

THE SHREWD MANAGER

By Michael Harper

Passage for study: St Luke chapter 16 verses 1-8

If we were to grade all the parables of Jesus according to how easy they are to understand, most would probably put the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-31) at the top as the simplest, and the shrewd manager bottom as the most difficult. Yet they are placed next to each other in Luke's text, and Jesus probably told them one after the other.

Most commentators are agreed that the parable of the shrewd manager is the hardest to understand and the most complex in the New Testament.

One of them (Bultmann) wrote 'It is impossible to know what it means'. There is a simple reason for our difficulties, and so also a way round them. The prodigal son is about a family, and family life is very similar in all ages and all cultures. The shrewd manager on the other hand is story about business dealings, some would say 'wheeling and dealing'. Anyone who knows anything about the Middle East will tell you that their ways of doing business are very different from Western practices. So we have to know about the culture, if we are to understand it properly. Kenneth Bailey, who has lived many years in the Middle East, calls this 'Oriental exegesis.'

1. The 'how much more' example

Jesus is here employing a common eastern or rabbinic method of teaching. Kenneth Bailey calls it 'the light to heavy method'. A classic example is Jesus' statement in Luke 11:13: 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!' Elsewhere God is compared to an unjust judge (Luke 18:2), or a reluctant friend (Luke 11:7.) The kingdom of God is likened to a somewhat shady deal over a field in which treasure had been found. Thus it is to be understood that if an unjust judge gives way to pressure from a widow, **how much more** will God judge fairly. As we shall see, what seems at first sight to be a parable commending dishonesty, is in fact an example of the mercy of God.

2. Mercy in the eastern setting

According to the practice of the day the steward should have been fired on the spot and put in prison. But his master gave him time to put things in order. There are many stories of how in the East the appeal to clemency has succeeded. There was a murderer who once asked to see the great Sultan Saladin before being executed. 'O most gracious

Sultan,' he said, 'my sins are great, but the mercy of the Sultan is greater.' It worked, and he was released! But notice that he made no excuses, that would have been fatal.

3. Eastern accountancy

Accountants like Price Waterhouse would have a fit if anyone followed the practices of those days! What the master in this parable asked for was the return of the account books (v1). The accounts themselves did not need to be balanced. All that was required was cleverness in changing them to suit the moment.

4. The importance of silence in the East

In Eastern culture what you don't say is as important as what you do say. If you go to Japan you will soon find out what this means. The shrewd manager said nothing in response to the accusations levelled against him. As we have seen already easterners by their silence are pleading guilty.

5. Changing the accounts

In this parable we notice that the manager is in a hurry. 'Sit down quickly' he says (v6). He was obviously an estate manager, and the rent due to his master was paid in kind rather than cash. So he reduces the debts, eight hundred gallons to four hundred, and one thousand bushels to eight hundred. Why these inconsistent reductions? The answer is simple when you look at Hebrew numerals. To change an eight to a four, and a ten to an eight only requires a simple stroke of the pen. The manager could quickly and easily change the account books!

6. Saving face

In the East one of the constant facts of life is the struggle to save face. This parable hinges on this eastern imperative. The manager is driven by the fact that he is going to lose face when he lost his job, because no-one would hire him again. So he had to save face and make friends somehow – albeit dishonestly (v4). But what is often overlooked is the manager's master and his need also to save face! It was this factor which provoked his master's fulsome commendation (v8).

When the debtors suddenly found that their debts were being substantially reduced, they would have thrown a public party to thank the master for such generosity. The master

under such circumstances could not possibly reveal that a great mistake had been made. He had no intention to do this. To do so would have meant his losing face. He commended the astuteness of his manager even though he himself lost money thereby.

7. Getting even

There would have been many smiles on the faces of Jesus' audience as He told this story. It is a peasant story, and peasants love to get even with their bosses. Then, as now, the eastern world had landowners who often ruled in absentia, sometimes oppressing their tenants through unscrupulous and corrupt officials like this manager. They would really have enjoyed this story, whether they understood its deeper meaning or not.

THE LESSONS WE LEARN

We are certainly not meant to follow the business practices mentioned in this parable! What then are the main lessons?

1. The mercy of God

Because we are so intrigued with the business side of the story, we can miss the main lesson, which is the mercy of God. The unjudging and forgiving behaviour of the master, so like that of the father of the prodigal son, reminds us again of the unbounded mercy of God towards us.

2. Our silence

Like this manager (and the prodigal son) we are bound to be speechless in the presence of such a merciful God. We have nothing to say, no excuses, no explanations and no defences; all we can say is 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'

3. Light is heavy

This story is thick with intrigue. But our relationship to God needs to be like His to us, without deviousness. Unlike eastern people, God does not have to save face, nor need we. Our relationship needs to be based on faith and humble trust in transparency. Our life needs to be the very opposite of this parable – honest, straight-forward, truthful and free from corruption.

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your abundant mercy to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. No words can adequately express our joy and peace as we respond to that mercy, nor in our human response to it can we excuse ourselves. Thank You that we can trust You completely, for in You is no deviousness or bias. Thank You that in our Lord Jesus Christ, Your mercy is fully and freely expressed. Amen.

Further readings:

Luke 11:1-13; Luke 15:11-24; Luke 15:25-31; Luke:18:1-8; Luke:18:9-14

Matthew 5: 1-12; Matthew 12: 1-8.