

# ■ LIFE OF JESUS

September 19, 2021 | Parable of the Shrewd Manager

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

- How is your attention divided at work, at home, and at church?
- Read Luke 16:1–13.
- Pray that God will help you to be aware of divided loyalties in your life.

## THIS WEEK

### ■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus warns His followers against living a divided life.

### ■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Leverage your possessions to prepare yourself for eternity.

### ■ MEDITATE

*“One who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Luke 13:10).*

## GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to encourage yourself to struggle with the meaning of difficult parables.

**Q:** *What books or movies can you think of that contain a hidden plot twist?*

**Q:** *Why is this an effective storytelling device?*

I love books and movies containing scenes that force you to completely reevaluate the story once you become aware of some key fact reserved for the end. Pulling off this feat requires tremendous talent and creativity. Sometimes the audience knows something is amiss and must keep guessing what key piece of information is missing. Other times, the audience is completely unaware they have just witnessed an allusion to the unexpected twist waiting at the end. The true significance of what they have just encountered is only revealed at the end. These scenes are often forgotten until a second reading or viewing. Then the reader can delight in recognizing the meaning hidden right in front of their eyes. In some ways, the parable Jesus told in Luke 16:1–8 operates like this. When we initially read the parable of the shrewd manager, it seems that Jesus was saying something impossible! How could He promote this kind of dishonesty and shrewdness among His followers? But reading the parable in light of what follows, we can see that Jesus was not promoting dishonesty but cautioning His disciples against living a divided life. His warning still speaks loudly to us today.

**Q:** *What is your approach to understanding difficult parables?*

**Q:** *What resources does your church recommend to help you when reading the Bible?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Luke 16:1–8 is not the only parable Jesus told that can disturb us when we read it for the first time. Jesus often included cruel and shady characters in His stories. Sometimes they are the ones we are supposed to emulate! How have you handled these difficult passages as you have read through the record of Jesus’s life contained within the Gospels? When we read the Bible, especially as part of some prescribed plan, we don’t often take the time to understand what challenges us. We just have to keep going. We move on to something simpler to understand and apply to our lives. But challenging portions of Scripture nonetheless have a tremendous message for us if we take the time to reflect on them. As you read God’s Word, come up with a system to help you revisit the challenging parts you encounter when you have time. Investigate the resources your church

recommends that would help you make sense of Scripture for yourself. Pastors love to help others understand and apply the Bible, but they are also encouraged when they see members seeking to grow on their own.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The parable in Luke 16:1–8 teaches us to avoid living a double life. The parable, when read in isolation from Luke 16:9–13, is nearly impossible to interpret. But when we allow our understanding of it to be shaped by what follows, we can easily see the challenge Jesus placed before us.

1. THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER
2. FAITHFULNESS
3. DODGING A DIVIDED LIFE

## GOING DEEPER

*+This section will look at this passage in three parts. The first part explains the difficult parable in Luke 16:1–8. The final two parts consider the teachings Jesus drew from His parable.*

## 1. THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER

### ■ LUKE 16:1–8

Q: *What statements in this parable make it difficult for us to understand?*

Q: *What principle can help us make sense of what is being said?*

The facts of this parable are easy enough. A wealthy business owner hired a manager to oversee his business but fired him because of his mismanagement. We do not know if the wealthy man's discontent was due to the manager's incompetence or dishonesty. The manager knew he would soon be relieved of his duties and acted quickly to make

friends from the pool of his master's debtors by discounting their debts. Whatever the rift between the business owner and the manager might have been, the manager's actions were clearly dishonest and would possibly impoverish the business owner.

What makes this parable difficult to understand is Jesus's endorsement of the manager's behavior. In fact, Jesus chastised His followers for not behaving more like this manager (Luke 16:8). What are we to make of His parable and His endorsement of the manager? Luckily, the verses that follow are rife with clues if we can put them together and connect them to the parable. Here we will focus on several clues found in Luke 16:9. The others will become apparent as they come up in later sections.

Jesus told us to “make friends . . . by means of unrighteous wealth.” At first, we may think “friends” corresponds to the earthy relationships we make with other people, but Jesus went on to say “they [referring to the friends] may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” This statement accomplishes two things. First, it reveals our “friends” are not our earthly acquaintances but figures associated with heaven. Second, the payoff shifts from something we will receive in this life to something we will receive in the next. The connection with the parable is easy enough to see. Just as the manager made friends for the future with the resources at his disposal, we should also make friends who are in a position to help us for eternity.

Notice also that Jesus described the means for making these connections as “unrighteous wealth.” Jesus's audience would have immediately made a connection to the parable when He said this. In the Old Testament, God's people were forbidden from profiting by charging interest on the money they lent to others (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–36; and Deuteronomy 23:19–20). The rich man in this parable, however, was likely profiting from the goods he lent to his debtors. This was how he became rich. Therefore, the “unrighteous wealth” can be connected to the resources at the shrewd manager's disposal. Jesus also said this unrighteous wealth would fail to secure eternal dwellings. This “unrighteous wealth” refers to resources we have on earth that cannot secure us a place in heaven.

How can we put all of this together to understand the parable? Jesus's point was not that His followers should be dishonest and shrewd for personal gain, as a first reading of this parable might insinuate. Instead, Jesus was telling His followers to use the resources at their disposal while on earth to have an impact on eternity. Just as the manager used the resources at his disposal to secure hope for the future, we should also leverage our resources for eternity. We are not securing our hope for eternity. Only Jesus can do that. But we are seeking to leverage our resources to make the greatest difference we can for eternity.

**Q:** *Can you create a list of five resources you have that you could leverage for eternity? Ten? Fifteen?*

**Q:** *How are you leveraging your resources for eternity?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – When considering the resources we have at our disposal, we must think broadly. We often equate resources with money, but money may be the most pitiful resource any of us have. In addition to your money, consider how you can leverage your time, gifts, intellect, and personality to influence eternity. Begin keeping a list of the assets God has given you. Review your list regularly and ask yourself how well you are leveraging those things for eternity.

**Q:** *What was the rich man's response to his manager's scheme?*

**Q:** *Why do you think the rich man allowed the manager to continue in his role for any length of time?*

Since the rich man knew the manager was bungling the business, we may be tempted to think the rich man was foolish to allow him to remain in his position long enough to carry out his scheme. He was inviting disaster upon himself. This is another instance where we must provide some leeway for the telling of the parable. The rich man was unlikely to have conducted his affairs in this manner in real life, but that should not factor into our understanding of the parable. Our role in interpreting Jesus's parable is to follow Jesus's lead. In the parable, the rich man congratulated the manager for his shrewdness. It is unlikely that anyone in the rich man's position would have reacted this way. Jesus likely intended this departure from reality to teach His audience something. The way the parable is explained above, the rich man has no clear correspondent to Jesus's audience, but his reaction is too out of the ordinary to write off as just part of the story. The rich man's admiration may coincide with the admiration the world will have for the followers of Jesus Christ if they live out their convictions fully. They may not agree with our convictions, but they may respect us for living them out consistently.

**Q:** *How may authenticity in the Christian life be a potent gospel witness?*

**Q:** *Has anyone ever noticed the way you live differently because of your faith in Christ?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – When I was a teenager, there was a growing emphasis on sharing the gospel with your lifestyle. The idea was that you did not have to use words to share the gospel. I am thankful this trend does not seem to be in vogue anymore, at least not to the extent it was. I always found it difficult to believe someone would

conclude that Jesus died on the cross for their sins just from watching me treat others with kindness. They could just as likely have concluded that I treated others kindly so I could earn my way to heaven. Nevertheless, there is certainly some relationship between our lifestyle and our witness. If we share the gospel with someone who knows we seldom, if ever, live out our Christian convictions, we are unlikely to be very persuasive. But if we allow the gospel to make its full impact on our lives, it is certainly possible that we will draw the attention of those who also need the gospel message. We will need to be ready to put the gospel into words, though, when an opportunity arises.

## 2. FAITHFULNESS

### ■ LUKE 16:9–12

**Q:** *Why did Jesus begin discussing faithfulness and dishonesty after His parable?*

**Q:** *What was Jesus referring to when He said “very little” and “much”?*

The parable of the shrewd manager challenges Christians to leverage our resources for the sake of eternity. It should not surprise us to see Jesus discussing faithfulness immediately afterward. Faithfulness is one element the parable promotes. We must be faithful with the resources God has entrusted to us. Notice that the extent of our resources is not important in how Jesus describes faithfulness. God has given some people many resources and others very few. If someone is faithful with little, that person would also be faithful with much. The same is true of someone who is faithful with much. That same person would also be faithful with very little. The key is not the extent of your resources but the extent of your faithfulness with whatever resources God has entrusted to you. Many of us are tempted to think that if we had greater financial resources, we would be more comfortable being generous with our money and investing it in eternity. Jesus does not allow us to go down that road. The extent of our resources, small or large, can never be put forward as an excuse for unfaithfulness or even delayed faithfulness, which is the same thing as unfaithfulness.

**Q:** *How is Jesus’s call to mere faithfulness liberating?*

**Q:** *How is God calling you to be faithful with your resources?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – In one sense, Jesus’s call to faithfulness is liberating. You never have to worry or feel embarrassed if the life you lead for Jesus Christ does not produce for eternity much that will be noticed, as long as you have been faithful with what God has given you. God has not called everyone to lead a small group, write a book, pastor a church, lead worship, or go on the mission field. But even if your faithfulness does not lead down these roads, you are still not excused from seeking to be faithful with what God has given you. This week, preform an audit on yourself to gauge your faithfulness in leveraging the resources God has given you for eternity. Whatever the result, pray for God’s help in being more faithful tomorrow than you were today.

Q: *What is unrighteous wealth?*

Q: *What are true riches?*

Jesus extended the metaphor of His parable in His teaching afterward. In the parable, the manager’s resources consisted of unrighteous wealth because it was gained by taking interest on loans, a practiced forbidden by Old Testament law. (It is debated among theologians whether the same principle is active today.) The manager’s use of this unrighteous wealth to prepare for the future corresponds to how we use the resources God has put at our disposal on earth to prepare for eternity. When Jesus discussed “unrighteous wealth” in His teaching after the parable, He was referring to the resources God has given us on earth. There is nothing intrinsically “unrighteous” about our possessions. Jesus was just extending the metaphor to refer to our possessions. Once we understand what is meant by “unrighteous wealth,” we can easily see what Jesus meant by “true riches.” These are riches that will last throughout eternity. Jesus said if we are unfaithful to leverage our resources for the sake of eternity, we should not expect to receive true riches in heaven. Why would we be entrusted with heavenly riches if we were unfaithful with something of far less value? What are these “true riches”? Does this refer to some sort heavenly currency we will need? Will true riches establish some sort of hierarchy among believers in heaven? Neither of these explanations is very plausible. Instead, “true riches” will be the means by which we magnify God’s glory throughout eternity. True riches are an extension of the resources God has given us on earth. They will be leveraged in heaven the same way we should leverage our resources on earth. True riches will be the means by which we give God glory throughout all eternity. We want as many true riches as we can get!

Q: *Have you ever been tempted to disregard the value your earthly possessions can have for God’s kingdom?*

**Q:** *Are you encouraged by the idea that the use of your resources will impact how you view eternity?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The way Jesus extended the metaphor of the parable could potentially lead us to conclude that our possessions on earth have no significance for God’s kingdom. What good would “unrighteous wealth” be before the throne of a righteous God? But once we realize that “unrighteous” is merely an extension of Jesus’s metaphor, we can easily see that our possessions, and the way we will leverage them for heaven, have a great deal of significance for heaven. Never fall into the trap of thinking it does not matter what you do with what God has given you on earth. The way you use your resources will matter for eternity. Leverage them for the sake of the gospel.

### 3. DODGING A DIVIDED LIFE

#### ■ LUKE 16:13

**Q:** *How does the parable of the shrewd manager relate to leading a divided life?*

**Q:** *What would have been the manager’s outcome if he had decided to be honest with his master’s money?*

The shrewd manager shows us the importance of investing our assets for heaven. He also shows us the importance of avoiding a divided life. Once he realized he was losing his role as a manager, his only concern was to prepare himself for the reality he knew he would face. He was even willing to steal from his master to do it. He could not afford to continue serving his old master and secure the friendships he would need after his role as a manager ended. When we come to faith in Christ, we know we will spend eternity worshipping God in heaven, but many of us continue to live as if our earthly lives are all that matter. We are living a divided life. Our confession says we should seek the joys of heaven, but the way we use our time, money, and talents suggests we are more concerned with our lives here. The parable of the shrewd manager offers us a warning. Live now for eternity! Do not think you can prepare yourself for heaven while seeking all this life has to offer.



Q: *Are unbelievers ever caught off guard by the way you utilize your resources?*

Q: *In what ways are you holding back from investing for eternity?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – One of the best gauges to see if you are leveraging your resources for the sake of eternity is to compare your lifestyle to your peers, especially unbelievers who are in a similar financial situation. Are you able to afford the same car, the same house, and the same vacations? Do you have time for the same activities? If there is no distinction between how you use your resources and how an unbeliever in a similar situation does, there is a good chance you are not leveraging your resources for eternity.

Q: *How did Jesus conclude His teaching from this parable?*

Q: *Why is monetary wealth so seductive?*

Throughout this lesson, an effort has been made to broaden the idea of “resources” beyond money. This is an important point. Living the Christian life will require a sacrifice of your time and talents. Jesus does, however, conclude by drawing attention specifically to our monetary resources. There is something about money that is seductive and destructive in a way nothing else is. Money divides families, businesses, and churches. The desire for money makes people do things they would not have thought themselves capable of. There is little reason to wonder why Jesus warned His followers of the dangers of serving God and money.

Q: *What protections do you have in place to keep yourself from succumbing to the love of money?*

Q: *Do you find managing your money to be the hardest part of living for Jesus?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The parable of the shrewd manager invites you to turn the tables on how you view money. We typically think in terms of how much we can afford to give. This parable challenges you to think in terms of how much you can afford to keep. Every dollar you cling to is one that cannot be invested for eternity. This is a much more challenging way of thinking about monetary wealth. Ask yourself, “How much money can I afford to keep from God?” The way you frame the question can make a difference in how you leverage your money for the kingdom.

## NEXT STEPS

Create a chart to help you track how you are leveraging your resources for eternity. Start with three categories: money, time, and talents. You may wish to broaden these categories more. Determine how to best quantify these things and come up with a total number for each resource you have at your disposal. Below your totals, write down how much you are currently leveraging for eternity. Below that, make some goals for the weeks and months ahead. For example, let's say you have two hours of free time on week nights once you get home from work and put your children to bed. Let's say you have five hours of free time for each day on the weekend. Your total time resource number would be twenty. Determine how many of these hours you spend each week on something that will make a difference for eternity. Do you prepare for your small group lesson? Do you participate in a ministry at Oakwood? Serve in an Oakwood ministry that benefits the community? After determining this, set some goals to do more in the future. Legalism in these things is not the point of this exercise. The exercise should help you understand how you are using your resources and encourage you to consider making more sacrifices that will show up in heaven.

## PRAY

*+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.*

-Jesus, help me to do the tough work needed to understand your teachings.

-Father, help me leverage my resources for eternity.

-Father, keep me from living a divided life.

-God, help me to always rely on the grace you have shown to me in Jesus Christ, whether I am walking well or stumbling.