

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the shrewd manager** in Luke 16:1-13. This is a parable concerning STEWARDSHIP IN GOD'S KINGDOM.

(S) Luke 16:1-8a says: There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 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." 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 - I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied. The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred." Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "A thousand bushels of wheat," he replied. "He told him, "Take your bill and make it eight hundred." The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to explain the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable.

The rich man was probably the owner of a large estate. We must assume that he was a man of integrity, because not he, but his manager was dishonest.

(S) The manager was a household manager or economist or steward, entrusted with caring for the business of the estate. This manager was accused of wasting his master's possessions. We are not told who accused him. He must have been guilty, because the manager did not loudly protest his innocence.

(T) The debtors were probably renters of a piece of the estate. They paid their rent by giving the owner a fixed amount of their yearly produce. They could also have loaned money or bought goods on credit from the owner. Nevertheless, each debtor owed a considerable amount of money to the owner of the estate.

(S) Giving an account of his management. The owner demanded that his manager surrender to him the account-book of how he managed the business affairs of the estate. The manager was not necessarily accused of fraud, but almost certainly of mismanagement. He could have wasted his master's possessions, or he could have been careless and negligent. The owner of the estate wanted to terminate his manager's job and gave him an opportunity to get the account-books in order before he departed.

(T) What would the manager do? The manager remained silent after he had been fired. He thus admitted his guilt. First, he was at a loss what to do. He was not strong enough for manual labour and he was ashamed to be dependant on other people's kindness. Then he suddenly had a good idea and devised a plan. He would do certain people a great favour, so that later they would return this favour to him. He would reduce their financial debts, so that later they would help him out financially.

(S) Changing the amounts on their bills. These 'bills' were written acknowledgements of debts, signed by the debtors. At the time a debtor incurred a debt, he made a written statement that he owed a certain sum of money or goods and was obligated to pay it. The dishonest manager called his master's debtors one by one and made them change their bills to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of his master. How this was done, is not said. The original written statements could have been on wax tablets, so that it would have been easy to make the change. Or the old could have been destroyed altogether and new bills, in which the amounts of the debts were considerably diminished, could have been drawn up and signed.

The debtors would probably not have known that this was dishonest. Due to unfavourable weather conditions affecting the crops, it was not unusual for an owner of an estate to reduce the debts. And the debtors would have thought that the manager was executing the owner's instructions.

(T) The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted *shrewdly*. The 'master' refers to the owner of the estate (verse 3 and 5) and it does not refer to Jesus Christ. Jesus was telling the story and he said that the owner or master of the manager commended his dishonest manager, not because he had been so *crooked*, but because he had been so *shrewd*! The dishonest manager had planned ahead for his future! That was a very clever, shrewd or

wise thing to do! The owner could not really change the bills back to their original state, because by that time everybody thought that the owner had been very kind to his debtors.

(S) POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.

Let us take turns to explain the context of this parable.

The setting of the parable is contained in Luke chapter 15 and 16. In Luke chapter 15, Jesus told three parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, in which he taught God's attitude towards the lost people in the world. This was in response to the bad attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law towards the tax collectors and sinners. In these three parables, Jesus exposed *the wrong attitude towards people!* In Luke chapter 16, Jesus told two parables. In the parable of the shrewd manager, Jesus exposed *the sinful use of material possessions*. According to Luke 16:1, this parable was addressed to the wider circle of disciples of Jesus. But the Pharisees definitely heard this parable and understood that it also referred to them (Luke 16:14). Luke chapter 16 has three related parts: Verse 1-13 exposes the sinful use of material possessions. Verse 14-18 exposes the hypocrisy of the lovers of money. Verse 19-31 teaches the terrible result of the wicked handling of both people and wealth, thus, a combination of the themes of Luke chapters 15 and 16.

The story of the parable is contained in Luke 16:1-8a.

The explanation or application is contained in Luke 16:8b-13. This parable teaches four very important truths:

(T) First. Christians should be shrewd as the people of the world. The master commended his dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. Jesus agrees with the master of the dishonest manager in commending, not his dishonesty, but his *shrewdness in planning ahead*. Jesus is not praising the manager's crookedness, but his cleverness to make provision for his future need. Likewise, Jesus is not telling his disciples to be dishonest, but to be shrewd and plan ahead. The people of this world often show more shrewdness in worldly matters than God's children do in matters affecting their everlasting salvation. Thus, Jesus teaches his disciples to be *shrewd*, that is, to have a sharp discernment and practical wisdom now while they are still living on earth. Just like the people of this world are commended for their being shrewd in planning ahead, so Jesus commends the people of the light, that is, the Christians, for their being shrewd in planning ahead. But there is a difference between the people of the world and Christians. While the people of the world plan ahead with dishonesty, the Christians plan ahead with honesty and mercy and generosity - all norms within God's kingdom.

(S) Second. Christians should use worldly wealth to gain friends. In Luke 16:9, Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Jesus teaches his disciples to look ahead and plan for their future. The term 'Mammon of unrighteousness' is a personification of worldly wealth, possessions or money. Jesus does not say that wealth, possessions and money are in themselves unrighteous or bad. But he does imply that often in the accumulation of wealth and the use of possessions and money a lot of unrighteousness takes place in this world! The Bible does not teach that material possessions or wealth in itself are sinful or bad. Therefore, the term 'Mammon of unrighteousness' is translated with *worldly wealth* to show that it refers to the temporary material wealth as opposed to the eternal and true heavenly riches (Luke 16:11).

By means of their worldly wealth, possessions or money, Christian disciples should plan for their eternal future. They should use their worldly wealth to support all good causes and needy people as long as they still live on earth, so that when they die, all the people who had benefited from their kind-hearted giving on the earth, will give them a big welcome when they come into heaven! Christians should spend their present resources with a view to eternity! Thus, Jesus teaches his disciples to use their worldly possessions and money to win people for God's kingdom. The good management of worldly wealth means to invest worldly wealth in God's kingdom. This is a good work that will definitely be rewarded!

(T) Third. Christians should be trustworthy with small and with great responsibilities. In Luke 16:10-12, Jesus emphasises trustworthiness and honesty in *small matters*, that is, in earthly possessions. Temporary worldly wealth, possessions and money are comparatively trivial and insignificant when they are compared to the eternal heavenly possessions! Trustworthiness in the small matters will lead to trustworthiness in the great matters. Making wise and practical use of the earthly possessions, which God has entrusted to a Christian, will lead to God entrusting far greater heavenly possessions in God's kingdom to him.

In verse 11-12, the parallelism is as follows: *worldly wealth* is parallel with *someone else's property* and refers to earthly possessions and money, which always belongs to God, even if he entrusts it to us to use wisely and responsibly. And *the true riches* is parallel with *property of your own*, and refers to heavenly possessions, which consists of God's kingdom that God gives to believers as their inheritance (Mt 25:34; Heb 12:28). Thus, Jesus teaches his disciples that there is a close relationship between how they manage what has been entrusted to them on earth and what will be

entrusted to them to manage in the new heaven and new earth. It is true that to a certain extent, the inheritance of God's kingdom begins when a person believes in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:3), and thus a trustworthy Christian will already here and now be entrusted with the management of the affairs of God's kingdom or the Christians in the Church. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on the inheritance of God's kingdom in its final phase, the new heaven and the new earth. The important rule for Christians is to fix their eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Cor 4:18; 5:7).

(S) Fourth. People cannot serve both God and Money (Mammon). In Luke 16:13, Jesus emphasises that a person cannot love and serve the God of the Bible and Money at the same time. The psychological tension that builds up in the soul of a person, who imagines for a while that he is able to love and serve both God and Money as masters, becomes so severe and unendurable, that he will sooner or later show in his attitude, words and behaviour where his real allegiance lies. Some people think they can use God to make money; that they can worship God in order to become rich (1 Tim 6:5). But Jesus teaches his disciples that they must choose to love and serve God also by using their worldly possessions and money to advance God's cause in this world!

(T) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant? Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning. In this parable there are several details that should not be given any particular meaning.

The rich man is not a relevant detail. He should not be interpreted as representing Jesus Christ or Mammon or anybody else.

The manager is a relevant detail, because he is the central figure in this parable. He does, however, not represent the Christian, because a Christian may not be dishonest. He is rather contrasted with Christians!

The word shrewd is relevant. Not the manager and not his characteristic of being dishonest, is relevant. What is relevant is his characteristic of being shrewd. His sharp discernment and practical wisdom in making use of worldly possessions and money to secure his future, is the central point of this parable and thus very relevant.

(S) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable of the shrewd manager in Luke 16:1-13 teaches about *stewardship in God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is the following. "Christians must be shrewd by using worldly possessions to make friends for themselves for eternity." To be shrewd means to be clever and sensible and to have sharp discernment and practical wisdom.

Stewardship is a fundamental characteristic in God's kingdom. The people of God's kingdom use their worldly possessions and money here and now to advance God's kingdom and to win people for God's kingdom. The wise and responsible use of earthly possessions will certainly be rewarded. All people, who have been won into God's kingdom or who have benefited spiritually because of the wise and responsible use of the earthly possessions of Christians, will welcome these Christians when they come into heaven! To a certain extent, a trustworthy Christian will already here and now be entrusted with the management of the affairs of God's kingdom or the Christians in the Church. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on the inheritance of God's kingdom in its final phase, the new heaven and the new earth. The people of God's kingdom fix their eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

(T) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES. IN THE BIBLE.**

I want to compare the parable of the shrewd manager with Matthew 6:19-24. While the parable teaches that a Christian must have sharp discernment and practical wisdom in using wealth, possessions or money, Matthew 6:19-24 teaches that a Christian must be *continually focused on* the spiritual reality. Although this spiritual reality cannot be seen, it is an eternal reality (2 Cor 4:18; 5:7). A Christian should continually store up for himself treasures in heaven and not on earth. Of course, a Christian stores up treasures only in an honest, wise and responsible way.

(S) I want to compare the parable of the shrewd manager with the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. That parable teaches that a Christian must *be faithful* in using the possessions, relationships, abilities or opportunities, which God has entrusted to him.

(T) I also want to compare the parable of the shrewd manager with the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21. That parable teaches that a Christian must *be unselfish* with respect to his wealth, possessions or money. He must not

live for himself, but must reckon with God in every aspect of his life. He must be thoroughly conscious of his dependence on God.

(S) I also want to compare the parable of the shrewd manager with the parable of the rich show-off and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. That parable teaches that a Christian must *be responsible* how he relates to the underprivileged people in the world and how he uses his wealth, possessions or money. The consequences of his responsibility or lack of responsibility with respect to his life-style on earth before death are irreversible after death! A Christian is responsible to make friends with the underprivileged and despised people of this world.

(T) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

First. All people must know what God is like. God has entrusted his possessions on earth to people so that they should be good managers of the earth and everything on it. Together with the related parables, it teaches that God is very much concerned and involved in the affairs on this world. The world and everything on it has been created by God and has been entrusted by God into the care or stewardship of man (Genesis 1:28). God will definitely hold all people responsible for how they have managed God's earth and everything on God's earth.

(S) Second. Christians must know what they should be like. God not only demands that people live unselfish lives, but also are faithful and trustworthy with respect to what God has entrusted to them. God demands that Christians have sharp discernment and practical wisdom how they use the wealth, possessions or money, which after all belongs to God and which God has entrusted to them in order to serve the interests of God's kingdom on this present earth. In the Final Judgement God will hold everyone responsible and accountable to how they have been stewards of God's possessions here on earth!

(T) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of faithful and unfaithful servants. As preparation, please read Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".