

SHREWD LIKE A SERPENT

September 21, 2025

(PROPER 20 C)

READINGSⁱ

Amos 8:4-7

*Hear this, you who trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, "When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?"*

*We will make the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."
The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.*

Luke 16:1-13

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager,
and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.
So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you?
Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my
manager any longer.'*

*Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is
taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am
ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as
manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'*

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty. Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

Last year, a businessman from the Gold Coast, Queensland was accused of using the money that had been invested into his NDIS related property development project to fuel his gambling addiction. The businessman was a former vice Chief Financial Officer of a major mining company. Before he became a property developer, he had 30-year experience in the financial and commercial sector. From 2023 to 2024, however, he was accused of gambling close to \$40 million of his investors' money in casino. He gambled about \$500,000 to \$5 million per month on average! His wife was also

accused of using \$2.5 million of the investors' money to buy luxury vehicle and property on the Gold Coast!ⁱⁱ

Friends, fraud is not only a modern phenomenon however; it was already present thousands of years ago as we can see in the ancient texts in our holy Scriptures.

We hear in our reading from the book of the prophet, Amos, how the traders in his time acted dishonestly by manipulating their scale. *Ephah* and *shekel* are units that were used by traders to measure the volume of the goods they bought or sold. It was a known practice that the traders back then often manipulated these units of measurement to dishonestly benefit from the trade.

In Jesus' parable in the Gospel of Luke, we hear another example of fraud. Unlike in the other Gospels, however, the characters in Jesus' parables in Luke's Gospel can be quite complex with conflicting motivations.ⁱⁱⁱ Just like a good novel, the narrative of the parable has plot twist and turns, leaving hearers of the story perplexed. No wonder that the parable is widely considered as one of the most confusing.

Some commentators of this parable argue that, by manipulating his master's account, the manager is actually helping others by cutting the amount of debts that they owe. And less debt means more resources to support oneself.

In the parable, the debtors owe to the rich man things that are necessary for day-to-day life in first century society; necessities like olive oil and wheat. So, cutting the amount of debts that these people have means that the debtors will have more to live.

But the amount of debts in the parable seems to be quite significant. We are told that the debtors owe 'a hundred jugs of olive oil' and 'a hundred containers of wheat'.^{iv} This means that the debtors themselves are not poor.

So the master in the parable is a wealthy man who lends to other equally wealthy people!

But make no mistake, the manager in Jesus' parable is not a good man. Regardless of the positive impacts that his shrewd action creates, he is still a dishonest man.

First, his action is born not out of selfless intention, but out of selfish motivation. He dishonestly cuts the debts to win the wealthy debtors' favors. His goal is not to help other people, but to look after himself. He helps the rich debtors so that he will have strong social connections to fall into after he finishes his job.^v

But here is the point that Jesus makes: Jesus laments the fact that the "children of this age", like the dishonest manager, know how to act shrewdly to get what they want. They understand how the world operates and they use their knowledge to benefit themselves. The "children of light", however, often lacks the imagination to be as shrewd in their pursuit of a good cause.

"for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

(Luke 16:8 NRSV)

This is quite a harsh, yet necessary reminder that we, as followers of Jesus, need to pay attention to.

The parable, however, is not that only time that Jesus speaks about this topic. In another occasion, Jesus once tells his followers,

"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,
so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

(Matthew 10:16 NRSV)

This is also not the only time that Jesus talks about choosing between serving God or wealth. Appearing after today's parable, however, this famous saying of Jesus can be seen from a different angle.

For Jesus, the “children of this age”—those who worship wealth—are driven mainly by selfishness; yet, their selfish motivation enables them to be innovative in pursuing their goal, no matter how twisted that goal is. The “children of light”—the worshippers of the one true God—on the other hand, often lack similar creativity to fulfil their honest intention!

So the challenge that Jesus presents to us today is to, first, rediscover our passion for God's Kingdom; to be as passionate as the “children of this age” in their pursuit of wealth. And, just like the “children of this age”, Jesus challenges us to also be ‘shrewd’ in our works for God's Kingdom.

Friends, today's parable about the dishonest manager is one of the many parables in the Gospel of Luke. The other parables are the parable of the prodigal son (or family to be more accurate),^{vi} the parable of the good Samaritan,^{vii} and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.^{viii}

All of these parables, including the one we hear today, have one thing in common: they all talk about the reversal of fortunes. They all teach us that status in the society is everything but permanent.^{ix} Today's parable challenges us to act shrewdly when we come face to face with a significant change of status.

As such, today's parable is quite relevant for the Church nowadays.

Today, the Church in the Western world faces the same kind of change in its standing in the society. In 1971, 86.2% of the population in Australia professed to be Christians. That number went down to 43.9% in 2021. I assume it is even lower now in 2025.

On the flip side, in 1971, the proportion of people who saw themselves as having no religion was 6.7%. In 2021, that number has swelled to 39.9%!^x Again, I assume it is even higher in 2025.

I believe most of you here are sitting in the first-row seats of the change that has happened in the life of the Church. Many of you have told me how, in the past, the Church was the only thing that happened on Sunday; how the Church was the main social hub in the community.

Well, not anymore. There are now a multitude of options that people can choose besides going to Church.

What does this mean for us today? Jesus' parable today teaches us that it means that we should no longer treat being the Church as 'business as usual'. We should first acknowledge that the Church's standing in the society that we once enjoyed as the Church is no longer there. We should then learn from the "children of this age"; to think of different ways in how we present ourselves and in how we connect with other people in our community.

A wise person once says that the definition of madness is "to do the same thing over and over again, but to expect a different result each time!" But we are not "mad"; we are the children of light who have been called to serve the one true God by being as shrewd as a serpent, while remaining pure as a dove.^{xi}

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How can you be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” in your life?
2. Why do you think Christians are often slow to change to respond to what happens in the world?
3. How do you make your faith relevant to other people without losing your integrity?
4. Who is the person in your life who is the best example of this?

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

ⁱⁱ “NDIS property developer accused of gambling \$39m of investors' money” an article by Mackenzie Colahan on ABC Gold Coast, Sat 9 Nov 2024 at 12:30pm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greg Carey, *Commentary on Luke 16-1-13* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.

^{iv} See Luke 16:5-7 NRSV.

^v Greg Carey, *Commentary on Luke 16-1-13* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.

^{vi} Luke 15:11-32.

^{vii} Luke 10:25-37.

^{viii} Luke 16:19-31.

^{ix} Greg Carey, *Commentary on Luke 16-1-13* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.

^x *Is Australia losing religion: The State of the Church* an article in Charles Sturt University’s website on 05 May 2023 (<https://about.csu.edu.au/community/accc/about/latest-news-assets/2023/is-australia-losing-religion-the-state-of-the-church#:~:text=The%202021%20Census%20shows%20that,difference%20between%20those%20two%20things>).

^{xi} “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16 NRSV)