FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"SHREWD FOR THE KINGDOM"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 16: 1-13

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 21, 2025 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Luke 16: 1-13

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

1 *Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.* 2 *So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.'* 3 *Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.* 4 *I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'* 5 *So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'* 6 *He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.'* 7 *Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'* 8 *And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.* 9 *And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

10 *"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.* 11 *If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?* 12 *And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?* 13 *No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

Shrewd for the Kingdom

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Perhaps you have noticed that some of Jesus' parables are difficult to understand, and there's always more going on in them than meets the eye. Jesus' parables can feel that way sometimes; some of them seem simple on the surface. At our recent Wednesday Taizé service, James referenced the Parable of the Talents, in which three servants were entrusted with their master's resources. Two of them invest the money and make more money, but one buries the talent that he had been given. We hardly notice it sometimes, but it's there: that third servant's skewed perspective of God. Even though he didn't receive as much as the other servants, the master had shown him generosity and trust. Yet listen to what the third servant says: "Master, I knew that

you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." As the parable continues, we learn that each of the servants is rewarded—or judged, as the case may be—based on their faithfulness.

Or consider the Parable of the Ten Virgins. There they are, waiting with lamps trimmed and burning, waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. They are not prepared, and they run out of oil. They go to get more, but before they can return, the door to the wedding feast is closed. The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree presents another example: the tree must bear fruit or be torn down. We find comfort in knowing that it is given one more growing season—a third and final chance to bear fruit. Yet the question remains: are we in our first growing season, or are we in that fateful third season? The answer matters. Similarly, the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge tells of a poor widow relentlessly pursuing justice from a judge who does not care about fairness. Eventually, he gives her what she wants. Some people misunderstand this parable, thinking that persistence will change God's mind. But the lesson is clear: if a widow can compel justice from a corrupt judge, how much more can we expect from our God, who is righteous and loves us? All of Jesus' parables have layers of meaning, and Luke 16 is no exception.

Indeed, the Parable of the Dishonest Manager—also called the Unjust or Shrewd Steward—is a most puzzling story. It begins with a wealthy man and his steward, who is accused of wasting the master's possessions and is about to lose his job. Faced with imminent unemployment, he devises a clever plan: he calls in his master's debtors and rewrites their bills. "How much do you owe?" he asks. "A hundred jugs of oil? Make it fifty. A hundred measures of wheat? Let's call it eighty." Historically, interest rates were inflated to get around prohibitions, and the master may still have been breaking even, but to the debtors, this was an unexpected gift, leading them to think well of both the steward and the master. The steward is not motivated by compassion but by self-preservation: he wants the debtors' goodwill so that when he is cast out, some will take him in. Up to this point, we think we know what's coming, but Jesus presents a plot twist. What we expect is for the master to condemn the steward—and why wouldn't he? The steward acted dishonestly for selfish reasons. But instead of condemnation, Jesus commends him, not for dishonesty but for shrewdness—being clever, resourceful, and forward-looking.

We are left to ask: why would Jesus use such a shady character as an example for the Christian life? Augustine said, "Don't imitate his dishonesty; imitate his urgency." John Calvin reflected that "everything belongs to God, and we are merely managers." The parable is not like the Prodigal Son, who squandered his own money; the steward acts with what belongs to the master—God. At some level, Augustine and Calvin are both right: the point is not that shady dealings are acceptable, but that if worldly people are committed and creative in serving themselves, how much more committed and creative should the children of God be? It is similar to the persistent widow: if she can obtain justice from a corrupt judge, how much more should we, who love God, act with holy urgency using the resources, time, and gifts God has entrusted to us?

In our Old Testament Lesson from Daniel, we see another example of resourcefulness and courage. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, young exiles in Babylon, find themselves under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. They are given new names, training, and diets, far from their homeland. Some instructions would defile them; for example, Daniel is asked to eat the king's food and wine, which he perceives as unacceptable. So he proposes a test: "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe." Daniel does not passively accept

his circumstances; he is shrewd, resourceful, and courageous. Mary Caroline, reflecting on a recent Bible study, described this as "not being scared" and "having courage," which is a fitting lesson for times like these. Daniel teaches what faithfulness looks like under pressure, and the steward teaches urgency when the future is at stake. Together, they challenge us: are we managing our lives in ways that are clever, creative, and courageous for God's purposes? Are we using the resources God gives us—our bodies, our minds, our choices, our influence—to honor God?

Psalm 24 declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." Everything we have—our time, talents, families, relationships, energy, influence, and vocations—belongs to God. The dishonest steward used his master's resources for selfish ends, while Daniel used his for faithful ends. How are we managing what God has entrusted to us? Who is our master: God or Mammon? This is not just about money, though our tithes are an example. It is about our lives: if God comes last, how can we expect blessing? The answers lie not in words but in lives that demonstrate our loyalty. During a recent Kirk Club session, 4th and 5th graders created a covenant that included "keeping the promises we make at baptism." When we baptize Jefferson, we proclaim that he belongs to God; from first breath to last, his life is a gift to be used for God's glory.

This is why we dare to live courageously and take risks: it matters that much. One foundational principle of the church is that it is called to risk and trust, even at the expense of losing life. That is Daniel in Babylon. That is the early church under persecution. That is Christians today who choose integrity, principle, and love—even at the expense of their lives. Courageous faith may mean using influence for the vulnerable, giving generously in a culture obsessed with keeping, or offering forgiveness in a world eager to cancel.

Next week, we welcome The Rev. Tom Are to our annual Parramore Preaching Series. He is a gifted preacher, but what makes him exemplary is faithfulness, not cleverness or style. He will call us, as this text does, to consider how we are faithful stewards of God's Word. He will remind us that using God's gifts should be done in kindness—a virtue in short supply. In every season, and when tempted to circle wagons and lash out, we are called to creatively leverage the currency of grace, bearing witness to God, living with respect, forbearance, courage, and pointing to Christ rather than Mammon.

This parable unsettles and intrigues us because Jesus challenges us to think differently. If the world can be shrewd in seeking temporary gain, how much more should we be wise and courageous in seeking eternal gain? Daniel demonstrated how it can be done, taking everything he had. May we continue to learn from him and from the cloud of witnesses how to manage God's blessings to live boldly, give generously, act courageously, and trust fully, knowing that God has entrusted all things to us and has already given the greatest treasure of all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.