

Congregation, when it comes to your eternal destination, are you preparing for eternity in glory, for that's the smart thing to do, or are you putting it off for a later time or even worse not giving it any consideration at all? Scripture repeatedly warns us repeatedly about two prospects – either eternal life in glory in God's presence or eternal punishment. Many texts make that clear, but perhaps no more than John 3:16 which says, "For God so loved the world that he sent His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

So to consider God and what he has made and done and what he has revealed in his holy word in regards to salvation, eternal life if you will, and to embrace that would be the smart thing to do and to reject it would be at the very least, not the wisest. I suggest that this the gist of the parable of the shrewd manager.

Of all the parables Jesus taught, this parable must be one of the most puzzling. It's puzzling because most people try to explain the teaching of this parable in the light of its ethical implications. People wonder whether the lowering of the amounts the debtors owed reveal dishonesty, or was this manager just dishonest all the time? Some people even dare to suggest that Jesus is condoning unethical business practices.

But the key to understanding this parable is to have an understanding of the business practices of the day and the strict Jewish legalism with respect to usury, or the charging of interest on interest, as we know it. Even though God taught His people repeatedly not to charge their fellow Israelites interest on interest, it often ended up being so, and even the Pharisees allowed it. Nehemiah 5 makes interesting reading on this topic. The Psalmist says that only he who doesn't charge usury may dwell in God's house and his holy hill [Psalm 15:5]. But sinful people have a tendency to reject God and his laws and especially so when money is involved.

Let's look at the parable keeping in mind the practices of the day. A rich person would appoint himself a manager who was given the full authority to act in his master's name. A manager therefore, was also able to deal with debtors as he saw fit on behalf of his master. Debtors had to abide by the stipulations set down by the manager and were responsible to him alone. Now if the manager exhibited incompetence, inefficiency or untrustworthiness, he would be called to account and sometimes dismissed. If dismissed, he was on his own! He would find himself out on the street with nowhere to go.

And even if the manager was taken to court for charging interest on interest, then the manager and not the master would be held accountable. However, the manager was also given ways to protect himself, and it was done in this way. The manager and the borrower would draw up a statement in which the debt and the interest were listed in one total figure. This same principle is still working today. You take a loan from the bank, and the interest and principle are worked out together so that you receive one figure that needs to be paid each month or quarter. The monthly or quarterly figure is determined, not just by the principle but also includes the interest charged.

In Jesus' day, the set rate for interest was 20% and an additional 5% for insurance against price fluctuations and depreciation of the product. However, if the commodity happened to be olive oil, then the rate could be as high as 80%, plus another additional 20% insurance against price fluctuations. Obviously the risk in lending against olive oil was great for the purity of the oil was always at risk. So with these interest and fluctuation rates in mind, the parable becomes a little easier to understand.

In the parable before us, the manager was inefficient and a wasteful manager and is called in by the wealthy owner and told he is to be sacked. Terribly concerned about his future, the manager wonders what he should do. He does not possess the robust physique that would equip him for manual labour, and he really does not want to go on the dole or start begging. So he comes up with a totally unscrupulous plan. While he still enjoys legitimate authority over the owner's goods and accounts, he starts cutting deals with his master's debtors.

It is a huge operation, and the sums are enormous. With debtor after debtor, he slashes the amount of their indebtedness and it all revolves around usury, interest on interest. One debtor's debt who owed nearly 3200 litres of olive oil is slashed by 50%. It was a huge debt and a huge saving. One olive tree yields about 25 litres of oil. This indicates an orchard or 130 trees or more. Another debtor owing 1000 bushels of wheat is told to reduce the debt by 20%. Again, that amount of wheat would have to be someone with 50 hectares of land.

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Now in both instances, large amounts of money were involved. Yet on the authority of the manager, who had already received notice of dismissal, they change the figures on the bills. We may assume that other debtors did the same. Notice also that the debtors wrote out the new amount owing for they knew that interest and insurance for olive oil was 100% and for wheat 25%. They gladly changed the totals of the bill to what they actually owed the master.

They didn't falsify the figures, rather they, in their own handwriting, indicated how much they actually had to pay according to God's law. When all was said and done, honesty prevailed because the interest rates that were illegally added had now been discarded.

The manager's reasoning must have placed the rich man in a good position for the rich man praised him (v8). Notice, this manager was very shrewd. First, by doing what he did, the debtors would continue to deal with the rich man. They weren't taking their business elsewhere. Second, this current manager had paved the way for the new manager by keeping the cliental. Third, the current manager had shown himself to be a religious and law-abiding citizen, for in the finish he did what was right by God's law.

However, why did the manager bother? He bothered because he lived in a culture where a gift created an obligation. The manager recognises that all these people will feel obligated to accommodate him when he finds himself without a job and income. His shrewd management in saving the debtors thousands of dollars will secure his own future, for they will feel indebted to him for a very long time. Now of course the rich man probably didn't like having his accounts diddled, but he was smart enough to recognise the shrewdness his manager had shown.

Now what does this parable actually mean? Jesus comes with the startling application. "For the people of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (16:8-9).

What does this mean? It cannot mean that Jesus advocates unscrupulous business practices. The point Jesus is making is that this manager used resources under his control (though not properly his) to prepare for his own future. That is exactly what people of the world do! Everything is geared for a comfortable, long and happy retirement. Worldly people will work day and night so that they can be comfortable and well off when they are old.

Many of them are very shrewd, especially if there is a dollar to be made. Now this is the question, do the people of the light, people who claim to be Christians, use resources under their control, although not properly theirs, to prepare for their own future? Christians know what God has done for them in Christ. They know that this life is but a short breath and we soon fly away! They know what it means to be called out of darkness and into the marvellous light of God's Son!

Christians also know the glorious future that awaits them. The shrewd manager wanted to be welcomed into the homes of these debtors in the future. The people of the light, are to be "welcomed into eternal dwellings." That's what verse 9 says. Christians realise that this life and all its wealth and fame is nothing compared to what awaits us. We are the people who do not lay up treasures on earth, but in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy.

So tell me, have you got the drift of this parable? Have you understood? We who belong to the light should be investing heavily in our eternal destination! That is the smart thing to do – anything else is just silly! Ah, you ask, how can we, how do invest in our eternal destination? We can invest time in God's word. We can invest time in prayer and enjoying the fellowship of the saints! We can invest time into doing a course at the RTC which might better prepare us for evangelism or the ministry we wish to be involved in.

We can invest our resources, which are not properly ours anyhow, whether it be our time or wealth on kingdom things. We can even ask the hard question whether my boy friend or girl friend that I hope to marry one day will share my kingdom vision and if not, perhaps I need to have a rethink. As difficult as some of these things may be, we do so for we look forward to the day when the master King will say, "Welcome, good and faithful servant!" Now young people, is that what you see happening in the lives of your parent's today? Is that what you see happening in your friend's life or in your own lives? Is that what you are thinking about as you come to the end of your secondary education or tertiary degree? The sad reality is that so many Christians behave as though this life is all there is.

Some people, yes even Christians if you will, don't mind being very generous when it comes to investing in earthly schemes that may or may not result in a worthwhile return so that their short retirement is secure and comfortable. All they think about is their careers and how they can make their first million! And when it comes to investing into things that really

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matter, things of eternal value, kingdom things, they seem so quick to find excuses for not giving it a thought leave alone being generous in kingdom things. Well let me tell you, just in case you have missed it, you cannot take a single thing with you when you breathe your last breath.

Oh I am not saying that we should be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthy value, not at all. Nor am I suggesting that we should never put aside a few bucks for our retirement or a rainy day. However, I am concerned that so many so called 'Christians' are so earthly minded that they are in danger of heaven completely passing them by! In the sixties, seventies and eighties, many migrants came to this country and many joined the church. They came for this land promised work and security. In many ways it was and still is a land flowing with milk and honey.

However, today, many of those same people have left following Christ all together, because their personal affluence and the attractions of the world at large have tricked them into thinking that the here and now is all there is. And unless the Lord causes a revival and brings them to repentance, they are in danger of never being welcomed into glory! So for this evening, let me simply encourage you to ensure that your life, your business practices, your leisure time, shows that you have your eye firmly fixed on your eternal dwelling! I am not saying that we shouldn't be good business people or that we cannot have fun, but don't take your eye off your heavenly city!

People of the world know how to be shrewd and plan for their earthly future, yet often we who have the best future ahead tend to relax and become indifferent to the great future that awaits us. Sometimes we even modify our Christian principles. Somehow we want the best of both worlds. We seem to want our Christian faith couched in the affluence of this world. We want to be loved by God and praised by man.

But you cannot have it both ways. James in his pastoral letter, Ch 4:4; admonishes those who opt for a double life. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Isn't that also what the following verses [16:10-15] after our text highlight? Those verses strip away the glamour of possessions in favour of what God values highly.

In fact, the 3 proceeding parables speak about the joy of the Father and experiencing the Father's love, when a sinner turns to him! How good it will be to live in that love! Therefore, do whatever is necessary to make sure you are part of it. Invest in things that will last and have eternal value. The shrewd manager had his eye on the future and was willing to do whatever it took to be welcomed. How much more should that not be true of us who know the wonderful things that are in store for us because of Christ!

All of us have been shown such grace - be smart with your resources. Soon your race on earth will be run and the Judge will ask, "How did you manage the resources I lent to you, those resources that weren't properly yours? Did you invest in my kingdom for your future?" I pray that you will be able to say yes, for that would be the smart thing to do. To have not done so would be immensely silly. Amen.