

SHREWD CHRISTIANS?

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, “*For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*” (Luke 16:8)

Some time ago I received an email from a man named Peter. I didn’t recognize the last name, but seeing that the subject of the email was “My Tithe,” you can imagine my interest. Peter wrote that he lived and worked in Texas. He wanted to send a tithe of his income to Grace Church, and he wanted me to pray for his sick brother. I replied, thanking Peter for his intention to give, and asked for his brother’s name so that we could pray for him. Honestly, I knew where this was going. I didn’t expect to hear from Peter again, but I was wrong. Two days later he emailed back with his sick brother’s name, and news that he’d sent us a check via DHL. He even gave me the tracking number so I could chart the envelope’s progress from Texas to New York.

Never did I expect to see any such delivery, but once again I was wrong. On a Friday afternoon the distinctive orange and red envelope arrived. Inside was a check made out to Grace Church for \$4,200. It was evident, however, that the check was about as legitimate as Monopoly money. I had a good laugh, and figured that was the end of it. But no, that wasn’t the end of it. The next day – a Saturday, when the banks are closed, of course – Peter sent another email with news that his sister had been injured in a car accident, and that he would have to pay her hospital bill. Would I wire \$2,000 to help? “Western Union, please,” he added. After all, he explained, he’d just sent me \$4,200. I’d still be \$2,200 in the black. What is more, he promised he would reimburse his tithe when he was able. Such a deal. How could I go wrong?

I replied to Peter that since I hadn’t cashed his check, he was flush to pay his sister’s hospital bills. He could even wire me the balance of his tithe: “\$2,200, Western Union, please.” Peter sent me one final email: “My sister is fine now, but I still have to pay the bills. Please cash the check and send the money.” Yes, it was the old fake check scam. Peter is a scheming, scamming con-artist. The sad thing is, hundreds of trusting, often vulnerable people fall for tricks such as his, and sometimes they wind up losing everything.

In today’s reading from Luke, Jesus tells a parable about a scheming, scamming con-artist working to feather his own nest. A rich man had a manager whose bookkeeping just didn’t square with the auditors. So the rich man called for the manager, read him the riot act, told him to turn in the accounts and clean out his desk: he was fired. The manager had only a moment of panic before hatching a lucrative little scam to save his hide. He called in one of the rich man’s tenants who owed a hundred jugs of olive oil. *Take your bill, sit down quickly and make it fifty*, said the manager. Then he called in another who owed a hundred containers of wheat. *Take your bill and write eighty*, said the manager. So off went the two debtors with their substantially reduced I.O.U’s. Now when the dishonest manager gets tossed into the street, he’ll have a place to go. He can hook up with these newly made friends whose debts he dishonestly decreased. But the real twist of the parable occurs when the rich man discovers the additional fraud. Rather than taking further action against the manager, he commends him for his shrewdness: *For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light*, is how Jesus concludes the parable.

From the moment Jesus told the parable, and still today, virtually everyone has puzzled and stumbled over its meaning. Some think Luke himself, who wrote the Gospel, attempted no less than three explanations of it that he tacked on to the end of the original story. Commentators have

continued with two-thousand years' of explanations that are enough to make your head spin. Devotional books on the parables avoid it. Children's Bibles omit it. How could it be that Jesus would point to a scoundrel as one who models certain aspects of the Christian life? The word "shrewd" isn't exactly the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the characteristics of a Christian. In our hearing "shrewd" is a competitive word that applies to someone who knows how to exploit an opponent's flaws and win. We think of a shrewd business dealer, a shrewd negotiator, a shrewd politician. But a shrewd Christian? Here we seem to have entered the realm of oxymoron, like "jumbo shrimp," or "friendly Chihuahua," or "yummy cilantro." Shrewd Christians?

Let me tell you why I think Jesus commends the shrewd manager. The key is in the Greek adjective translated here as "shrewd." The word, in Greek, is *phronimos*. In every other place we find *phronimos* in the New Testament, the word is translated as *wise*. Jesus told his disciples to be *wise* as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). He told the parable of the *wise* man who built his house upon a rock (Mt. 7:24), and the parable about the *wise* and foolish maidens (Mt. 25:2). It's the same adjective translated from Greek: wise and shrewd. Its meaning goes deeper than crafty and competitive. It also means astute, quick, and ready. It is the practical wisdom of a person who sees what can be and must be done in any given situation, and does it. It is the fortitude of a person who is never at a loss for options. The wise man and the wise maidens were shrewd. They were quick and ready. It wasn't their habit to sit around and hope for the best without thinking ahead and taking some action. They had foresight. They were not to be caught napping. They were shrewd.

The shrewd manager wasn't caught napping, either. Jesus commends him for his shrewdness in spotting an opportunity and seizing it. If you are an employee in the corporate world today and you get fired, you will be escorted immediately out of the building. But the dishonest manager has the small window of opportunity to *turn in the account of his stewardship*. It's not much time, but it is some time. And the manager doesn't waste it. He makes a quick assessment of who he is and what he has, he makes a decision, and he runs with it without looking back. He demonstrates the exact opposite of sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. The sin of sloth begins with the assumption that your situation is hopeless, and that whatever you do will make no difference. So eventually you wind up doing nothing about everything. The steward rejects the approach of slothful pessimism. "*What will I do ...? I have decided what to do ...*" He is quick, ready, and not for a moment at a loss for options. He is shrewd.

Jesus commends the manager not only for the readiness of his shrewdness, but for the creativity of his shrewdness. When you think about it, his scheme was brilliant. In the blink of an eye he feathers a future nest for himself, and he brings in at least some return on delinquent debts the master likely had written off long ago. What the dishonest manager did was ingenious. He is to be commended for his shrewdness. Who else is to be commended? Peter the fake check scammer, I suppose, is to be commended for his shrewdness. All of the world's clever, crafty, angry, mean-spirited workers of selfish schemes are to be commended for their shrewdness. Think of the planning, calculation, creativity, and down-right smarts that go into such undertakings as cheating the elderly out of their savings and creating computer viruses. It's impressive. They are all wise as serpents. The trouble is, they are all guilty as serpents as well. That's the difference. They are all applying their shrewdness – their wisdom – to the losing side: the side of sin, death, and self-centeredness. They are all shrewd *children of this age*, as Jesus calls them.

No doubt about it, Jesus hopes to instill the quality of shrewdness in his followers, perhaps even as a spiritual gift. But here's the catch: we are to be shrewd as *children of light*. We are to be shrewd as serpents, but innocent as doves. To be a shrewd Christian isn't an oxymoron. It means that as creatively and shrewdly and ingeniously as some people work to diminish God's kingdom and frustrate God's will, our mission is to apply godly means toward godly ends. It is to strengthen God's kingdom and make straight the way of the Lord. Their mission is to tear down, ours is to build up. Sometimes those who tear down seem to prosper. Sometimes it's easy to forget that God wins in the

end, and that those whom Christ calls “children of light” are on the winning side. This is why, Sunday after Sunday, we bring ourselves here – to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, to be reminded that God raised Jesus from the grave. The powers of death did their worst on the cross, but the resurrection assures us that all the world’s workers of iniquity labor on the losing side. What is more, God in Christ extends an open invitation to all children of this age. The invitation is to become a child of light.

Let me tell you two stories, loosely based on this parable, of what it might look like in real time to become or remain a child of light. My father was an Episcopal priest, and his first parish all through the 1960s was a lively, lovely, little urban congregation in Newark, NJ called St. Thomas Church. He told how one Sunday, when the offering plates arrived at the altar, he noticed that right on top of all the one-dollar bills was a ten-dollar bill – a big deal in that place and time. After the closing prayers he looked again and the ten-dollar bill was gone. The only one who could have taken it was an acolyte who sat nearby.

Rather than risk a faulty accusation, Dad decided instead that the next week he would preach a stern and stirring sermon about honesty. You had to know my dad to understand how comically this would have unfolded. He was not always a smooth operator. At one point in the sermon he looked directly at the acolyte and declared that “it’s never too late to repent, and that if you’ve ever stolen anything you can return it anonymously and be right with God and other people.” He did all but shout, “cough it up, you little crook!” Sure enough, the next morning when my father went to his office, he saw two plain white envelopes that had been slid under the door. Inside one envelope was a twenty-dollar bill, and inside the other was a five-dollar bill. Whoever took the ten-dollar bill was still on the loose, he thought. But at least two others had signed up as children of light.

The second story is about another Episcopal priest, the rector of the church I served as curate when I was first out of seminary. He was an immensely talented priest: a fine preacher, a charismatic leader, and a community organizer who knew how to raise money for good causes. I learned a lot just by watching him. And then it all came crashing down. A longstanding pattern of extramarital affairs became known, so known, in fact, that the major metropolitan newspapers covered it all over their front pages. Parishioners were angry, deeply disappointed and disillusioned, even betrayed. The bishop stepped in and took the position away from him, requiring him to resign as rector and eventually deposing him from the priesthood. Within the space of a summer I watched my mentor and boss lose his job, career, reputation, marriage, and house. At 52 years of age he had nothing. In today’s terms we would say that he was cancelled. What would he do?

How easy it would have been for him to despair, to give up, to throw in the towel, to allow his moral failures to define him and paralyze him, to resign as a child of light and become a child of this age. Instead, he made an assessment of who he was and how he could serve. He rented an apartment and embarked on a fast and furious job search. In time he became the director of a small non-profit housing corporation in a nearby city. He would hold the position for the next fifteen years. In that role, out of any spotlight, he worked to build up what others had torn down. Under his watch houses that had grown old were made new. People who had been cast down were raised up. Families who had been thrown out were welcomed into homes they could call their own.

How could it be that Jesus would commend scoundrel? Well, here was a sinner who had been unfaithful with much. He started over, proved faithful with a little, and God blessed the increase. Such things are possible when we are wise for the kingdom of God, and shrewd as followers of Jesus. Such things are possible by the Spirit of Christ, whose word to us today is that it is never too late – or too early – to sign up as a child of the light.