

A PUZZLING PASSAGE
Luke 16:1-8
Baraca Radio Sunday School Class
First Baptist Church, Anderson, South Carolina
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INTRODUCTION

You've heard me tell about growing up out in West Texas. Until I was thirteen or fourteen, Daddy worked as a farmhand. Every time he changed jobs, we moved because a house for the farm worker was always available as a perk. Daddy changed farm jobs a lot. I mean a whole lot. We usually moved at least a couple of times a year. Then, when I was still an early teenager, Daddy decided to change the kind of work he did. So we moved into Sweetwater, the county seat town. He got a pretty steady job with a contractor in the building trade. Bud Harris was a sub-contractor who did cement and brick work, and he hired Daddy as his assistant. Daddy made more money in this work than he did working for farmers, but it may have been a tradeoff because we had to pay rent instead of living for free in a farm house.

We still moved from time to time as Daddy would find a house he thought was better. So, even in Sweetwater, we kept changing places where we lived. But Sweetwater is a small town, so we always managed to live just a few blocks from downtown.

I was interested in girls by now, and Jack Higgins asked me if I wanted to double-date with him. His girlfriend had a friend. So I said, "Sure." Then he said, "Could you loan me four dollars?" That was a small fortune in 1949. About all I had, except enough to buy the movie ticket for my date and have enough left for Cokes afterward. I loaned the money, but I thought Jack Higgins never was going to pay back my four dollars. First, he said he didn't get paid on time. Then, he said he had to pay somebody else back. Then he said he had to help buy groceries for his family. All the while, I didn't have any money to do anything I wanted to do. Jack finally did pay me back, but it took forever.

Bottom line: I was pretty gullible. My world was limited. Lot to learn.

Keep the story about my naiveté in mind. That may make sense before we're through.

LUKE 16:1-6

Our Bible passage today, from Luke, chapter 16, begins with perhaps the strangest story Jesus tells in the Gospels. The central character is a worldly wise man in a place of responsibility. He works for a wealthy land owner and is supposed to be keeping track of the owner's business affairs.

Follow in Luke 16 as I do some paraphrasing and interpreting of this story:

The owner is a gentleman farmer, and the man in question is the on-site manager--the person you go to see when you want to do business with the company.

The rich man trusts his manager and has left him to run the company. But, now, the owner gets word that the trusted worker really isn't to be trusted. He is mismanaging the wealth. Apparently pocketing some of the money which is supposed to go to the boss.

With this word, the absentee owner realizes he hasn't supervised the man closely enough. He thought the man was reliable, but he finds out that isn't the case. So he calls the man in, confronts him with what he's learned, and tells the man he has to let him go.

The boss doesn't tell the manager to leave right that minute. He gives the man time to pull things together. It seems the owner prefers, even at this point, that things be done in an orderly fashion, rather than abruptly.

With this leeway, the manager analyzes the situation. He's a white-collar man who's never done hard physical work. He says to himself, "I'm not strong enough to do hard manual labor, and I'd be ashamed to go out on the street and beg." Then he says, "I know what I'm going to do. I have to make some arrangements so I won't be out on the street without a job when the boss tells me to leave."

His master has extensive land holdings, and the man rents out land to tenants and collects rent from them in such forms as oil or wheat. An in-kind arrangement or barter system, if you will. Out in Texas when I was a kid, tenant farmers did farming "on the halves." The land owner would let a man work the land and be responsible for all the expense of bringing in the crop. Then when the crops were gathered, the farm worker

would give an account of his stewardship. He would get half of what he took in, with the other half going to the land owner (Wellford).

Our story here appears to be something like that. But the manager has not done his job. So he decides to ingratiate himself to the men who owe the boss some pretty high stakes. He hopes one of these sub-contractors will take him on when he has to leave the land owner. With this in mind, the manager calls his major debtors in, one by one, to settle their accounts.

He asks the first man, "How much produce do you owe that I haven't collected?" The man says, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." Did you hear? That's not a hundred little *bottles* of olive oil. That's a hundred *jugs*. The word for jugs indicates each jug contained eight or nine *gallons* of olive oil. We're talking about eight or nine hundred *gallons* of olive oil. The renter probably is a wholesaler if he has all that olive oil from trees on the big man's property. So the manager says, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and change it to fifty gallons." (<http://www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/luke/luke16.htm>)

Then he asks another man what he owes. He replies, "A hundred containers of wheat." Each container holding ten to twelve bushels. So that would be a thousand to 12-hundred *bushels* of wheat. This time, the man who's about to be out of a job says, "Cut your bill down from a hundred to eighty."

Relieved that they will owe less to the big boss, the men start telling their friends what the crooked manager has done. As the old Clairoil commercial used to say, "They told two friends, and *they* told two friends." Word quickly spreads about what this dishonest manager has done. Before long, word gets back to the owner. Then comes the puzzling part of the story. Instead of having the workman thrown into debtor's prison, the owner commends the man for being a shrewd operator.

Why would the owner praise his subordinate for dishonesty? And why would Jesus tell the story about a deceptive man who is commended for his dishonesty? Let's consider the first question first: Why would the owner praise the man's dishonesty, rather than have the man punished?

Perhaps the owner realizes his own failure. He's been too much of an absentee landlord. He has been unwise in not keeping a closer eye on his own business.

Or, perhaps, the owner, as a man of the world, can't help but admire the craft and cunning of another man in the world of business.

One commentator (Wellford) wasn't surprised that the guy was fired. What was surprising . . .

was that shrewdness was valued just as much and maybe even more so than faithfulness because when the steward reduced the amounts of rent that the tenants owed to his master, to the detriment of his master, the master praised him instead of punishing him further.

Perhaps that explains why the man isn't ordered to leave the farm at once. But why would Jesus tell this story about a deceptive man?

We see the answer in the latter part of verse 8:

[F]or the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

Jesus contrasts two groups: *children of this age* over against those He calls *the children of light*.

Children of this age are people whose orientation is secular, selfish, concerned only with the physical and material aspects of life. By contrast, *the children of light* are oriented toward the things of God. Recall how the Bible often contrasts darkness and light. Here, Jesus could as readily have called *the children of this age* "children of darkness," in contrast with *the children of light*.

Jesus says Christians can learn from the dog-eat-dog business world. He doesn't say we should adopt dog-eat-dog ways, but we should be aware of how *the children of this age* do their business. We can learn lessons from negative ways of the business world as well as from the positive ways.

Ralph Wilson says, "Jesus doesn't applaud dishonesty, but he notes that 'the people of the light' aren't as smart as worldly people when it comes to securing their future" (Wilson). Maybe like a naive teenager who loans his buddy four bucks with no guarantee of being paid back.

Another interpreter, Mark Shea, also helps us understand this strange story. He says Jesus is NOT saying we should be cynical weasels to save our skin. But you and I as people of faith "should be at least as proactive about saving [our]souls as this worldly guy was about saving his skin."

Scoundrels often have something hidden which holds promise, while we as Christians often are careless about God has entrusted to us (Shea).

Mark Shea cites a corrupt businessman in Nazi Germany, Oskar Schindler, who was featured in a book and the movie, *Schindler's List*:

"Oskar Schindler was the Nazi arms merchant who . . . saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust while remaining the less-than-savory character he always was . . ." (Shea).

We admire Schindler's shrewdness in saving the lives of Jews in Hitler's Germany, even though he went on with black market work and was morally corrupt in his personal life.

Anne Robertson draws a modern parable which may help us understand why Jesus told about a shrewd worldly wise man.

A man is convicted of murdering his wife. As he is being escorted to prison, he sees a burning house where a child is trapped inside. The convict gets the officers to let him go into the house. In he goes and brings the child out to safety.

The crowd who are watching include a bunch of people from the neighborhood church, but they simply stand and watch. As it happens, the pastor comes along and learns what happened. So, the next Sunday, in his sermon, he raises the question:

"Why is it that this murderer can figure out that saving a child is a good thing and the 16 churchgoers who were there watching the fire burn did nothing? This convict is smarter than all of them. Use the opportunities life presents to you to enhance God's reputation. The one who risks his own life to save another is living out the Gospel" (Robertson).

Here's a real-life example of con artists being sharper than the children of light. A man came to the church where I was one of the ministers. His story: Needed some help. His mother going into the hospital tomorrow for surgery in the local hospital. After paying enough to guarantee the surgery could proceed, he needed some cash to get groceries until his next payday. Could we help him?

He took his story a bit further. His mother's illness had made him realize he needed Jesus in his heart, and he wanted me to pray with him so he could have assurance of his salvation. I prayed with him, and then we wrote down his mother's name and gave him money from our benevolent fund.

The next day, I called the hospital to check on his mother so we could make a follow-up visit. They had no record of a patient by that name. I called the next day as well. Still no one by that name.

This is a small example of the kind of double-dealer Jesus tells about in his story. We can't commend the man for his dishonesty, but we realize he is one smooth operator.

William Barclay brings this comparison into the church, noting that if Christians "would give as much attention to the things which concern as souls as they do to the things which concern their business, they would be better men." Dr. Barclay notes (216):

. . . over and over again a man will spend twenty times the amount of time and money and effort on his pleasure, his hobby, his golf, his garden, his sport as he does on his church.

Our Christianity will only begin to become real and effective when we spend as much time and effort on it as we do on our worldly activities.

I thought of that comparison a while back when some of us in the Anderson Lions Club took part in a project sponsored by our District Lions organization. About twenty men and women from Lions Clubs around the Upstate took training sessions and then called on business leaders in Spartanburg and Travelers Rest. Our efforts resulted in the formation of new clubs.

Churches could learn from such concentrated -- and consecrated -- efforts on the part of the Lions. This is the central point about the shrewd manager. He saw a need -- albeit a self-centered need -- and developed a strategy to get out of the fix he had gotten himself into. More positively, a church could learn from this Lions project: seeing things which need to be done for Christ and applying our minds and hearts and energies to getting those things done.

When the church learns from the world, there can be both negative and positive fallout.

Some ministers don't have a whole lot of business smarts. I include myself in this category. Because that's true, churches can get in all sorts of messes. A bunch of church members may see the church building needs some repairs and decide to do the repairs themselves. That's fine if one or two of them are handy with

clean-up, paint-up, fix-up. We see this in Habitat for Humanity projects. But turn people like me loose on that work, and the people we're trying to help wouldn't set foot in the place but once. Same thing with upkeep of church property. If you have some church members who know how to do maintenance work, they can save the church money and gain personal satisfaction through such practical service. So the church can apply business principles and do good things for the church and community.

PRACTICAL NEED FOR WISING UP

On this matter of children of this age being wiser than the children of light, let me say a word to my fellow senior adults who listen to this Baraca Class. Some folks will take advantage of seniors. So let me offer a few suggestions about wising up to some of the ways of the world.

Someone calls and says he's from your bank. Says there are some problems with your account and they need to get your account number so they can be sure everything is OK. May even say you need to take all your money out of the bank for a little while and let them keep it for you while they fix the problem. If you get that kind of phone call, Don't believe a word. It's a scam.

Likewise, don't give anybody your Social Security number on the phone. Your government agency or bank already has your Social Security number. Don't give any personal information about yourself to anyone other than a family member or a trusted friend who helps you on a regular basis.

On the Internet, people will ask for your Social Security number or your bank number. I've gotten official-looking e-mails from banks. If I were to give what they ask for, they could clean me out financially. In one case, I don't even have an account at that bank, but if I gave them my account number, they could tap into my bank. When I get those e-mails, I look up the legitimate 8-hundred phone number for the bank they claim to represent and I report this scam.

And then, those e-mails claiming to represent a multi-million dollars account in Africa. If you will send your financial information and a couple hundred dollars of good-faith money, you can share their wealth.

Another scam involves repairs on your house or yard. A guy shows up and says your roof needs some work done. Or your gutters. Or you need to have some painting done. Then he asks for a down payment to show you're serious. Don't believe it. There's a good chance you'll never see the so-called repairman or your money again.

If someone shows up at your door uninvited, ask him to leave. If he doesn't leave, lock your door and call the police. Don't let anyone into your house or apartment if you don't know the person.

There are criminals looking for the opportunity to take advantage of you and me because we're old, and they think they can get away with it.

I began with a true story from my teenage years of how a shrewd, fast-talking buddy got me to loan him some money and probably had no intention of paying me back. But he finally did repay.

Let me tell you another story from those early years to illustrate my naiveté. Our family never had a car while we kids were growing up in the country, so my brothers and sisters and I rarely went much of anywhere besides school and church. I guess other kids were aware of our limited experience. One day, a boy my age started to ask me whether I knew another boy. But then, he stopped and said, "Oh, you wouldn't know him. He doesn't go to church."

This boy probably didn't intend that as a putdown. He just saw it as a fact. But it stung when I heard him say that. Here's the point: it's great to be deeply involved in church and religious activities. But if that's the only thing we do, we may need to branch out and get a better understanding of life beyond the church, lest we fall prey to people who try to take advantage of us.

[F]or the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

CONCLUSION

As we draw this lesson to a close then, consider these basic lessons from this parable:

First, in the owner, we can see two sides to God: God is the Righteous Judge who will call us to account. But God's judgment is tempered with mercy as He looks past the man's dishonesty and sees potential for good.

Second, as Christians, we are challenged to learn from the dishonest man's resourcefulness. But, rather, than follow his example of dishonesty, we should learn from his creativity. We should be strive to be as alert and active for Christ as the dishonest steward was for his selfish interests.

George Buttrick gives examples of children of this age being wiser than the children of light:

The worldling thoroughly cares for his senses, while the follower of Christ is casual about his soul. The golfer takes lessons and reads books, while the religious man forgets his prayers. The salesman becomes an evangelist for some gadget, while the disciple of Jesus rarely mentions the Savior of the world (Buttrick 281).

Then, we see a third application as Jesus Jesus rounds out the story of this shrewd but selfish manager in verse 9:

So I say to you, use your worldly wealth to win friends for yourselves, so that when money is a thing of the past you may be received into an eternal home (New English Bible).

If we are children of light who use our money wisely to win friends, that means we will reach out to the hungry, the homeless, the sick, those without clothes, those in prison, and others in need. When we do this, we will hear the commendation of our Lord: When you have reached out in love to those who cannot help themselves, you have ministered to me (Matthew 25).

Then we will be welcomed into God's eternal home.

BENEDICTION

Now, we conclude this week's Baraca Radio Sunday School Class from Anderson's First Baptist Church. As you to seek the wisdom of God which exceeds worldly wisdom, claim these promises:
God's love that will never let you go,
God's grace that is greater than all your sin,
God's peace that passes all understanding.
These are yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.