

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

LUKE 16:1-17:19

There's an old saying, **"The smartest fish are still in the sea."** **A fish's survival depends on its shrewdness.** *Can it avoid the fisherman's hook, the tempting bait, the bigger fish, or a host of other underwater dangers?*

And likewise, a Christian lives in a world fraught with danger. He or she also has to learn to be shrewd.

William Shakespeare wrote a famous comedy entitled, **"The Taming of the Shrew."** In Luke 16, Jesus teaches a parable, **which I call "The Taming of the Shrewd."**

Our Lord exhorts us to be among the smart fish...

Verse 1, **"He (that is, Jesus) also said to His disciples: 'There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.'** A **"steward"** was an ancient office manager or project boss. He was hired for his honesty and reliability and managed the Master's business as the Master would want. His ultimate job was to faithfully represent His Master.

In **1 Corinthians 4:1-2**, Paul refers to Christians as **God's stewards**. God entrusts His business on earth to us and like a steward, calls us to be faithful to Him.

But for some reason in this parable, the steward was failing at his job. He was wasting his Master's goods.

"So (the Master) called (his steward) and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'"

"Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg.'"

As I said, "The smartest fish are still in the sea." They survive. And this steward was also a survivor. Before he's officially fired, he's plotting his next step.

Apparently, he's too lazy to roll up his shirtsleeves and get a real job. He's afraid of that mean Mexican, "*Manual Labor*" - but he's also too proud to stand on the street corner with a placard and collect handouts.

This soon-to-be-fired steward has another plan...

In verse 4, he thinks to himself, "I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' While he's still in control of his Master's businesses, he'll renegotiate more favorable rates for his Master's debtors. He'll win their favor, securing a future job in their enterprises.

And so he asked the first debtor, "*How much do you owe my master? And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.'* So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'" This is a good deal. 100 measures of olive oil equals 800 gallons. It takes 450 olive trees to harvest that amount. This would've been the yearly profit of an average grove. This debtor can cut his pay-off in half through the steward's generosity.

“Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.’

100 measures of wheat equaled about 1000 bushels, the yield on 100 acres. This guy can now cut his debt 20%. Once again, the steward is doing his Master’s debtor a huge favor that he hopes will be reciprocated.

“So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt **shrewdly**.” And here's the trait we don't usually link with godliness... **“shrewdness.”**

This steward was cagey, crafty, clever, resourceful, opportunistic. The Greek word translated, **“shrewd”** is **“phronimos.”** It speaks of **“a practical intelligence.”** We would translate it **“common sense”** or **“street smarts.”**

It's been said, **“There are two types of people. Those who can do stuff and those who can get stuff done.”**

This man knew how to use the system to accomplish his purposes. He's a survivor. He was a **“shrewd saint.”**

Yet Christians are not always known for their savvy and shrewdness. And in verse 8, Jesus draws an unnerving conclusion, **“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.”**

As Christians, even though we're citizens of heaven, we still navigate life on earth. Some believers are nice people who love God but have zero street smarts...

They always pay retail. They're afraid to haggle and end up a slave to the list price... Or they lack the creativity to read between the lines and strike a better deal... Or they're so

caught up in how society ought to be, they don't understand how things are and lack the ability to work the system... Being shrewd is not sinful.

A Christian can be *true* to the values of heaven while still being *shrewd* in matters on earth.

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus warns us, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." In other words, **wise in our ways, harmless in our motives.**

As I see it, this servant was shrewd in five ways. You should jot these five points down and study them later.

First, he had an eye on the future. While working for his Master, he is thinking ahead, plotting his next move.

Second, he didn't burn bridges. He made friends who could help him later. It's a small world. Be careful how you treat people. You never know when you might meet the same person under a different circumstance.

Third, he acted quickly and seized an opportunity. If he'd waited a few days, he may have no longer had the authority to negotiate discounts. Time would've run out. The window to strike these deals would've closed shut.

Fourth, he created a win-win situation. He made the debtors happy with their savings. *And* his master "**commended**" him. He was happy with the collections.

Fifth, he followed his heart but used his head. Again, God guides us by quiet times and quick wits. Follow Christ, but don't leave common sense behind.

Verse 9, “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.”

A cagey Christian uses money not only as a means of purchasing goods but more importantly to develop relationships and build friendships that are eternal.

For “He who is faithful in what is least (that is, money business, politics) is faithful also in much (the kingdom of God); and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.” Jesus is saying if you’re faithful in *one area* of life you’re likely to be faithful in *lots of areas*. Reliability is a lifestyle, a pattern, a character trait.

But so is unfaithfulness. If you don’t pay your bills, we’re not going to make you a church treasurer. If your marriage is a shambles, don’t counsel other couples.

“Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?”

Jesus is saying if you can’t handle the material stuff like money (of lesser importance), how can you be trusted with the really significant, spiritual matters?

Don’t try to teach me to *thrive spiritually*, if you don’t *survive physically*. A person or church that **mishandles the money** will probably **mismanage its ministry**.

Verse 13 “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to

the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (meaning money).”

And here is how we know that God is against bigamy. God doesn't want men to have *two wives*. For Jesus tells us, “*No man can serve two masters.*” (Laughter)

It is true you can't serve God and money. They chart different courses and compete for your allegiance.

It's interesting, as Christians we *want to please God*, and we *need to make money*. But for everyone, eventually, there's a conflict. *What matters more the promotion or your witness? Your integrity or your job security? Pocketing that bonus or giving your tithe?*

At some point, everyone has to choose if they'll serve God or money. *Here's the goal make money, just don't make more of it than you should.* Money is a tool to be used for God's glory, not an idol to be worshipped.

Verse 14 “*Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him.*” One paraphrase of this verse reads, “*They rolled their eyes, dismissing Him as hopelessly out of touch.*”

They assumed Jesus wasn't living in the real world.

Maybe they knew He wasn't married and had no kids. *What does He know about life's responsibilities?*

“*And (Jesus) said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."* Jesus insists that the real concerns of life are not the

stock market, or your job, or the current politics, but the matters of the heart.

Most often, what man esteems and what God esteems are poles apart... The ancient Jews had the same problem as many of today's misled Americans. We're concerned about *the contents of our wallet*, while God cares most about *the contents of your heart*.

God could care less about the balance of your 401k or your net worth. God measures a person's heart.

Then verse 16, Jesus says, "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it." Apparently, the Law and Prophets were preparatory. They set the stage for what was to come.

But with the arrival of the Baptizer, Jesus' forerunner, John, there was a new sense of urgency. What the Law and prophets predicted was now a reality. The kingdom of God had come in the person of King Jesus.

And everyone is "pressing into it." The phrase means "to act with force or move violently." Realize, Christian salvation is a violent act. It's forceful. Satan has us in his clutches until God rips us loose and sets us free.

Salvation is a jailbreak. Nobody just strolls into God's kingdom. Peace with God requires "pressing into it."

Think of launching a rocket into outer space. It takes a violent thrust to break out of Earth's atmosphere.

Likewise, God's Spirit orchestrates a controlled burn in our hearts that breaks us free from the gravitational pull of sin.

This happens when we're born again... The Spirit supplies the sudden thrust that breaks the hold of sin and Satan and launches us into orbit around God.

Jesus says verse 17, “And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail.”

The jot is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The tittle was the squiggly stroke on the smallest letter.

Jesus is making it crystal clear - God's written Word is infallible and unfailing down to its smallest stroke. This should give us great confidence in our Bible!

And with that confidence, let's believe a hard saying, verse 18, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

The Jews had a form of no-fault divorce. Some Jews thought a man could divorce his wife for any reason.

But Jesus says, “No!” Divorce on unbiblical grounds, that is, for anything other than abandonment or sexual infidelity - is the equivalent of adultery. It's the violation of a sacred vow made between God and your spouse.

I tend to think that serious forms of abuse also fall under **abandonment**. Some married folks are unwilling to accept any of the responsibilities of marriage (it's a practical abandonment) and can also be a biblical grounds for divorce. But common excuses heard today like *we needed to find ourselves*, or *we grew apart*, or *we were incompatible*, or *irreconcilable differences drove us apart*... these are not

biblical grounds for divorce, and in the eyes of God constitute adultery.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus inserts a teaching on divorce in the midst of a discussion about money?

Why is that? Statistics reveal a common reason couples get divorce is financial. In some marriages it's not "until death do us part," it's "until debt do us part."

Bad decisions, big bills, burdensome loans become a wet blanket that smother the fires of love. Yet the answer to financial struggles isn't divorce, it's diligence.

Couples need to establish a budget, cut up the credit cards, pay down the debt, build up a reserve... get some help if necessary. And remember Malachi 2:16, "the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce."

The Bible teaches us there is no problem that our God cannot overcome. Let's take Him at His Word!

Now, once upon a time, a young pastor, serving in his first church was worried about offending the members, so he closed his sermon with these words, *"Now, my friends, if you don't believe these truths, there may be grave eschatological consequences."*

Afterwards, an old farmer asked the young pastor, "Preacher, by *"grave eschatological consequences"* did you mean Hell?" The timid preacher stammered, "Whyyy Y,Y,Yes." The farmer replied, *"Well son, if that's what you meant; then you better start saying so!"*

Hey, Jesus had no problem, *"just saying so!"*

Jesus talked a lot about Hell and was never afraid of offending someone's sensibilities. In fact, Jesus knew hell firsthand. He created it for the devil and his angels.

He understood its horrors and torments. That's why He was diligent about warning us of its reality.

A 2014 Pew Research survey revealed that 72% of Americans believe in heaven, while just 58% believe in hell. And of the 58% of hell's believers, I would imagine less than 1% believe they're actually going to go there.

Sadly, the true percentage will be much higher.

"Hell" was one of Jesus' favorite subjects because He doesn't want a single human being to end up there.

This is what we find at the end of Luke 16. Jesus gives us a glimpse of hell's horrors as a deterrent.

Some people view this next story as a parable. Yet in His other parables, Jesus never uses a proper name.

Here He speaks of "*Lazarus*." Rather than a parable, I believe the story Jesus tells here is a real-life account of two men and their journey into the afterlife.

Verse 19 "*There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.*" And if poor Lazarus' plight wasn't bad enough... "*Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.*"

A rich man lived in opulence and luxury, while a poor man lived outside the gates of his house in abject poverty. As the prodigal son ate the pea-shells thrown to the swine, Lazarus ate out of the rich man's trash.

“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried...” *his body that is.* A different plight was reserved for the rich man's soul... “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

Realize, God's plan for humanity has progressed through the ages. And conditions in the afterlife are no exception. Eternity is a project “under construction.”

In OT times when people died, they went to a place called **Hades** - in Hebrew it's **Sheol**. Hades was in essence, a duplex. One side was *Abraham's Bosom*, a place of comfort, refreshment, pleasure. Jesus referred to it as “**Paradise**” when He spoke to the thief on the cross. And across a wide expanse, the other side - the dark side - was called the **bottomless pit**, or the **Abyss**.

The rich man ended up in the latter. Jesus describes his state as “**in torments**” plural. What's mentioned is *scorching heat, relentless thirst, and eternal regret*, but hell is full of multiple sorrows. Hell has worms... and boredom... and frightening, smothering darkness. Also a “**bottomless pit**” has no bottom. There's nothing solid in hell, nothing to lean on or stand on. Hell is aimless drifting. It's dangling forever. And worst of all, hell is a land of unfilled dreams. You're tormented by “*what ifs.*”

Jesus describes the rich man as being conscious of his surroundings. *“He lifted up his eyes...”* And he could see the other side - *not earth, but in Abraham’s bosom.* He *“saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus...”*

The former beggar was comforted, while the former rich man broiled like a slab of meat rotating on a spit.

That’s when the rich man in Hades, *“Cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'*

Here’s a revealing insight, notice the rich man never asks to leave hell. He never argues that he got what he deserved. He realizes any relief would be an act of *“mercy.”* Sadly, he realizes his need for mercy too late.

In verse 25, *“But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.’”* In the afterlife, the tables get turned. The rich man begs, and Lazarus becomes rich!

“And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.” Notice the sobering word *“fixed.”* When a person dies his soul doesn’t end up a bodiless spirit with wanderlust. Uncle Joe doesn’t get a weekend pass to visit Earth and drop in on Junior’s Little League game.

No, spirits of the dead are given a *“fixed”* destination.

It's been 2000 years since Jesus told this story, and you can be sure the same rich man is still *"in torments,"* while Lazarus is still being *"comforted."* And the same will be true a billion, trillion years from now.

This is the grave consequence of the grave. When you pass from this life into the next you forfeit any possibility for change. Your status becomes *"fixed."*

Notice, Lazarus isn't even allowed to visit and warn the rich man's family. *"Then (the rich man) said, 'I beg you therefore, father (Abraham is the father of faith and of Israel), that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'*

Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'" And this was prophetic. Jesus will rise again; yet Israel rejected the testimony of the Church of Jesus' resurrection.

It was just a few days later that another man named *"Lazarus"* of Bethany, Mary and Martha's brother - rose from the dead. *But how did they treat that Lazarus?*

John 12:10 tells us the Jews plotted to kill Lazarus since he was turning so many hearts to Jesus. You can see a miracle, and still harden your heart to the truth.

This is why Paul said in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” It’s not miracles, but God’s Word that grows a strong faith.

As I said earlier, the afterlife is under construction. At the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you.” He was speaking of heaven.

Abraham’s bosom was a holding tank used until sin was atoned for fully. After Jesus paid *the once and for all price* for our forgiveness, He went to Hades and rounded up those who believed in salvation's promise.

Jesus cleared out Abraham’s bosom and took the waiting believers into the halls of heaven. He brought them into God’s throne room and into His presence.

Today, when a person dies their body returns to dust, but Jesus immediately judges our spirit. Believers go straight to heaven. Unbelievers continue to suffer the torments of Hades. *I trust you’re headed to heaven!*

In Luke 17, Jesus begins, “He said to His disciples, ‘It is impossible that no offenses should come.’” Life is hard. Here below, there is no such thing as a hassle-free life. We’re fallen people, living in a fallen world - *a world that crucified our Lord*. Trouble is inevitable!

It’s been said, “Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you’re a good person is like expecting a bull not to attack you because you’re a vegetarian.”

Life is not that discriminating. Difficulties can happen to any of us. The world we live in is full of obstacles.

Verse 2, “But woe to him through whom they do come!” Evil is inevitable, but God holds the person who acts out the evil responsible. Woe to the *offender*!

“It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.” Here, Jesus sounds like the Jewish Mafia. He promises a concrete wetsuit for those who stumble the little ones.

And that list of perpetrators includes pedophiles, and child abusers, and drug dealers, and teachers with an immoral agenda - even advertisers, movie moguls, music producers, fashion designers, and social media creators who promote immorality to our children...

The hottest spots in hell will be reserved for those who targeted kids with evil. Jesus is *the defender of the offended*. Corrupt a child, and there'll be hell to pay.

But the expression, “*these little ones*” also included the new believers in Jesus - sinners, and prostitutes, and tax collectors who had begun to follow Jesus. He's saying, woe to the Pharisees who discourage them.

The legalist who weighs down our faith with heavy burdens - with laws or rules or rituals - will be weighed down themselves with a millstone of God's judgment.

Jesus warns in Verse 3, “Take heed to yourselves.”

You may think of yourself as one of the “*little ones*,” but be careful you're not a Pharisee or a legalist.

“If your brother sins against you, rebuke him...”

Rather than simmer and stew, and *grow a grudge*, if a person sins against you let them know. We don't always know we've offended unless they say so.

“And if he repents, forgive him.”

We've all said and done stupid stuff. When someone realizes their sin and admits it, be quick to forgive. Tomorrow it might be you in need of their forgiveness.

“And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him.” Apparently, it's not up to us to question or judge if the offender is sincere. In Matthew 18, Jesus told Peter to forgive 7 times 70. In other words, **if you're keeping count you've missed the point.**

If the person who offends you says he repents *and understands what repentance means...* If he's willing to change, not just feel sorry he got caught; then we need to afford him an opportunity to repair the damage.

That's especially true if the offender is your spouse!

Verse 5 **“And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith.”** To forgive so fully and freely we need a bigger, bolder faith. This is what the disciples sensed.

They asked Jesus to increase their faith...

And today, if you could ask Jesus for an increase of anything, what would it be? Lord, increase my _____”

Would it be an increase in pay, or friends, or love, or years? The disciples knew the key to spiritual success was faith. Above all else, they wanted a bump in faith.

“So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.” Notice, the disciples ask for an increase in faith, but Jesus directs their focus to the little faith they already possess. A mustard seed is tiny, but it's not the size of our faith that matters, it's the object of our faith, Jesus! Take the little faith you have and fix it on Jesus.

I believe that Jesus here is actually talking about a specific kind of faith - what Paul calls “the gift of faith.”

It's faith that's planted in us - like a seed. God gives it at special times, for special purposes. It originates with Him, not us. He plants His faith - a supernatural faith - in our hearts. This is faith that uproots trees.

“And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'?

But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.” Don't expect an award or a bonus for just doing your job.

“So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" To me, baseball's most overrated record is Cal Ripken's 2,632 consecutive games played. *Why all the hoopla for a guy who just came to work every day?*

I'm being a tad facetious. Cal's accomplishment is noteworthy. But where most of us work, nobody is going to reward us for just showing up and doing our job. It's our duty. We're not expecting a special award.

In the 1970s, McDonald's ran an ad campaign, "You deserve a break today." Sadly, this is the motto of many Christians. Hey, just because you witness to a few folks, or give a tithe or two, or walk a little old lady across the street, *don't think God owes you.* After all He's done for you, that's the least you could've done.

Christians can develop an **entitlement mentality**. They think God is indebted to them. Don't be deceived. Give God all you've got and you've only done your duty. *Hey, if God is keeping count, we are way behind.*

God saved us by the blood of *His Son*. His blessings abound to us. Serve God for infinity and you'll still be on the short end of the stick. God doesn't owe us the time of day. His grace is love we can never deserve.

It's time we all knocked the chip off your shoulder, and served the Lord because we're grateful for all He's already done, not for some special recognition.

Verse 11 "Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off."

And here the social distancing was required. You think folks are leery of Covid. Leprosy was considered far more contagious. A leper kept a healthy distance.

“And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.”

Notice, the lepers acted in faith before they were healed. Before their leprous wounds grew new flesh they set out for the priest expecting to be healed. It was *“as they went”* that the ten lepers were healed.

“And one of them (just one out of the ten), when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.”

Apparently, the others who were healed were Jews.

And these nine Jews were eager to visit the priest and begin a new life. Perhaps they figured God owed them a healing because of their religious pedigree.

But the despised Samaritan, who the Jews looked down on, knew he didn’t deserve God’s blessing. Yet he was the one who stopped long enough to say *“thanks.”*

“So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?”

And today, millions the world over, have been healed by Jesus, *but we can still hear Him ask, “Didn’t I heal John and Jim? Didn’t I save Beverly and Becky? Didn’t I comfort Andy and Ashley, but where are they?”*

Here’s the question for us, *are we among the nine? Nowhere to be found!* Or are we among the few who’ve taken the time and made the effort to truly thanks?

Jesus asks, "Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And He said to him, "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well." And you too will go your way this morning, but I hope, I pray not before you seriously say thanks!

So be a shrewd, cagey Christian! Haggle for the cause of Christ... Make some money, just don't make more out of it than you should... Let's press into God's Kingdom and bust out of the prison cell called sin!

And if you're married hang in there! For there is a hell far more hellish than your marriage. Recall the rich man and his torments... He missed out on mercy.

And since it's the mercy of God we've received, we should live a life of forgiveness - which calls for an increase in faith - at times even "the gift of faith!"

For I hope that none of us act like we're entitled to God's blessing - that He owes us! Let's be grateful to God. Let's be among the few who pause to say thanks!