

**WESTMINSTER**  
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SERMON

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# Shrewd Christians

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We learn to navigate at an early age how to get what we want with what we have.

Although most school lunchrooms prohibit students from trading their lunch, we know or can recall an exchange rate exist of the market ratio of chips to Cheetos. Some tables establish how many granola bars it takes to equal the value of an unopened package of double-stuffed Oreos.

We become crafty in getting what we want – trading chores, portions of our allowance. Can you recall how you negotiated as a kid, or the schemes presented to you as a parent.

Kids trade sports cards. Cards of their favorite baseball or football hero.

We don't lose that passion to pursue what we want with age; we hone our skills.

Recently an autographed Patrick Mahomes Rookie Card #161 sold, or traded for, \$4.6 million. I presume an adult purchased this and not some kid who can throw around that kind of money.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus tells simple to stories spotlight what we value. And what God values.

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<sup>1</sup> [Patrick Mahomes rookie card sells for \\$4.3 million, shattering previous record involving Tom Brady card - CBSSports.com](https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/patrick-mahomes-rookie-card-sells-for-4-3-million-shattering-previous-record-involving-tom-brady-card/)

We relate to this master story-teller's characters and their crises, even after two thousand years. He speaks of ordinary life – a wedding banquet, a rich man's barn, bridesmaids waiting for a groom, and then his story pivots for us to realize he is talking about us.

Today's story from the lectionary rarely is preached because it seems obtuse. After wrestling with this for quite some time, I'll submit the messages sparkle with clarity.

Let's place this story in context. In Luke's gospel Jesus preached that he would bring good news to the poor and release to the captive. Along the road, he tells his followers, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."

Just prior to our reading, he told three stories of lost and found in presence of the religious authorities *to defend* his quest to pursue the outcast. Those stories erased their method to keep score and keep boundaries by focusing on God's passion for joy. He defends his ministry of grace.

Now he turns his attention to his disciples and tells this story *to define* his ministry. This is what the disciples and we need to be prepared to do to follow him.

Dear God,

*We know you speak to us through Jesus, his life, his stories, and to this church, today. Like those followers on the road, we find ourselves in crossroads. Turn us from what seems normal to do what is divine. Send your spirit among us and startle us with new meaning in these ancient words that we pursue his holy way. Amen.*

### **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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.’

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

<sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup> He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ <sup>7</sup> 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.'

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> "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. <sup>11</sup> If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup> 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."

This parable bends our minds. It goes against everything that we believe about fair trade. The villain receives praise and throws out whatever ethics that held the world together.

This Greek word to describe this story is "parable." In the common Greek of the time a *parable* means *para*, "next to," and *bole*, to "throw down." A parable is a story thrown down next to our lives.

If his parables mirror our lives, this one seems like a mirror from a carnival's arcade House of Mirrors. It purposely distorts our reflection in ways that hold our attention.

Over 2,000 years of interpretive history, we twist to make sense of this. Some scholars unearthed first century contract law to normalize the dishonest manager's transactions while others argue he discounted the common practices to generate commissions within contracts. We like tidy, logical meaning.

That hubris – to pull the story apart and claim righteous intellect rather than letting it shine for what it is – distracts us from this story's meaning. This parable asks: what does your heart treasure? I often wonder if Jesus told this with a twinkle in his eye, a bit of mischief knowing we'd wrestle.

So, the story goes...

A whistleblower approaches a rich man with evidence his manager acted recklessly with his property. "Squandered."

We can presume the charges must bear some truth since a full-blown crisis erupts. Now the manager must account for his work – how did he tend his duties and resources entrusted to him.

He approaches each of his employer's debtors. Together they reduce the obligation.

The money evaporated. The debtor's burden grew lighter and, although not mentioned, we wonder if they built a relationship so he might be welcomed into their homes. Reading between the lines, had money stood in the way all along of their forming a deeper bond.

This manager, who previously squandered, doubles down with his shady dealing to collect a fraction of the money owed.

Jesus' story surprises us when the rich man *commends* him, rather than *condemns* him.

As an aside, all the while studying this story, it gnawed at me of the trusted business manager who stole from this church. Honestly, I almost sidestepped the lectionary for that reason. His theft left bitterness and skepticism. Thankfully, wise stewards in the church crafted a covenant loan from our endowment to the operating fund to settle debts.

And sound stewardship demands that the church repay this loan to us, even though it weighs on us each month. We have less money for mission and fewer staff resources to shepherd our vital ministry. We know all too well, as so many other churches and non-profits, of the pain from theft.

Studying this story for so long, I do not believe Jesus commends someone who steals.



Back to the parable. Jesus caught our attention with these imagined characters and so he can sweep us into the wave of teaching for our lives.

This is why I imagine a twinkle in his eye as an ingenious screenwriter better than Sorkin, the Coen brothers, and Spielberg combined. At this moment of resolving the story's tension imagine a new urgency in his tone of voice. His disciples, and all his followers, need to get out of the money race. Chasing after wealth hurts others.

In the story, the rich man commends his manager, a member of the “children of this age” – meaning all those who live for earthly treasure – for being shrewd.

Shrewd. Think budding tycoon. Media mogul. Tech investor. Fill-in your mind with the names of those who skirt the tax codes, copywrite rules, the dealmakers who chase after their self-interest. Not illegal, just crafty. In the biblical sense, the word shrewd means wise, savvy, and with the verve required to get things done.

The rich man commends the manager who works to get what he wanted. Maybe he called him shrewd for realizing such tight-fisted greed, in the long run, fails to serve anyone's interest. To value money above all else creates a corrosive impact on people, family, community.

Jesus speaks from a down-to-earth view. As if to say, look at this story and learn from it. He knows we will pursue our self-interest. Only he wants us to see when God becomes the goal, genuine self-interest includes the welfare of the other. To love God and neighbor moves from command to become a way of life.

Jesus pushes his “children of the light” – all those who place God at the center of their lives – to also be shrewd. Be creative. Muster some chutzpah. Use your resources – towards divine purposes.

Maybe you recall some of his other stories. Pay down another’s debt. Pay for the health and lodging of a poor man beaten by robbers and left in a roadside ditch. Spend big on a banquet and invite the homeless as your honored guests.

He tells them, be shrewd in creating relationships that matter in this life so you may be “welcome(ed) into eternal homes.... For you cannot serve God and mammon.”<sup>2</sup>

The story is about more than money. It is about what you value and the way to tend the resources entrusted to you.

Can Jesus’ followers be as shrewd with the gospel as the wheeler-dealers who get up every morning scheming for a

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the writings of Matthew Myer Boulton from the Salt Project, [What Is Money For? SALT's Commentary for Fifteenth Week after Pentecost \(saltproject.org\)](http://saltproject.org) and Thomas Long, “Making Friends,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2007, 52-57.

buck? Will those who receive the sacred last supper and holy spirit be driven to tell that good news with the burning desire we see from Wall Street?

Maybe Jesus' strategy to call the tradesmen, the workers, the fishermen, those with worldly experience – negotiating the best price for a haul of fish, or finding the best raw materials for building, or attracting good workers – gave them the collective street savvy to build a movement to follow his teachings.

What about us? Can we be shrewd today?

A shrewd Christian would pursue the PPP loans from the Cares Act during COVID, so this church continues to fund operations, payroll, and hands-on ministry. Thank goodness for our elders.

A shrewd Christian sends an extra portion of their wealth, over and above their pledge, to the church to fund one month of our loan payment back into Endowment. This gives a bit of relief over the coming eight years of payments ahead.

A shrewd Christian sees the way TikTok mesmerizes youth with “lukewarm Christian” garbage. To counter, she turns herself upside with costumes and silly antics to communicate God's love and acceptance. When I tried to find @revbethany, who has attracted 100,000s of followers, I descended into a

rabbit hole seeing others like her who also stand against the crowd of ugly theology.<sup>3</sup>

A shrewd Christian remains focused on the future, seizes new ministries, and makes partners with groups aligned to serve God.

Beyond these walls, a shrewd Christian sees a prospective employee, from a family with no connections or ivy league, and champions them in learning the trade.

A young, shrewd Christian trades a prized sandwich for saltines just so another kid in the lunchroom does not go hungry. In the process they might eat together – bringing a great big smile to Jesus’ face.

We learn to navigate at a young age to get what we want with what we have.

What you have is always a gift from God. Want more? Want God. Use what God gave you, all the influence and riches, humor and street smarts, intellect, and connections. Go out and be loving and funny. Go out and be courageous to stand with those who cannot. Go out with compassion. Go out and get what will delight God and in the process, you may become so very, very wealthy with life.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2022/6/29/general-assembly-commissioner-has-found-creative-w/>



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