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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Being Shrewd for God”

Scripture Text: Luke 16:1-13

Dear people of God, when I was growing up on Barkley Avenue in Clifton, New Jersey, there used to be a small house at the top of the hill on the corner. The house had a small grocery shop in front. The store was no larger than my office. It was run by an elderly couple, Mr. And Mrs. Meyer, who operated the store to supplement their retirement income. A lot of the kids in the neighborhood would frequent the store because in addition to selling cold cuts, bread, canned soup, and other grocery staples, it also sold candy bars, bubble gum, baseball cards, and lots of other treats that little boys and girls like.

At my school, children would walk home to have lunch from noon to 12:30pm. When we would finish lunch, many of us would stop at Meyer’s store on the way back to school to buy a dessert, such as a Snickers bar or Twinkies or Ring Dings. Because the store was so small, and there was no room to keep extra inventory, the Meyers wouldn’t order from their supplier more than they thought they could sell from week to week. That

meant that the kids were never guaranteed that they would have the snack they wanted. It often would be sold out.

One day Mrs. Meyer came up with a shrewd idea. She asked each of the kids what snacks they would like for the following week. Instead of guessing what they might want, and often being wrong, because children are very fickle, Mrs. Meyer now knew exactly what to order. She would ask me, “Gary, what snacks would you like next week? And I would answer, “I would like Twinkies on Monday and Thursday, a Milky Way bar on Tuesday and Friday, and snowballs, make sure they’re the pink ones, not the white, on Wednesday. Oh, and Mrs. Meyer, make sure to get more baseball cards next week. You’ve run out!” Mrs. Meyer would ask each of the children who patronized her store the same thing. As a result, she did a much better business than before and without needing to stockpile extra goods that never sold.

Mrs. Meyer was an example of what I would call a shrewd person. Some of us aren’t comfortable with the word, *shrewd*. It’s one of those words that sounds sinister, but it really isn’t. The word is used only five times in the entire Bible, three times in the Hebrew Old Testament and twice in the Greek New Testament.

In Hebrew the word *shrewd* means “having shown that you have

wrestled with something.” In other words, it means that you have thought things through, looked at them from all sides, and then have chosen what you consider to be the best course of action.

Greek, which is a language that reflects its culture, imparts to the word *shrewd* a more rational meaning, along the lines of being wise, intelligent, prudent, or savvy.

If you put the two concepts together, you get the idea that a shrewd person is someone who has looked at all the options and decides upon the wisest and best choice.

To remind you, a parable is an everyday story that has a spiritual meaning. Jesus’s parables always relate to God in some way. The parable that’s the focus of my sermon this morning is probably the most difficult parable to interpret. On the surface, it seems that Jesus is praising the unscrupulous manager for his dishonesty. But that’s not really the case.

If we remember that every parable tells us something about God, then we must be very careful about what we claim to be the moral of the parable. Also, parables usually tell us only one thing about God. They never present the whole picture of who God is. That’s why systematic theology books rarely cite Jesus’s parables. By themselves they give an incomplete picture of God. And if there’s anything that systematic

theologians hate, it's incompleteness. They want to write about God in the divine fullness so that nothing is left out. Parables are of little use in that regard. That's why systematic theologians prefer the apostle Paul's letters to Christ's parables.

And so, what we should be looking for in this parable is that one idea of God that Jesus is trying to help us to see. More has been written on this parable than any of the others that Jesus told. While systematic theologians ignore it, biblical theologians grapple incessantly with it, spending pages and pages trying to explain it. As you can imagine, because more has been written on this parable than any other, more interpretations have been put forth on this one than any other. A lot of these interpretations are off the mark in my opinion. Many commentators are frankly embarrassed by this parable. They try to wiggle out of the obvious conclusion that Jesus is commending this dishonest steward. But there's nothing to be embarrassed about.

We should state very clearly that the master in this parable represents God. And the master very clearly is commending the dishonest manager, who is supposed to represent you and I. But we must be very careful about why the master is commending the dishonest manager. He's not commending him for his dishonesty. He's commending him for his

shrewdness, specifically for the prudent way that he responds to his situation after being notified of his firing.

First of all, we must notice that everything the manager uses belongs to his master. He doesn't own anything himself. There's nothing in your retirement account, the equity in your house, or in your paycheck that doesn't belong to God. Everything we have belongs to God, and is merely entrusted to us to manage for God for as long as we are allowed to live on this earth. At the beginning of this parable, there's already a problem, namely, the manager wasn't doing a faithful job in handling his master's money. That's a risk God takes with each one of us.

When asked how he felt being America's first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., remarked that his assets hadn't changed from the time he got his first job at the age of 16 as an assistant bookkeeper. He said, "I didn't own what I had before, and so, I own the same amount now, which is zero. But I do feel an added responsibility to God for the added wealth I have. I tithed ten percent of my very first paycheck to my church and I still do today." Rockefeller, who was a devout Baptist, knew that though he may have been the wealthiest man in the country, God was the real owner of all his assets.

The fact that the master in the parable calls the dishonest steward

to account of his management teaches us another lesson, namely, we won't have our wealth very long, so we should use it now for God's purposes. Though it's wise to have enough savings put away for a rainy day and not to be in a lot of debt, we must all realize that when it's our time to leave this earth, we can't take it with us. If you want to make a donation to the church or to another worthwhile cause, you should do it while you're still around and living at home.

A former parishioner of this congregation, now deceased, left Park Congregational Church \$15,000 in his will. The church never got the money. Why? He spent the last two years of his life in a nursing home and they eventually took it all. So, though his will stated that Park Church was supposed to get \$15,000, there was no money left in his estate because he died on Medicaid, as will 95% of us. I will repeat that because it's very sobering. According to present trends, 95% of us will die in a nursing home on Medicaid, in other words, penniless. If you want to make a donation to your family, to the church, or to some other worthwhile cause, you should do it while you're still alive and living in your own home.

Another aspect of this parable is that it teaches us to have others owe us a debt of gratitude rather than putting ourselves in financial debt.

When we help others, they'll naturally seek to return the favor. We should do this not to try to coerce God's favor, but rather, because it's the right thing to do and it will make us happy. Spending money on ourselves will only wind up putting ourselves in debt and will eventually make us miserable. The dishonest manager in this parable is making friends with all his master's clients so that they will invite him into their homes when he's no longer employed. He's doing them a big favor by cutting their bills, and so, they will feel obligated to him. They will become his friends. The dishonest manager could have wallowed in his misery, saying "Woe is me! I've been fired! What am I going to do now?" But no, he didn't do that. He used his shrewdness to figure out a plan so that he would be able to survive after his being let go by his master.

A wise and savvy investment of God's resources uses them for Christ's church and kingdom, sometimes in very imaginative ways. What are the ways that you are using the resources that God has entrusted to you? Are you being shrewd in your management or are you following our secular culture and mindlessly going after material things just because everyone else is doing that? It has been said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

I think another teaching of this parable is that God doesn't just

demand things from us because he's God and we're not. God is showing us that we receive benefits when we shrewdly use the resources God has conferred upon us.

First of all, when we're shrewd with the stewardship entrusted to us, God allows us to be trusted with more. Those of you who are parents, do you notice what your children do with their allowance? Are you inclined to give them a bigger allowance if they're inclined to spend it on frivolous things or on worthwhile things? God is the same way. If God sees that we're wasting the gifts granted to us, more gifts probably will not be coming. God wants to see if we're people of integrity. If we use what we have shrewdly, God will trust us with more to manage. We must be faithful with the little things in life because that's how God can tell if we'll be faithful with the big things. The dishonest manager got into trouble because he squandered his master's money. When he was called to account, his attitude changed and he became shrewd, using his master's money to benefit his clients. You would think that the master would be angry about this, but he wasn't. That's how our surprising God is.

Can we push ourselves to devise plans to help people with what has been entrusted to us? Do we possess items no longer used that might be a

godsend to others? Can we donate our time to drive people where they need to go? Do we have resources to share with others that might allow us to make new friends and allow other people into our lives, people we would not otherwise get to know?

We should notice that what really characterizes this manager as dishonest was his original squandering of his master's property. This squandering wasn't just incompetence or irresponsibility. It was dishonesty. To waste God's resources is being dishonest. It's stealing. If we don't use the resources God has given us for the benefit of the church and kingdom, we are stealing from God. It's when we invest in the work of the church and kingdom that we are considered trustworthy by God.

And of course, as an added bonus, as the master in the parable indicates, if we're found to be trustworthy stewards, we'll be welcomed into the eternal dwellings. Now we shouldn't profess to be Christians merely to get into heaven after we die. If that's the reason we're Christians, then we're just as selfish as anyone else. Then we're just into this Christian thing for what we can get out of it. God wants us to be shrewd to get us beyond ourselves. As I quote Lily Tomlin in today's bulletin insert, "I always wondered why somebody doesn't do something about that. Then I realized I was somebody." We're all somebodies. We all

can do something to change the world for the better. It starts with one good deed.

Some of you might remember the old Jack Benny skit. He's accosted by a robber who points a gun at him and says, "Your money or your life." The miserly Jack Benny just freezes. Again, the robber says, "Come on, come on, your money or your life." Jack Benny finally says, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" Jesus is asking that question right now to each one of us. He's saying, "You must choose either God or your money. You must choose either God or your possessions. You must choose either God or your time, your diversions, your amusements, your material pleasures. What's it going to be?"

Let's not just stand there and say, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking." Let's make a decision. If God is number one in our life, then let's not be lazy and just go through the motions of being a Christian. Let's show some shrewdness. Let's be shrewd for God. Amen.