

Shrewd investment: Luke 16:1-13

by [Jennifer E. Copeland](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

Are you kidding me? In these days of Enron, Martha Stewart and wars waged over phantom weapons, we know better than to defend dishonesty. Then why would Jesus offer a parable lauding it? Upon closer inspection, however, this parable is just one in a long line of stories that Jesus tells about how to handle wealth.

In the Bible as a whole, Jesus offers more commentary on how to deal with wealth than on how to handle sex—a fact ignored by today’s church, which is preoccupied by matters of sex while it says very little about money. Those with a supposedly high moral character are not always the shining examples in these stories. “Shady” characters may demonstrate the ability to make worthwhile decisions—and inform those of us who have high opinions of our personal morality. The Lukan parable is about money. How do we make decisions regarding our possessions?

Jesus tells of a worker who is faced with a crisis not unfamiliar to many workers in our land these days. Pink slip in hand, this worker must quickly determine a course of action that will secure his future. Urgency defines his reality. He is in crisis. But is this crisis any less urgent the one faced by others, the crisis that Jesus interjects into our lives? Somehow the words “Follow me” don’t pack the same punch as “You’re fired.” Yet even if “Follow me” sounds more subtle, it too has high urgency, and requires a life-changing response from us. In this parable, Jesus is telling us—one more time—that how we live right now has important consequences for God’s kingdom.

How we live includes the friends we choose, how we spend our time, and how we use our wealth. This disclosure shouldn’t be news to us. Sixteen chapters deep into the third book of the New Testament, we’ve grown familiar with Jesus’ dinner partners and we’ve already been soundly thumped by Jesus’ teachings on wealth. We watched with delight—or was it dismay—as a prostitute washed his feet with her tears. We sympathized with the rich young ruler who turned away from Jesus, unable to sell his possessions and join the troupe. We took notes on where to sit at dinner so as not to be embarrassed when other guests joined the party.

We listened to the comparisons between our treasures and our hearts and despaired over the untimely death of the farmer whose barns were bursting with grain. We were startled when we read Luke's Beatitudes, especially if we'd recalled the milder version in Matthew that gives us a little wiggle room. No wiggle room for the spiritually poor in Luke's list of blessings and woes. We heard the shouts of John in the wilderness, the song of Mary at the annunciation, the claims of Jesus during his first sermon. So the punch line of this latest parable shouldn't catch us by surprise: do what needs to be done now to prepare for the future—God's future.

Stanley Hauerwas's 2001 Gifford Lectures were published as *With the Grain of the Universe*. The title comes from an essay by John Howard Yoder that includes these words: "People who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe." In his use of these words, Hauerwas implies that God is moving the universe in a particular direction and making that direction known through the work of the cross. The worker described by Jesus in Luke's parable, for example, surveyed the direction of his life and acted "shrewdly." He used all the means at his disposal to adapt to his new reality. We should be no less shrewd in adapting to God's reality.

There is, however, a crucial distinction between the "dishonest manager" and the "child of light." It would be incorrect and dishonest for us to read this story and adopt an "anything goes" attitude. We don't make the *same* choices this manager made; we follow his example of making choices that are in keeping with the future God is placing before us. Jesus showed us by the example of his own life what that future will be for the people who follow him.

The presence of Jesus places a crisis in our midst. We cannot hear the call and give no answer. Even silence is an answer, after all—the answer no. And if our answer is yes, the decision to follow Jesus is not the end of the crisis, but only the beginning. The crisis confronts us daily through the values we hold, the relationships we form, and yes, the way we use money. Each little choice we make every day has important repercussions for God's future. Take stock. The time is at hand. How will we live into God's future now that we know God's expectations of us for the present?

Make no mistake—this is not a question of working our way into heaven. God will have God's future whether we choose to participate or not. The question for us is much more fundamental: Shall we move with the grain of the universe or drift in the current flowing around us?

The manager in Jesus' story used all his resources to secure his future. We must be no less resourceful. At our disposal we have hope in God's justice, faith in God's peace, and trust in God's grace. These are the best possible resources. We must use them so that it will be said of us, "And the master commended them because they acted so shrewdly."