

Have you ever had a Taxation office audit?

How did you feel? Were there some nerves - what did I do? What didn't I do?

Or maybe, you have had a tax audit and **knowing** you did some dodgy stuff on your last tax return. The nerves would definitely be there and you'd wonder what the outcome might be.

Similarly, have you ever been a victim of fraud? I've known at least two people who have been defrauded by a business partner, and the end result was terrible, coupled with relational breakdown and horror. I really hope it hasn't happened to you.

Some shrewd managers do well. Some shrewd managers fall away.

Today we're looking at a really strange parable.

On initial reading it seems that Jesus is affirming dishonesty. What on earth can this parable mean? How do we interpret whether shrewdness is positive or negative? How do we find out what Jesus really meant?

And probably the biggest question is - why on earth would Jesus tell a story like this anyway. It seems so odd.

Well, can I say that one of the first things we do in ALL bible reading is consider the context. And that means you have to ask what's happened **before**, and what happens **after**.

The first thing to note is that this immediately follows the parables of the the lost sheep, lost coin and lost sons, which was our reading last week. And we noted then that these were parables for the **Pharisees** to hear. It's the **Pharisees** who were there muttering about Jesus saying "He welcomes sinners and eats with them." And he told the parables of the lost sheep, coin and son.

Then at the beginning of chapter 16, in v.1 it says that Jesus is now speaking to the **disciples**. And he tells them this really interesting parable.

But before we get into it, I want to direct you to **v.14**. I believe this is a key to understanding why Jesus told this parable.

v.14 says - "The Pharisees, **who loved money**, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus."

So we're told that Jesus is telling this story to his disciples, but the Pharisees haven't gone anywhere. They hear it all! And Jesus would obviously know that the Pharisees are still there, and could hear.

My question is - was Jesus continuing to tell parables against the Pharisees. Was Jesus wanting them to hear?? I believe - yes, he was.

Let's get back to the parable with all that in mind.

Basically what it is, is that a rich man does an audit on his manager, his steward, because he'd been accused of wasting his possessions.

Not the sort of thing you'd be wanting a supposedly trustworthy manager to do.

So the manager goes into panic mode. I'm getting fired! I've been doing a desk job for so long, I'm not fit anymore so I couldn't do a labouring job, and I'm certainly not going to demean myself by begging!! I have to work out a plan. What about - if I negotiate with all the debtors, and get in good with them, then they'll like me and invite me for meals. Then at least I won't starve.

So he sets about to put his plan into action. He calls in the debtors one by one and changes their invoices in their favour.

Surprisingly the rich man commends this, and we're left wondering why?

Now of course, this is a parable. It's a story Jesus made up, so we can't have every question answered as if we needed to do an investigation of it all. This isn't a real audit. It's a story designed to teach a principle.

We don't know whether the manager was lining his own pockets by over-charging, and through these invoice changes he was righting his own wrongs. You could say that that change of method could be commended.

We don't know whether he was skimming other things off the top and diddling the rich man that way.

And we don't need to know.

All that we know is - we've got a dodgy manager; he got found out, and the end result was that he was commended for how he handled it. And we are told the reason for the commendation - he acted shrewdly. And in these circumstances he was in, that was wise.

Jesus says that the point of the story is that we are to use worldly resources wisely, to plan well for the future.

And the big point about that, is that it's not just about a physical worldly future, but we need to plan well for our eternal future.

If people who are worldly know how to wisely plan and prepare for a worldly future, how much more vital is it that people who belong to Jesus know how to plan and prepare for our future.

Worldly resources are amoral, they are neither right nor wrong. It's what we do with our worldly resources that matters. If we do anything with our worldly resources, let's make sure that it's with a generous spirit. Let's make sure that we put others first in decisions about money.

One of the reasons I believe Jesus' intent was for the Pharisees to hear this parable, is one of the words he uses in the parable.

Look at v. 1. There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. Now look at chapter 15:13 from last week's passage.

".... the younger son set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."

The word translated 'wasting' in chapter 16 and 'squandering', in chapter 15 is the same Gk word.

These are both parables about people wasting the resources given to them. The Gk word is 'diaskorpizo'. And the word means 'I scatter'.

There is a connection between these two parables. The younger son was a **disreputable** scatterer of resources.

Now in the next parable, with the pharisees still within hearing range, we have a '**reputable**' scatterer of resources being found out. A manager of an estate doing things irresponsibly.

Now as we've seen, chapter 16:14 says - The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

And Jesus says to them - You justify yourself in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly, is detestable in God's sight.

Jesus rebukes their emphasis on human values and traditions, and says you cannot 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.

Now this of course is the same language that Jesus used in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 6:24.

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.

RC Sproul says that 'The Pharisees thought that because they had power, wealth and authority in the community, they could use their success to justify their sinful lifestyle. People were willing to be blinded to the evils of the Pharisees, but Jesus reminded them that God knows the heart. He reminds them that we live in a topsy-turvy world, where those things that are highly esteemed by people, are detestable in the sight of God. '

Power and success, if achieved at the expense of human beings, by the exploitation of the weak and poor, are despicable to God.

I'm not sure if you've been keeping up with the world wide Christian news over the last few years, but there have been way too many high profile Christians, who have had "successful" and very influential, even you would say excellent, ministries, who have fallen down the path of cover up, sin and mishandling of many issues.

Decades ago there were people like Jim and Tammy Bakker, more recently there has been Mark Driscoll from Mars Hill, Bill Hybels from Willow Creek, Hillsong NY pastor Carl Lentz, Ravi Zacharias from Ravi Zacharias Ministries, and now here in Australia not only Frank Houston from a generation ago, but in the last couple of weeks the allegations are coming about Brian Houston the founder and global pastor of Hillsong who has now resigned this last week under a great cloud of allegation.

These are the guys who needed someone to say - "what are you doing?" "What am I hearing about you, cause I don't like it." Just like the master in today's parable who said to his manager - what's this I hear about you?

But the truth is in fact, that every single one of us needs someone in our lives who can say that. What are you doing? Is that legit? Is that honouring to God?

Why are you making those choices? Why are making those decisions?

This parable is not here to teach us how to manipulate events for our own benefit.

As much as that may have been the dishonest manager's method, Jesus isn't suggesting that it's OK for us to manipulate or cheat, even if we believe it is in the service of God's kingdom.

So those who may want to use this parable to justify underhanded or dishonest methods of evangelism, or to justify and continue in inappropriate behaviour, are simply misusing it.

It's never enough to say the end justifies the means.
In the service of God's kingdom our motives must be right and righteous.
What the parable is about is how we **use** our influence, our money and our position in life.

It points out that money and worldly goods are neutral commodities, and it's how we use them that makes us honest or dishonest.

But it's also about having a long term vision. It's about expanding our horizon, and getting the big picture on life. It's about understanding where we're going, long term, so we can know how to live our life here and now.

What does the manager do?

He realises what life will be like when he's been fired and he does something about it.

He takes the opportunity he has while the opportunity is there, to create a secure future for himself.

You see, this is what life is about for the Christian.

Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternity."

This is not about buying your way into heaven.

We have to read this parable in conjunction with the preceding one, the one of the prodigal.

There we see very clearly that it's the grace and forgiveness of the Father that matters.

But nevertheless, God cares about how we use the resources he gives us. In fact that was the elder sons problem.

That's why so much space in the New Testament is given to exhorting us about our use of money.

This dishonest steward eventually saw the big picture and his horizon reached beyond this world and into eternity.

He saw that his behaviour influenced his future.

And that's also what should be part of our view of life. We're not here to make money for short term pleasure. We're not here to plan for retirement.

In v.9 Jesus directs our attention to eternity. He says, use worldly wealth in such a way that you will be welcomed into eternity.

One of the sad things Jesus teaches in this parable is that worldly people are often more astute in these matters than people who live in the light.

So he's exhorting people who want to follow him, to be as shrewd about eternity, as the world is about the short term future.

We're here to plan for eternity. We're here to bring people into God's kingdom. And one way of doing that is to use our money, our wealth, our time, to support God's work.

The Pharisees were stewards of the law, but they wasted it by reinterpreting it and so compromised it.

Although they were highly esteemed by the people, in God's sight they were an abomination.

So what about you?

Where have you come to in your shrewdness about living for your eternal future?

You may well be shrewd with your budget, you may well be shrewd with your few resources, or with your many resources, but you need to think about much more than your next purchase, or your earthly retirement. What really matters is your shrewdness about your eternal future and your kingdom impact.

If we are living as people in the light, let's make sure that Jesus won't have the view that others are wiser than us.

If we love our money more than we love God, there is trouble ahead.

If we love our money more than we love God, I think that narrow door is closing on us, if you remember back two weeks ago.

The Scriptures are clear as well as consistent, even though there are times that it is cryptic.

May we all be trusted with the little, so that we can be trusted with much.

God bless you as you work this out in your life as you live to love and proclaim Jesus.

Amen.