

Stories from the Road #7

Stories Jesus tells as he is on his way to die outside Jerusalem^a

16 Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

³ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵ “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons^b of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’

⁷ “Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels^c of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly^d. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light^e. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings^f. (Luke 16:1-9)^g

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from the passage?

Q. Which character in these stories do you most identify with?

Q. What question would you like to ask Jesus?

^a Luke interviews eyewitnesses and writes his biography of Jesus to a particular person. “I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:4). In other words, he wants to add confirmation to what Theophilus already believes about Jesus.

^b About 3000 litres.

^c About 30 tons.

^d To be “shrewd” is the idea of being astute or sharp in practical matters.

^e The “people of the light” refers to people who follow Jesus.

^f “Eternal dwellings” is a reference to heaven.

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This story is from a collection of stories Jesus tells his followers on the road as he heads towards Jerusalem to die. Jesus is explaining what it will mean to follow him – and not just in a physical sense.

At the conclusion of this particular story, Jesus says his followers will need to be shrewd by using worldly wealth to gain friends for themselves. These ideas need unpacking, especially since “shrewd” is often understood in a negative sense.

The manager in the parable is “shrewd” in that he sees the future, and acts now. He knows he is losing his job. He can’t dig and won’t beg and so his option is to make some friends amongst his master’s debtors by discounting what is owed, so that they will return the favour when he is unemployed. It is this cleverness – the ability to see the future and to act now – that the manager is commended for, not his dishonesty.

Jesus says that the people of the world are good at being shrewd. They are good at finding people to help them achieve their goals (“dealing with their own kind”). Jesus’ followers can also be shrewd - but sometimes they have the wrong future in mind (their own comfort this side of the grave). Real shrewdness will require them seeing the future (heaven) and using their resources so that others will be in heaven with them (to “welcome” them in). They can’t buy others a place in heaven – but for example, being generous with their possessions can be a powerful witness to Jesus.

For Jesus’ followers, to have such a single-minded focus with one’s worldly wealth is challenging! Fear of missing out on the comforts of this world can sometimes lead to compromise – to have a foot in both camps. Jesus goes on to spell out whether this split focus is possible:

¹⁰ “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Luke 16:10-13)

Jesus says that a split focus isn’t possible because it’s incompatible. To love God will require Jesus’ followers to have their eyes on God and to be trustworthy with what they have (a relative pittance compared to true eternal wealth). This doesn’t mean they can’t enjoy the comforts of this world. It’s a question of what / who they are living for.

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from what you have just read?

Q. In what way has this story confirmed or challenged your understanding of Jesus?

Q. What do you want to take away and ponder further?