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*" There is no compromise between the two. There may be such a thing as a moderate Baptist, moderate Republican, or moderate Democratic, but there is no such thing as a moderate Christian. You can't serve God and money. You've got to choose one or the other. As the African proverb says, "The man who tries to walk down two roads, splits his pants."

In 1924 Eric Liddel was the fastest man in the world. The Scotsman was favored to win the gold medal in the Paris Olympic games. When he learned the heats would be run on Sunday he refused to run. The British leaders met with him to pressure him to run for his country. Liddel said to these leaders, "God made countries. God makes kings and the rules by which they govern. And those rules say, 'The Sabbath is his.' And I, for one, intended to keep it that way.

At the Paris games the gold medal in the 100 meters was won by fellow countryman Harold Abrahams, whom Liddel had raced and beaten. Liddel did race in the 400 meter race, where he was the clear underdog. Many say it was an act of providence when Liddel won the gold medal in that race and set the world record.

Years later, Liddle left the adulations of the Scottish people to serve as a Christian missionary in China. During the 1930s, when the country was ravaged by civil war and Japanese occupation he was busy saving lives. He sent his pregnant wife and two young daughters back home to be safe. The day after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese ordered Liddel and nearly 2000 foreigners to a concentration camp 300 miles south of Beijing. Eric Liddel, the headmaster of a Christian school was at the front of a long line of missionaries and families walking with what few possessions they still had, into that concentration camp singing a song from Psalm 46.

In 1945 his health deteriorated suddenly and he died from a brain tumor. Six months later American paratroopers dropped from B-24 bombers and liberated the camp. Eric Liddel wasn't there to be liberated because he had already been buried on Chinese soil where he was born 43 years earlier when his parents were serving as Chinese missionaries.

When another Scottish athlete, Alan Wells, won the 100 meters for Britain in the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow, he was asked, "Did you run this for Harold Abrahams?" He said, "No. This one was for Eric Liddell."²

Conclusion

In a time of crisis Eric Liddell gave himself uncompromisingly to God. His Olympic experiences were merely a warm up to the greater responsibility to serve God as a missionary in a concentration camp the last 4 years of his life. He gave himself to the children and their parents in that concentration camp and he is remembered as a man who loved his enemies and his God.

At some point we are going to face a crisis. It might be a moral crisis when we are tempted to give in to the powerful voices urging us to compromise our faith and our values. It could be at a party for high school students. It might be in a boardroom with leaders of corporations. It might be in the den of your home when you are contemplating the claims of competing religions in a pluralistic society. In some senses, the crises come daily because the call to discipleship is the same everyday, "Pick up your cross and follow me." And we are to follow wherever he leads. We are to use whatever wisdom, shrewdness, and resources we have for Christ's sake and God's glory. Every dollar, every muscle, every brain cell we have was given to us by God. And when we use them all for Him, we are the steward who here's not the words, "You're fired!" but rather those words we long to hear, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

¹ Fred B. Craddock, Luke, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 192.

² This story came from a special narrated by Mary Carillo of NBC television as a part of NBC's coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympic games.