

This parable of Jesus can be one of the more confusing ones, especially at a first glance. In it, Jesus speaks of a manager who defrauds his master and then is praised for it. What's going on there?

Yet as we dig a little more into the story, we'll see that what Jesus is actually teaching concerns valuing God and His kingdom above all things.

Right off the bat, we need to state that this parable isn't an endorsement of theft or fraud. The Bible clearly condemns such things as sin throughout, such as in the Seventh Commandment: "You shall not steal."

So note that, while the master commends the manager for his shrewdness, his cunning use of what he had available in his situation, he still fires him. And note too that the manager is referred to at that point by Jesus as "dishonest," or more literally "unrighteous." It's the exact same word that Jesus uses when He speaks of "unrighteous wealth."

This man's stealing is opposed to the righteousness of God – that righteousness shown to Moses on Mount Sinai and that righteousness shown in God made flesh: Jesus.

So it's not stealing that is praised in this parable, but shrewdness. That's not a word that we use very often, and might not understand what it means. Shrewdness is having sharp or astute judgment in practical matters; it's a sort of down-to-earth wisdom fitting a worldly situation.

The manager shows this shrewdness in a couple of ways. First, he is honest with himself about his situation. He doesn't try to convince himself that it will be alright. He doesn't make a whole bunch of excuses to justify what he's done. He doesn't mope and whine about how the whole thing is so unfair.

No, shrewdly, he admits to himself that he's been caught and that he's going to have to deal with the consequences of his actions. He acknowledges that his master is taking away the management from him, and so he needs to figure out what to do, because he has to do something.

The manager's shrewdness is even more visible when he starts to think up what it is that he'll do. He takes stock of his situation, has a goal in mind, and figures out how he can use what he has at hand to get to that goal.

He admits that he's too weak to dig or do other physical labor for a living, and he's too ashamed to beg, so that's out. But then he realizes he's still technically the manager, at least of a little bit longer. And so quickly, urgently, he starts calling in his master's debtors and slashing their debts.

If he were going to still be a manager, either in this house or a different one, this would be completely foolish. But he's out no matter what. His time of having authority over his master's possessions is going to end regardless.

And so he uses those possessions, which are going away very soon, to make friends for the long run. He's got nothing to lose, but much to gain. That's his shrewdness, using what he has for only a short time in order to benefit in the long run, to get what's truly important.

This shrewdness – not the theft, the shrewdness – is what we Christians are directed to by Christ in this parable. We are to take stock of our situation truthfully, and then use what we have for the best possible good.

As with the manager, we must be honest about the state in which we find ourselves. We too stand accused before our master, God Himself. We are guilty of wasting these things with which God has entrusted us: our possessions, our talents, our time on this earth. The Law of God demands perfection, and we all fall short of the glory of God.

As the manager is told to give an account of his management, you too will be commanded to give an account of your life. Everything will be out in the open. Nothing is hidden from God. When you die, and you will, the time entrusted to you by God in this life will be up. Your days will be finished.

What will you do? What can you do? You can't dig your way out of this pit. No amount of good works can atone for your sins. You can't make it to heaven by your efforts.

Neither can you beg your way into the Kingdom of God. Whatever pleas, excuses, justifications, blame, or lament you might cry out, it will be tainted by sin. As with the manager, we men are too prideful to truly throw ourselves upon the mercy of God.

As sinners, we will always have our fingers crossed behind our back. We will always join our apologies with comparisons that we're not as bad as that other guy. We will be sorry that we got caught, not that we actually broke God's Law.

Without the working of the Holy Spirit and the new birth He gives, we are unable and unwilling to be reconciled to God. Our inability to earn righteousness and our pride and self-love would keep us with that same title as the manager: unrighteous.

At this point, our story diverges a little from the parable, as the rest of the Gospel comes into play. We can't buy off others as the manager in the parable does. We can't bribe God, and there's no one else who can get us into heaven.

Instead, our Lord comes and pays the price for the debts we have accumulated. Christ offers up His life to atone for our wasteful transgressions. His blood, poured out on the cross, wipes out everything written on our bill, eliminating all our debts to God.

Christ sets aside His glory, completely lacking sinful pride, and humbly begs to the Father on our behalf. He gives all that He has, that we might be restored to Him as His friends, brought into His eternal dwellings, to the place He has prepared for us. We are given new and everlasting lives as His beloved people, made into sons of light, as He describes in this parable.

It is as sons of light, reborn children of God, that we come back into this parable, to deal shrewdly with the world. We are to assess honestly our situation and use what we have available to bring about the best we can.

So as the redeemed, what situation do we now find ourselves in? In a sense, much the same as the manager, though without the anxiety or worry of what will happen when this life ends.

We know that our time on earth is short, compared to the eternity that awaits us. We know that everything we have truly belongs to God, and that all of it is only in our care for a short while longer.

Your money, your stuff, your place in life, none of it will follow you into the next life. The glories of heaven are so great that all of this world's stuff will be absolutely forgotten.

Since all your stuff is only temporary and will be taken from you at some point anyway, use it accordingly, to gain those things that will not pass away. As Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth."

Use what you have, not in pursuit of more wealth and more stuff and more pleasure – all things that are often idols – but use it for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Make eternal friends by using what you have to spread the Gospel, so that someone who hears it and is given faith might be your friend in heaven forever.

Support the work of missionaries who work to spread that Gospel to all nations. Give to faithful schools, so that the next generation might have places to learn to be faithful Christians rather than being constantly bombarded with anti-Christian worldviews. Help provide for Christian pregnancy centers, that mothers might be shown the love of Christ, both for themselves and for the babies with which He has blessed them. Support faithful seminaries, both here and abroad, that men might be trained to preach the Word of God and administer the saving Sacraments throughout the world.

Care for those whom God has placed in your life, not only with the necessities of the body but even more so with the Good News, that they might someday join you in the everlasting dwellings of God.

This will all seem like foolishness in the world's eyes. Giving up wealth for things you may never see in this life would be absolutely ridiculous in the world's eyes, sort of like canceling debts that might cause your master to throw you in jail.

No, it's much more "reasonable" to pursue those things that you can see and touch and feel now. Take care of yourself and your own happiness, and let the other things take care of themselves.

Surprisingly, this single-minded focus is commended to us by Jesus, like the master commending the unrighteous manager. Christ doesn't commend idolatry, just like the master doesn't commend stealing. But Christ does commend this shrewdness which the world practices to us. He says, "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."

Those in the sinful world pursue their idols with shrewdness; they know what they want, and they're willing to pursue them without worrying about anything else. We Christians often try to have both, deceiving ourselves that we can have the pleasures of this world while still being citizens of the Kingdom of God. This isn't shrewdness, but foolishness, self-deception. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." He tells us, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

St. Paul speaks of his own existence as a Christian, saying, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

This world, and everything in it, is passing away. Be shrewd, looking not to temporary trinkets but to the true riches of God Himself.

And as you look shrewdly at the world and what you’ve been entrusted with, have confidence. Unlike the unrighteous manager, who had to buy off enough people before time ran out, you already have an everlasting home waiting for you.

Your Lord has already paid the price for your salvation. In your Baptism, God made you His own, and He cannot forget you. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and He will – not might, will – give you your daily bread, even as you manage your life and wealth in ways that the world sees as foolish.

It’s all going away anyway, so don’t cling to it but use it freely for the Kingdom of God, to help bring others into the everlasting dwellings of Christ.

In shrewdness and confidence, let us join with St. Paul in confessing, “But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.