

# How to Invest Your One and Only Life

## Luke 16:1-13

Good morning/evening friends.

Anyone who has raised more than one child knows that, because each of them has a unique temperament and motivational styles, that you often you speak differently to one child than to the other.

And anyone who has been part of the inside of a group knows that there are times when you speak differently to those inside the group that those outside the group. In fact, even inside the group, because there are often the curious and the casual as well as the committed, often the way a person talks to the various types *inside* the group differs.

Know what I'm saying?

Well, over the past 3 weeks, we've been listening to Jesus tell stories to one type of people. In Luke 14 and 15, He's surrounded by highly-trained and highly-but-falsely-self-confident religious types. The Bible calls them "Pharisees."

In Luke 14 and 15, Jesus has all sorts of stories to tell these people. Stories so good they've been recorded and read and learned from countless times in the last 2000 years. If you've been here that past three weeks, you know that those stories are the stories of the Great Banquet, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Wayward Son. (If you haven't been here, but are curious, you can pick up a copy of them at the Information Center.)

But while Jesus is telling those stories, He's aware that there's another group that's listening in. A group, not that opposed Him, like the Pharisees, but a group that supported Him. A group of insiders. A group so committed to Him that they had bet the farm that following Him was the best decision for their lives and eternities.

So, in typical Jesus' fashion, when He gets through talking with the outsiders, He turns to these close followers, and He talks to them awhile. He tells them a very intriguing story about a scoundrel who'd bet the farm on a person he had offended. A person he had mistreated. But because of the character of the mistreated one, the scoundrel won the bet and secured his prosperous future.

That's the story I want to tell you today.

If you're a seeker here today, wondering whether God can be trusted and whether you'd ever want to trust your life to Him, you're going to like the way this story turns out.

If you're a believer, and you've made a mild commitment to Christ, and wondered if you should commit everything to Him, you're going to want to take that step after you hear this.

And if you're a spiritual soldier, and you're fully invested with Him, you've committed everything to Him – your time, your talents, and your treasures, when this story is done, you are just going to say, "I am so glad, I am so glad."

So, I think there's something here for everybody. And like last week, I'm going to pretend that you know virtually nothing about 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian culture, and give you all sorts of brain candy to chew on so that you can see this story in the way the original hearer saw it.

So take notes, and write small.

Ready? Let's start with the very elementary:

Luke 16 is the chapter in the Bible that immediate follows Luke 15. Everybody with me on that? When He gets done addressing the Pharisees, Jesus turns to His disciples and tells them the story of *The Shrewd Manager*.

It's a story about a rich guy, a nobleman, who finds out that he's being cheated by one of his employees, so he fires the employee, who then does something very creative and unethical to ensure his future. The twist to the story is, instead of being outraged at this, the nobleman praises the manager for being a shrewd operator.

For centuries, this story has confounded right-brained, Western logical thinkers, because for the life of them, they can't understand why Jesus, or the character that represents God in the story, would praise someone for doing something unethical. They've come up with a lot of theories of how this might work, or what's wrong with the story. But all of them miss the mark unless they know something about Middle Eastern culture. – And 30 minutes from now, you all are going to be experts on this. So with what we're going to cover, you'll be able to walk out of here and act like a Pharisee, knowing more than everybody else at the office, and secretly feeling just a little superior because you do.

The story of the Shrewd Manager is a story Jesus tells in

***Four Scenes:*** Scene A is

**A. *In the master's office.*** This is where the scoundrel gets the word that he's laid off, downsized, kicked out, cut off, fired, and all those other terms were hearing so regularly in our down economy these days. Scene

**B. *On the way to get the books.*** This is where some huge thinking goes on, and reveals what this unscrupulous manager knows to be true about the man he's been cheating, even though the man has treated him so well. Scene

**C. *With the books.*** This is where the manager works the plan he hatched on the way to get the books. And the plan works flawlessly. And Scene

**D. *In the master's office.*** (again), where the climax comes.

Let me walk you through each of these scenes, so you can see them digitally enhanced and hear them with Dolby surround sound.

Scene *A. In the master's office.*

In this scene three characters are introduced, though only two of them are actually in the room.

The first character is *The master*. He's a wealthy Middle Eastern landowner. Jesus calls him, "A rich man." And tells us that the people in the area respect him so much that many of them come to him and tell him that his regional manager is cheating him.

Jesus' exact words are, "***There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.***" – *Luke 16:2* The tense of the verb in the original language indicates that the manager was accused repeatedly – over and over again of this kind of embezzlement.

So the master asks. Calmly, and graciously. He doesn't scold, berate or threaten. He doesn't demand repayment, or put the manager in jail, which were well within his rights. He's an impressive landlord.

The second character is *The manager*. He's an agent for the master, a middle man, managing property and assets that don't belong to him. Only he's not managing them, he's *mis*managing them. He's rascal who's cooking the books to his own advantage.

According to the Mishnah, the Jewish commentary on the O.T., there were three kinds of managers legally recognized to play a management function in the life of Israel.

This man was a "*shaluah*" in Hebrew.

The Greek word used here for him is "*oikonomos*" – sounds very close to our word, "economist" doesn't it?

He's an educated man, who's worked all his life with people and contracts and records. He's an agent, hired by the master to negotiate and administer land contracts between the master and the peasants who work the land. In the 1500's, when the Ottoman Turks conquered this area, they divided up the land amongst themselves and then rented it back to the locals in exchange for a certain percentage of the crops.

The peasants hated these landowners because they exploited them, bled them dry, and were usually absentee landlords uninvolved and unconcerned about local affairs. They were represented by managers like this who not only bilked them for the master's gain, but bilked them a second time, on the side, for their own gain as well.

Kenneth Bailey, who lived in that region of the world for 15 years, writes, "***The Turkish landowner... is vividly remembered as corrupt, ruthless, and indifferent to any suffering he or his steward might cause his renters. [But] this scene is quite different from the one in the parable. At the very beginning, someone cares enough about the welfare of the master to***

***report the actions of the dishonest steward. The master is clearly a part of the community. The wealthy, distant, foreign, ruthless landowner is unknown in this parable.***

The third group in this scene is hinted at, but not present. They are ***The debtors***. These are the peasant farmers who live on the land as share-croppers. Every year each of them negotiates with the master, through the manager, to farm a certain number of acres. In exchange for the right to farm, the master gets a specified amount of wheat or olive oil, or whatever product they are farming.

It is the peasants who have blown the whistle on the shrewd manager.

That's the set up for the action.

The entire action of scene one takes place in two sentences, both from the lips of the master.

The first sentence is a ***Question***: The master calls the manager into his office and says, ***"What's this I hear about you?"***

The master is very careful with the words he chooses. He doesn't say, "I hear you've been cheating me..." because that would tip the manager off as to what the master knows about him.

The landlord doesn't want to tell the manager what he knows, because he wants to know everything the scoundrel has been doing to cheat him. So he says, "What's this I hear about you?"

All the listeners hearing Jesus story would expect one and only one response to a question like this: the ***Expected response: silence***

And in Jesus' story, the manager doesn't disappoint them. The ***Received answer: silence***

The manager is smart enough not to give any answer, because *he* doesn't know what the master knows about his dealings. Does he know everything? Or just one or two incidents? He doesn't want to confess to anymore than the master can already prove.

So he stays quiet.

So the master delivers the second sentence. He gives the manager his ***Dismissal: You can no longer be manager*** he says. Translated: "You're done, fired, gone. Don't let the down hit you on the way out."

At this point all the listeners expect to hear a debate or argument from the manager [***Expected response: argument***]. There are a lot of things he can say to defend himself. He can blame others. He can claim ignorance, or that it was all just an

oversight. He can put the onus on the master himself. This is the time for him to explain why he's innocent and ought to be retained.

But, to the surprise of listeners, the manager stays silent. [*Received response: silence.*]

Silence is supremely significant in the Oriental setting. The manager is indirectly affirming at least the following:

1. *I'm guilty.*
2. *The master knows I'm guilty.*
3. *This master expects obedience, disobedience brings judgment.*
4. *I can't get my job back by offering excuses.*

This manager, this *shrewd* manager, doesn't dwell on how he can get his job back. He knows he can't. All his energy is focused on the future and what he's going to do now that he's unemployed.

Before he even leaves his boss's office, he begins processing everything he knows and weighing all his options.

The master has told him he's fired, and that he must turn in the company books. So now what's he going to do?

He's thinking about this as he leaves the office. As he closes the door, he thinks to himself, "At least he didn't throw me in jail." The Mishna, the Jewish book of commentary on the OT, makes it quite clear that an agent was expected to pay for any loss for which he is responsible. The master hasn't even asked that of him. He's *not even scolded*. He just released him.

"He is a merciful man," thinks the manager as he walks into scene two, which takes place

***B. On the way to get the books.***

The master has said, "***Give an account of your management...***" – ***Luke 16:2***

How does an accountant account for his work? He keeps records. In Middle Eastern culture, when a person is fired, they're fired on the spot. No severance pay, no 60 day's notice. This guy is terminated. He is now powerless, friendless, and without a job.

He only has one task left to do: turn in the books.

So on his way, he is thinking furiously: "***What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job.***" – ***Luke 16:3***

He multiplies his options: Let's see - "***I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg.***" – ***Luke 16:3***

While he's walking, his mind is whirring and spinning. And it hatches a plan. The plan is based on everything he knows about the master.

His thinking goes like this: *I have been manipulating another man's money for years, and everyone around here knows it. I'm too weak for manual labor, and begging is beneath my social station, so what am I going to do?*

***Problem: Who will hire me?***

Answer: no one. They all know his reputation. Nobody likes him, or they wouldn't have turned him in. Nobody trusts him. There is no way in his current state of popularity he could hope to get a job. His reputation won't allow it.

So he thinks and thinks and thinks and thinks and comes up with a solution not based on *his* reputation, but on *his master's* reputation: The solution he comes up with? ***[Solution: Trust in the master's mercy!"]***

After all, this is a man who was so kind; he didn't even reprimand the manager when he let him go. He didn't demand repayment, he didn't make a fuss! This man is generous! This man is merciful!

"I know what I'll do," he says, "I'll stake my entire future on the master's reputation!"

And he does.

Scene C reveals the plan he's hatched. Ironically, the plan has everything to do with the master, and nothing to do with the manager.

The manager has to move fast, he knows, because his entire future depends on changing the villagers' perceptions of him, so that one of them will give him a job. He's got to change the minds of his master's debtors, and he's got to do it before they discover they he no longer has any power or authority. So, Scene C in his office, ***C. With the books.*** And everything that takes place in this scene comes from the mind of the manager and is based on two assumptions.

The manager knows that, for his plan to work, the debtors must assume two things: ***[The debtors' assumptions:]***

1. They must assume that ***The manager is still in authority.*** They must believe that he still works for the master. They must believe that he still manages the legal contracts between them and the master.

So, as soon as he gets back to his office, he finds one of the servants and says, "Summon all my master's debtors."

The peasants don't know that he's been fired. They assume his summons is an official one, sanctioned by the master, so they come.

As soon as the first tenant farmer shows up, he pulls his contract out of the file, lays it down in front of him and says, “Quick, **“How much do you owe my master?”** – **Luke 16:5**

The farmer says, **“Eight hundred gallons of olive oil.”** – **Luke 16:6**

**“The manager told him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.”** – **Luke 16:6**

He calls the next one in, lays his contract in front of him: **Then he asked the second, “And how much do you owe?”** – **Luke 16:7**

**“A thousand bushels of wheat,” he replied. “Take your bill and make it eight hundred.”** – **Luke 16:7**

In actual monetary value, the debts are both reduced by the same amount: 500 denarii. The manager isn't thinking percentages, he's thinking speed. He knows he must complete every deal before a servant walks in and says, “Hey! I heard you were just fired!” If that happens, his plan collapses and he goes to jail.

2. The second assumption the debtors must hold is that ***The master has approved of this debt-reduction.***

If not, they'll never go along with it, and they'll never change their perceptions of him, and he has no future at all.

But, lightning-fast, he pulls it off. One by one the tenant farmers come and they all have their bills reduced.

This is the *great betting-of-the-farm*. The manager is risking everything based on what he knows about his master: that the master is *generous and merciful*. If this is true, if the master really is generous and merciful, he'll be okay. If he's wrong, it's Jewish Fulsom prison. He bets the farm. He stakes everything on this. Everything.

Now, reducing bills like this was not unheard of, but it was rare. The Mishna provides for rent reductions when trees die or a blight spreads or when the winter is particularly harsh, but discussions of this kind never begin with the owner. They always begin with the *renter*. The renter, having been wiped out by a flood, or having a locust plague, would petition the landlord for a reduced fee. But never would the landlord initiate the process. Never.

So each farmer is astounded when he sees his bill and his the words, “rent reduction.” They all wonder how they could be so fortunate. And the manager is only too happy to tell them.

“Well,” he says, “I caught the old man in the good mood and decided to see if I could do something for you. Actually, I've been working on this for quite some time, and it all

came together today.” The reduction may come from the master, but the manager lets it be known that the idea came from him!

And do the villagers respond?

Imagine getting a call from the last salesman who sold you a car, and the guys saying to you, “Have you gotten the check yet?”

“What check?”

“The check that’s coming from the dealership. I convinced the manufacturer to give you a \$5000 rebate, for no particular reason, just because I’m a good guy and these people listen to me.”

Who’s your new best friend?

Only these guys haven’t gotten a \$5,000 rebate, 500 denarii is equivalent to a year and a half pay. So it’s more like a \$50,000 rebate.

As quick as he can, the manager gathers up all the freshly-reduced contracts and dashes back to the master’s office.

This marks the beginning of scene ***D. In the master’s office*** (again).

And this is where, to those who understood how things worked in Middle Eastern culture, everything becomes clear.

As the manager reaches the master’s office, the ink is still wet on the contracts. The master can see what’s happened. He’s no dumbie. And he can *hear* evidence too. Because already, in the streets, the tenant farmers are throwing a party, celebrating the name of their most generous landlord! Never before in history has their been a man as wonderful, as kind, as noble, and deserving of loyalty and praise as this master! Never before has a landlord reduced rents just because he’s a generous person!

As the sound of “three cheers for our patron!” goes up outside his windows, the master realizes he has two options:

***[The master’s options:]*** he can

- ***Explain that the reduction was a mistake***, that the manager has manipulated them and that they are still legally obligated for the full amount. In which case, the master’s name goes from marvelous to mud and they will curse him for his stinginess. Or, he can
- ***Keep silent and accept the praise*** and allow this clever manager to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm.

So what does the master do?

He reflects on his choices for a minute: Reputation, or money? For a man of character, it's a no brainer. He turns to the manager and says, "Shrewd move. Shrewd move. You are a rascal, but a wise rascal."

Middle Easterners still tell a story today about a condemned murderer during the days of the famous sultan Saladin. The killer was condemned to death and kept crying, "I want to see the Sultan." Finally he was taken to see Saladin, where he cried out, "O most gracious Sultan, my sins are great but *the mercy of the Sultan is greater.*" And he was released.

This is very difficult for the Western mind to grasp. But for the Eastern mind, *face*, or reputation is everything.

A modern version of the story happened in 1960 to the wife of a condemned spy who had been arrested by the Jordanian government. She waited outside the king's palace and when King Hussein's motorcade came out, she threw herself in front of his car. She deliberately did not plead her husband's innocence, her only appeal was to the mercy of the king.

The Jordanian king knew full well how a noble king is expected to act, and the spy was released.

We know our president wouldn't act that way. – He couldn't. But a Middle Eastern monarch could, and did!

The Bible says, ***A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. – Proverbs 22:1***

And Middle Easterners believe that.

See how this story nets out? It's about a master who is generous and merciful. And about a man who has assets that are only at his disposal for a brief time. He doesn't control his own destiny, and he knows it. It's all in the master's hands.

The question is, "Will the manager think about his situation? Will he make the most of his only opportunity? While he has assets at his disposal, will he squander them, or will he use them before they slip through his hands?"

Jesus is saying, "The shrewd move is to trust the master. The shrewd move is to bet the farm that He's generous and merciful."

Many years ago, Bill Hybels asked a question that I've never forgotten. He said, "What are you going to do with your one and only life that will last for eternity?"

(repeat)

I think that's pretty close to the question Jesus is raising in this parable.

What are you going to do with the one asset you have?

A shrewd guy uses what he has to gain a future for himself.

In the verse that immediately follows the story, Jesus gives the first of ***Three Lessons*** from the story.

He says, ***“I tell you, use your worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” – Luke 16:9***

Translated: you only have one life. Use it to enhance your future. Use it to build friendship with people who can say to you some day in heaven, “Thanks. Thanks. I’m here because of you.”

(reread verse)

Friends, that verse changed my life.

It made me ask, ***What should I do with what’s been entrusted to me?*** And it begged the answer: ***Invest it in making friends for eternity!***

And really, the prospect of that was too enticing for me to ignore.

It started me dreaming about a church where all the insiders had bet the farm on God’s generosity and mercy, and all the outsiders who wandered it got a chance to consider eternity and give their lives to Christ so that they could spend it there with Him forever.

I started thinking about building a church around this verse: *use your worldly wealth to gain friends for eternity, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*

Last week one of our members shared how he had explained the way to heaven to a friend of his, and the friend had responded by asking Christ to apply His forgiveness to their life.

While this New Songer was telling me how it all happened, I just imagined for a second, this new Christ-follower coming up to him years from now in heaven, and saying, “Hey, thanks. You opened your friendship to me and you opened your church to me, and I found Christ. So I’m here, in part, because of you.”

See, I want heaven to be a place that welcomes me and all my friends, because we helped steer people there.

Sometimes while we’re planning celebrations around here, like our 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I start thinking about the ultimate celebration in heaven. And I imagine renting a room

up there and having a New Song reunion. I hope they'll be a chance for something like that, because I can almost taste it. I imagine thousands of us all walking around high-fiving and hugging and backslapping each other saying, "Ah! You helped me get here! Ah! This is so good. Ah! My whole eternity changed because of you."

In my mind, that's a vision worth whole giving my life to. I think it's the ultimate vision God is calling us all to. It's the ultimate and final vision of this church: up in heaven celebrating together because we did our best to win friends for eternity.

And I kind of like the words that master said to the manager, "Shrewd move. Shrewd move."

The second lesson Jesus teaches at the end of this story is this. He says, "***Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?***" – Luke 16:10-13

I think this is Jesus' way of asking, "Do you want a big kingdom assignment here and in heaven, or do you want a little assignment here, and there?"

I think vs. 10-13 are asking me the question, "***What do I want entrusted to me?***" And the principle behind the question is, ***The better I invest what I have, the more will be entrusted to me.***

And then the final lesson: Jesus says, "***No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.***" – Luke 16:13

This verse asks the question: ***Can I invest my life in two places?*** – Can I work on my own stockpile over here and run across and work on God's stockpile effectively too? Can ride the fence? Can I have it both ways?

What's the answer friends? **No!** You cannot serve two masters.

10 years ago, faced with this story, and these lessons, a little group of people meeting in a rented home off of Rancho Del Oro Road decided to bet the farm on what we knew about the master. And so far, He's never let us down. In fact, it's been the ride of a lifetime.

So I want to invite all of you who feel like you're on the fence about becoming fully devoted to Christ, to hop down from the fence, and bet the farm. You'll never regret it.

Each week during this series, I've given you an assignment or two, so that you and God could do some work together throughout the week. This week's assignments are:

***(1) Continue praying “God, I don’t ask you for much today, I just ask that you give me your heart for lost people.”***

***(2) Ask God: “How do you want me to invest my one and only life?”***

Then, when you think you’ve heard something, call the church office, or introduce yourself to a ministry leader, and tell them what you think God said.

Okay?

Now, in about two minutes, we’ll all walk out that door and re-enter a loud, chaotic world. So before we go, I want to give you a brief minute just now to let you tell God what you’re thinking about Him and about you as a result of what we’ve covered today.

Holy Spirit, we are primed for a conversation with you just now. So talk to us, and listen as we talk to you just now before we leave this place.

Talk to Him friends.

Father, some of us in this room have been wondering if your real. Are you trustworthy? Are you really like the master? Generous and merciful. Can we trust you? Answer that question for these people soon, I pray.

And some of us have been wondering if we dared serve you, instead of serving all those things that the American dream says we have to pursue. Father you’ve answered that for us today with this very creative story. Now speak to us about what it means to invest our one and only lives in welcoming people into eternity.

And those of us who have invested it all just want to thank you now. Thank you for reminding us of your generosity and your mercy to us. Thank you for being a God who never scolds or jails us, even though sometimes we are scoundrels, but a God who comes through when we bet the farm on you.

Amen.