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**Is it Good to be Shrewd? – Dr John Tan**  
**Luke 16: 1 – 14**

Are parables used to make things easier to understand or were they designed to hide truths from people? Matthew Henry says, parables make the things of God ‘more plain and easy’ to those who are willing to be taught and to be led by the Lord and yet at the same time, parables make things more difficult and obscure to those who choose to be willfully ignorant. That said, Luke 16: 1 – 14 is one parable that is actually quite difficult to understand for it would almost seem like the Lord was praising and commending the person in this parable who was practicing shrewdness and dishonesty.

This parable can be divided into two sections – the first has to do with temporal investments and the second is about eternal investments. The important verses are verse 2 (in consideration of temporal investments) and verses 9 to 13 and 15 (which relate to eternal investments).

**Temporal ‘investments’**

This parable is somewhat shocking in that the main character in this parable is a crook and yet he is commended by his boss, whom he defrauded, and to top it off, the crooked manager is even complimented by the Lord Jesus Himself!

The owner is very rich and has a steward who manages everything for him. The steward or manager is the one who deals with all the financial matters/transactions on behalf of his master. But this particular steward went wayward and was wasting the owner’s possession. After a period of time, he is found out and he knows that he is about to be fired. His boss says to him, ‘give me an account of your management’ (verse 2).

Verse 2 tells us that all of us who are called by the name of the Lord will be required to give an account of how we spend the resources that the Lord has given to us, the gifts, the talents, the finances and so on. We need to be sure that we are not wasting the resources that the Lord has given us while we are still living on this earth.

In verse 3 we see that the crooked manager knows that he is about to lose his job. He does not want to dig; he is ashamed to beg but he knows that he needs a means of living. You would think in such a situation that he would craft a plan to steal the master’s money, but he does not do that. Instead, he hatches a plan so that he might still be received by people after he had lost his job.

He got together with his boss’s debtors and told them that he would reduce their outstanding debts. Essentially, he gave the owner’s debtors unauthorized discounts – this crooked manager was buying favors for himself using someone else’s money (see verses 5 to 7). What he did was wrong, illegal and unethical but it was also shrewd. This was done to make his master’s debtors indebted to him.

Now, surprisingly, the master actually commended this crooked manager for what he had done. One would have thought that the owner would have thrown the whole book at this crooked manager. The master had seen that the crooked manager was not just planning for the immediate. If he had done that, all that he had to do was just to steal more of his master's money. But what this crooked manager did was more than just for the immediate future; he had set up a chain of people that he could call upon for favors in the future.

Now, it is already bad enough that the master had complimented the crooked manager but what is really shocking is that Jesus also commends the crooked manager by saying 'the sons of this world are more shrewd than those of us who walk in the light'. What does it mean that the sons of this world are more shrewd than the ones who walk in the light?

The word shrewd means 'having or showing sharp powers of judgment' or being 'astute'. A shrewd person is one who shows the capacity for sharp judgment in practical matters, sometimes at the cost of moral compromise, and who is able to quickly and accurately judge a situation and then turn it to his or her advantage. Shrewdness is something that can be developed. A shrewd person knows that he or she needs to invest time in developing the skills required to get ahead in this life.

Consider for a moment just how it is that the people of the world are often more 'shrewd'. The people of this world invest huge amount of time and effort into perfecting their abilities in their chosen areas as they try to build their name and fame for the future. Alexander MacLaren said that 'jugglers and fiddlers, and circus-riders and dancers, and people of that sort spend far more time upon efforts to perfect themselves in their profession, than ninety-nine out of every hundred professing Christians do to make themselves true followers of Jesus Christ'.

These entertainers know that nothing can be achieved, no standards can be reached without working for it. They invest much effort into crafting the future that they so desire. Similarly, in our Christian life, we need to realize that we too need to invest time and effort into developing ourselves to become effective servants for His kingdom while we are still here on this side of eternity. We need to devote time to being able to defend the faith, to preach the word in season and out of season; to correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction (2 Timothy 4:2). There is a plethora of tools that can help us but first and foremost is that we must become well acquainted with scripture, with doctrine. Unfortunately, many Christians today waste the God given resource of time and do things that are of little or no value to the Kingdom of God. For instance, when did we last invest time and effort into honing our abilities to share the message of hope and eternal life? Perhaps we should consider listening to people like Cliffe Knechtle from 'Give me an answer' and others so that we might learn how to engage in discussions with skeptics, how to explore faith, overcome doubts and have answers to tough questions. Perhaps, what is meant here is that Christians need to develop our abilities to become more discerning, more sagacious and farsighted, to be less fearful of sharing our faith, but without any compromise of ethics or morality. If this is our underlying paradigm, then it is time for us to develop these skills from the perspective of eternity.

## Eternal investments

Now, let's turn to verse 9 and see just what it is that the Lord is really saying through this parable. The main lessons are really from verses 9, 10, 11 and 12.

Verse 9 – “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings”. It might seem like what the Lord is saying is that we are to use our money to buy friends – but He is definitely not saying this. What word makes it clear that He is not telling us to use money to buy friends? It is the word ‘eternal’. What then does verse 9 mean?

I believe that the verse means that we are to invest our money to bring people into the kingdom of heaven so that when you leave this world and get to heaven you will be welcomed by those who had been saved through your giving and participation in the spreading of the gospel. Unfortunately, though, many of us build and gather earthly treasures for ourselves, so that we can have bigger houses and better cars and are better able to flaunt our wealth. While there is nothing wrong with becoming wealthy, remember that laying up treasures on earth is subject to the treasure becoming reduced in value and stolen. Who are we making our money for? We all agree that one second after our lives expire here on earth, all the wealth on earth will do nothing, mean nothing to us. So, the real question then is can we send our earthly wealth ahead to heaven (in a manner of speaking)?

Consider the words of Jim Elliot, the martyred missionary who gave his life reaching reach the Huaorani people of Ecuador; ‘He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose’.

We are to use our worldly wealth to gain friends for ourselves in heaven, so that when our wealth is gone, so that one second after our lives on this earth are over and all the wealth on earth is totally meaningless to us, we will be welcomed by those who were brought into the Kingdom into eternal dwellings because we gave to the work of the Lord. I trust that we will have people welcoming us into the Kingdom.

Look now at verses 10 to 12. ‘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. So, if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, will the Lord trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?’

I think that it is important for us to note the following:

- If you want to be entrusted with much, then make sure that you start with being trustworthy with whatever little is given you. Our faithfulness and trustworthiness can be demonstrated by how we handle things that belong to others, but which have been entrusted to us. For instance, what are we doing with the message of salvation that has been entrusted to us to share. Are we working and practicing and fine tuning our ability to share the word effectively?

- The wealth of the world is really very little if compared with the true wealth that awaits us in heaven
- The wealth that we have here is really not our own
- If we are faithful with what is not really ours (as we cannot take it with us), He then gives us what would really be ours in glory.

Now, all of a sudden, just after the Lord has said that we should use money to gain friends for ourselves, He pivots and says ‘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’ (verse 13). What does He mean by this? This can really only be understood if we know what the real value of worldly wealth is. Money is to be used to serve God and to win souls for the Kingdom. Unfortunately, so many use people and love money when it really should be to love people and use money. When we love money, it becomes our master; but when we love people for the Kingdom’s sake, then we place God as the Master. And remember, we cannot serve two masters.

Apart from money, what are the things that we hold so very dear to our hearts? We need to take time off and reflect on this.

So then, is it good to be shrewd? The answer to this question is that it is indeed good to be shrewd, but to be shrewd about our eternal future rather than to be shrewd just for the here and now. Our hearts should be invested in the eternal and not just the temporal.

Matthew 6: 19 – 21 says <sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.<sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6: 24: No man 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 God and money.

Dr John Tan