

*“Shocked, shocked, I tell you!”*

J. Barry Vaughn. Sept. 18, 2022. Text: Luke 16.1-13.

A couple of years ago I received an email from Lawrence Bacow, the president of Harvard University, my alma mater, letting me know that Harvard had received substantial donations from the late Jeffrey Epstein and planned to give the money they had not yet spent to organizations supporting victims of sexual trafficking and assault.

Now, that’s a good thing, but it reminds me a little of the scene, in *Casablanca* when the police inspector tells the Nazi commandant that he was “shocked, shocked, I tell you” to learn that there was gambling at Rick’s Café Americain.

The late Jeffrey Epstein seems to be an example of the kind of person Jesus was talking about in today’s gospel reading who “made friends for himself by means of dishonest wealth.” After his conviction for sex trafficking and especially after his death, recipients of his philanthropy have been scrambling to assure us that they had no idea, no idea at all, of what a rogue and rat he was and of course they are going to give the money he gave them to non-profits that protect children from sex trafficking and similar charities.

The so-called “parable of the dishonest steward” or “shrewd manager,” depending on how broadly you define “shrewd,” is undoubtedly one of the strangest parables in the gospels. It’s a story that’s difficult to make sense of, although it helps to know a little about economics in the time of Jesus.

Keep in mind that Jesus lived long before the economic system that we know as capitalism. The great insight of capitalism is that wealth is not static; it is dynamic. In other words, the pie really can get bigger. But that was not the case in first century Palestine.

In the time of Jesus and in the ages before him, wealth was static. If your neighbor Reuben had more, then your neighbor Jacob must have less. Wealth was regarded as a kind of theft, unless the rich person used his wealth to help his neighbors.

There is no doubt that the Bible, especially the New Testament, regarded wealth with great suspicion, and this is especially true in the books of Luke and Acts. Keep in mind that the two books were written by the same author.

The author we know as Luke had a special interest in wealth.

- Only Luke includes today’s parable.
- Only Luke includes the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a story that comes only a few verses after today’s reading.
- Only Luke has an absolute condemnation of the rich in his version of the Beatitudes: “Woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation!”
- Only Luke includes the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, in which Mary says, “God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.”
- And only Acts (also written by Luke) includes the story of Ananias and Sapphira, two members of the early Christian community, who were struck dead when they cheated the church by under-reporting the amount they had received when they sold some land (Acts 5).

We have to keep all that in mind when we read this story in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel.

Another thing that helps me understand this story is that the rich man who fired his manager may not have been a paragon of virtue himself. It's very possible that he was over-charging his customers. So, when the shrewd manager discounted one person's bill by fifty percent and another's by twenty percent, he was probably just charging them what they really owed in the first place.

Another way to look at it is to realize that the rich man probably knew that he was not going to get paid everything he was due, and the manager really was being shrewd when he at least got his former boss eighty percent of what one buyer owed him and fifty percent of what another owed him.

However, I imagine you are saying to yourselves, "What does all this have to do with the gospel, the good news? What's spiritual about a gospel reading that sounds like a business school case study?"

The thing is that almost nothing reveals our character more clearly than the way we use our money. The only other thing that is as revealing about our character is the way we use our time.

Our bank accounts, credit card statements, and daily schedules are to our spiritual health what thermometers and heart pressure gauges are to our physical health.

In many, probably most, of Jesus' parables there is a character who represents God. For example, last week we heard the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The shepherd seeking his lost sheep and the woman seeking her lost coin probably represent God and are meant to tell us how much God loves us and seeks us when we are lost.

But surely neither the rich man nor the shrewd manager is meant to represent God. I think the point of the parable is clearly and concisely stated in these words: "Whoever is faithful in a very little, is faithful also in much..."

The "very little," of course, is money, and the "much" is spiritual things, the things of God. But this turns the logic of our world on its head. We live in a world that values money above all things. Every newspaper contains a finance section, but does any newspaper contain a section on spiritual affairs? A section that details what people are doing to serve the poor and oppressed and has articles about prayer and Bible study?

So, what would it look like if we were as faithful in our spiritual lives as we are in our financial lives?

One thing that would change immediately is that churches would no longer worry about their budgets.

There are many good and deserving causes that want you to contribute money to them, and I hope you are supporting some of them, but I believe the church is unique.

The church is the only institution that is entirely devoted to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. In this and other churches you can hear the gospel proclaimed every week. Every week you have an opportunity to confess your sins and hear God's promise of forgiveness. In this church God's blessing is pronounced on you every week. Here you can receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus. Here our children are taught the stories of the faith.

We live in an upside-down world, a world that values the cheap and devalues the things that are really important.

The Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard told the story of a thief who broke into a jewelry shop but didn't steal anything. What he did was to change the

price tags around so that what was expensive was cheap and what was cheap became expensive.

That's the kind of world in which we live. The price tags have been moved around. People no longer know what is really valuable and important.

But that is why we are here and why the church is important. The Bible can teach us what is of real and lasting value: love, compassion, kindness, courage, faith, and hope.

If we are faithful in those things, then we are shrewd indeed.