**Principles of Shrewd Discipleship**

August 30, 2015

Luke 16:1-13

Key Verse 16:8b “For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

When we think of shrewd individuals, we may think of the lawyer who knows all the loopholes, not at all concerned about moral principle or true justice. Or we may think of the businessman who knows how to exploit his competitor’s weaknesses or a customer’s ignorance. But if I look up “shrewd” in a dictionary, a number of different synonyms show up: astute, sharp, on the ball, smart, perceptive, insightful, wise, and clever. Those are all positive adjectives. In a plane, one pastor was sitting next to a very successful businessman. He asked him what the secret of his success was. The response came very quickly: shrewdness. The man said that he spent much of his waking moments thinking, scheming, planning, developing, and putting details together in order to make his company the largest profit possible. He was single-minded and left nothing to chance. He used all of his energy, intellect, and determination to accomplish his goals. Later, the pastor reflected on that conversation and wondered what would happen to the church if the people of God put the same sort of shrewdness to work for the Kingdom. In today’s passage, Jesus, with a sense of dry humor, says that the people of the world are outsmarting the people of light. Jesus is saying in a humorous way, if only his disciples were as eager and ingenious in doing God’s work as the people of the world are making money. Jesus wants us to act with the same intensity in our discipleship toward him as the cheaters and crooks act in their attempt to make money and secure their future.

Verses 1-7 is a story about a shrewd manager. This man wasted his master’s possessions. As a result, he was accountable for his misuse of his master’s possessions. He was in deep trouble. He was at the point of dismissal. His human conditions were not so good. He was too weak to dig, and he was ashamed to beg. It was a time for him to become very fatalistic and sit down to complain to his wife. But he did not do so; he began to think and devise a plan of how to live after being fired. When he decided to make use of the hours of the time as a shrewd manager before being fired, his mind was suddenly flooded with imagination and inspiration of how to manage the situation. We can say many negative things about this manager: He was wasteful and dishonest. He was lazy, saying “I’m not strong enough to dig.” He was proud, saying, “I’m ashamed to beg.” But we have to give him credit for one thing: he was shrewd.

He realized that he was being fired, but he had not yet been fired. He had his pink slip, but he hadn’t yet cleared out his desk. He still, for a short period of time, had his authority as manager. “Is there a way that this brief time of management can be used to provide for my future?” Yes, he realized! There was a way!” So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied. The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’ Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ ‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’” Quickly, before the master knew what was going on, the deed was done. Thieves are always in a hurry. Con men are always in a hurry, “Sign here, sign here, sign here.”

These were big debts, and big price cuts. We may have some difficulty understanding how big the debts are, because they are not stated by dollar value, but in terms of goods. Probably the debtors were tenant farmers. The olive farmer owed the master a portion of the olive oil harvest, and likewise the wheat farmer. But just how big were these debts? 900 gallons of olive oil would be the product of at least 150 olive trees, and was worth about 1,000 denarii, about 3 years wages. So when the manager made the debt 450 gallons, he was saving him one and half year wages! Well you can imagine how happy the olive farmer was! One bushel of wheat weighs 60 pounds. So a thousand bushels of wheat weigh 60,000 pounds. It fits a room of 10x10x2 feet. It was the yield from 100 acres, and was worth about 2,500 denarii, about 8 year wages. The deal is struck. No questions are asked about whether this is the wish of the owner. The guy who is getting the 50 percent discount doesn’t want to ask that question. Why? Because he doesn’t want the answer to that question. He wants to sign and get out quickly because this is a deal he never could have hoped for.

This is purely a shrewd way to embezzle his master in such a way that secures the obligation of all these people to this manager so that he can go back to them and say, “You remember what I did for you? You need to give me a room. You need to give me a job and a place. And if you don’t, I’m going to tell the rest of the people for whom I did the same that you are a dishonorable man.” Here is the shock. Look at verse 8a. “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” What is he praising him about? He is not praising him about his incompetence, his wastefulness. He is not praising him about his embezzlement and deception of the owner. He is praising him because he acted shrewdly. It is his ingenuity that is praised. It is his fierce determination to achieve his goal. He pursued his goal with all of the creativity and energy he could muster.

Look at verse 8b. “For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.” The people of the world are unbelievers. They use their creativity and super diligence to make money to secure their future. They don’t care whether it is ethical or moral. They are even willing to cheat. Do you see the point Jesus is making in this parable? He is saying that since the people of the world are so intense in their way of life, why aren’t my follower? If the crooks of the world will stop at nothing to make money, why aren’t we who are followers of Jesus as committed to him with such zeal, ambition, and dedication?

If crooks and those who are only looking out for their own welfare are so ingenious and can act so decisively about things that really don’t matter, why does a Christian seem so casual about the care of his/her soul? Do we as Christians work as hard at our discipleship in following Jesus, as the two business men in the following story try to cheat people?

“Two partners had a clothing store. One would stay in the back room while the other waited on the people. The one waiting on the people would pretend that he was hard of hearing. When a customer would choose a suit he liked, he would ask the price. The clerk would call to his partner in the back room, ‘How much is this suit, Harry?’ Harry would reply loud and clear so the customer would be sure to hear, ‘$399.00’ The clerk would then say, ‘He said it is $339.00.’

Many people would hurry and buy the suit for $339.00, thinking they were making a good deal because the person waiting on them did not hear the right price. Little did the customer realize that his greed cost him $20 dollars. The same suit sold for $319.00 or less in other places.” These two men went to great lengths to assure themselves of a comfortable living at the cost of cheating the public. But do we as children of the light as Jesus describes those who follow him, act with the same intensity, the same effort in living for Jesus?

Do we practice our prayer life with the same intensity as a professional athlete practices to improve his skills? I read in the Reader’s Digest about a golfer who wanted to make the professional golfers tour. The article said that the man practiced so long and so hard that his hands would frequently bleed at the end of the practice session. How many of us have bleeding hands because we have folded them in prayer for so long and with such intensity? Do we have such drive to communicate with God, as that golfer did in trying to put a little ball in a little cup so that he could make so big money?

This parable deals not with money, or commending a person for being dishonest, but this parable really deals with one’s commitment or discipleship toward Jesus. Jesus wants our lifestyle committed to him. He wants the way we act, the way we think, the way we make decisions, the way we interact with others, all to be influenced by our commitment to Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn’t want us for only one hour a week on Sunday morning, but he wants every hour every day, He wants an intensity in that relationship that comes before anything else on this earth. And he wants us to work at that commitment. Not take it for granted, or leave it all up to him, but he wants our active participation in this relationship.

The parable of the dishonest manager ought to give us pause, and urge us to take an inventory of the things which occupy our greatest levels of energy. I think that it should make us stop and consider just how much of our prayers, presence, gifts, and service we are willing to give for the sake of our Lord. If we discover that we are much more willing to devote energy to things which are not of ultimate consequence than we are to the Lord of our lives, then perhaps we should ask ourselves what we are going to do about it.

Look at verse 9. “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” In the old translation, it says, “the mammon of unrighteousness.” Unrighteous wealth is part of the passing world. It has in itself no virtue, no righteousness. Jesus is saying that even though it is evil, we should use it for eternity. People of this world use money to secure their temporal future until they die. Then it is gone. They cannot take it with them to the grave. It belongs to this temporal world. But Jesus says in a most amazing and gracious and merciful manner to make friends with money that will welcome you into heaven. Suppose you have $100. You can spend it all on a nice dinner. The next day it will be gone. On the other hand, suppose you buy 10 Bibles and distribute to 10 people, and they are saved. When you arrive at the gate of heaven, there will be a welcoming committee of those who were saved through your sacrificial giving and prayer. They will thank you, saying, “It is you who invited us here.” On the final day when my life ends and I’m separated from everything I have, I’m going to find out who is standing on the edge of heaven welcoming me as a friend. What a gift the Lord has given us.

Look at verse 10. “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.” Some say, “Well, I don’t give much, because I don’t have much. If I had more, I would give more.” No, they wouldn’t. No, if they had more, they wouldn’t give any more. It’s not about how much you have. It’s about who you are. It’s about what your priorities are. The amount you possess is not the issue. Your character is the issue. Your commitment is the issue. Your love for heaven is the issue. You are either unselfish, humble, generous, non-materialistic, committed to the kingdom with all your heart or you’re not. It’s not a question of an amount. No, it has nothing to do with an amount.

Look at verse 11. “So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” Suppose you have been self-indulgent, accumulating, and spending all your money on things you are going to leave here. If you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteousness wealth, who – meaning God – is going to give you things that are spiritual and eternal? So what happens is that as you demonstrate unfaithfulness in the use of your unrighteous wealth, you forfeit spiritual and eternal blessings; both now and forever. You may buy yourself endless stuff, comforts, all the shallow things, all the corrupting things, all the temporary things, all stuff that burns up, but you will not receive the true riches, the things that will last forever.

Jesus closes this parable with a statement which strikes to the heart of the matter as he says in verse 13: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” He concludes with a sharp statement as a way to sum up what he had been trying to say all along. And if you are going to be for me, then give me all the effort you can. Give me your entire effort. He is saying that he doesn’t want any half-hearted discipleship. He wants total effort on our part. If the dishonest people can put so much effort in their work to secure their own future, why can’t you try even harder to serve me, love me and love your neighbor?

Can you put forth the effort to serve Jesus? That is what he is asking in the parable; where is your effort? Jesus is asking where do your priorities lie.