

Part I: Parables

Lesson Four

Surprising Advice From an All-Knowing God

Introduction

List some examples of the types of people who inspire you to be like them.

Parents, teachers, spiritual leaders, firefighters, historical leaders, heroes of the Bible, or military figures. **What character traits make you want to emulate them?** Courage, faith, devotion, stewardship, perseverance

As you look across American society today, what types of people *aren't* considered good role models?

Criminals, often politicians, entertainers or athletes. Likely, some might mention fraudsters, bankers, or lawyers—classes of people whose reputations have become tarnished in recent years.

Studying God's Word

In some of his parables, Jesus held up some of the most *unlikely* and even *unsavory* types of people as role models for his followers. Cheats. Pests. Those who were less than honest or seemed to have no shame in overstepping their bounds.

Why in the world would Jesus use these as examples of Christian character and action? We look at God's surprising advice in this lesson. As we do so, remember the general rule of understanding parables: stick to the point of comparison and don't get sidetracked by other elements in the parable.

Shrewd managers in a dying world

Read Luke 16:1-13.

1. Jesus advises his people to be like the shrewd manager from this parable. Why is that so surprising? **In what way is he NOT a good role model? What did he do wrong?** The manager had wasted his master's possessions. He was afraid of honest hard work. He stole from his master by reducing the amounts that others owed him. He acted in a completely selfish, self-serving way.
2. Agree/disagree: Jesus commends the man's actions.
He doesn't commend his previous poor management or his laziness. He probably doesn't approve of the cutting of prices. **How do you know?** Because that Bible condemns those actions as sins. **What does he commend?** The man's shrewdness. **Means what?** The man used the time, opportunity, authority and resources. and authority he had in the short-term, to benefit himself in the long-term.
3. What is the significance of the word "quickly" in v. 6? **The man only has a limited amount of time.**
4. Agree/disagree: According to v. 9, how you spend your money on your friends here on earth will determine where you spend eternity. **Disagree. We're saved by faith, not works.**

5. A more literal translation of verse 9 would be: “I tell you, use earthly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when the money is gone, they [that is, the friends you make with your wealth] will welcome you into eternal dwellings.” What light does this translation shed on this verse?

The people we make friends with on earth will only be in heaven the same way we will be in heaven: by faith created by the gospel. To believe they must hear, and someone must bring them the gospel. .

6. What are some examples of how we can be like the shrewd manager?

Generous offerings can support the work of the church. Being kind to neighbors and building relationships with them allow us opportunities to share the gospel. Congregational welfare groups (like Dorcas Societies or Good Samaritans) provide points of contact. So do preschools and grade schools, medical missions, parenting groups, etc. While many of those aren't established as avenues for sharing the gospel, they can certainly be “shrewdly” used to that end.

7. How does this parable convict you, comfort you or guide you? Convicted because I've not always managed my resources well, comforted that God still entrusts me with more (and forgives me), gives me an example to follow in this manager (cf. my mom's estate planning: WELS was her 5th son)

Invitations to persistent prayer

As you read the next two parables, it's important to understand the context. Jesus had just finished teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer to show them *what* to pray for. Now he teaches them *how* to pray.

Read Luke 11:5-10 and 18:1-8.

8. Which character in each parable represents God? **Is there anything odd about that?**

The neighbor who won't give bread and the unjust judge. (Not good traits)

9. Scripture makes it clear that God actually *does* want to answer our prayers. So why would Jesus use these figures?

When our prayers aren't answered the way we want or when we want, God may seem to be like the two individuals in the parables.

10. The real point of comparison isn't that God is like the neighbor or judge. What is the point of comparison in these two parables? What quality is Jesus encouraging among his people?

Persistence in prayer, even when it seems that God isn't listening or wanting to answer. All the verbs are present tense, Keep asking.

11. In what way are these parables comparisons from the lesser to the greater? (If even _____ would answer repeated requests, we can be confident that _____.)

If even cranky neighbors or unjust judges would answer repeated requests, we can be confident that a loving Father and Savior will gladly hear and answer our prayers.

12. Just keep praying? Or accept that God's answer is “no”? How do I know which to do?

Each addresses a weakness of faith. What is it? 1. When I'm tempted to give up, when I'm not trusting that God is able to help or wants to help, when I'm too self-reliant, when I'm impatient and not trusting God's timetable.

2. When I demand my will/desires/plan, and don't want/accept that God's plan is better.

Which are you most apt to fall into: giving up too soon, or being frustrated that God said no?

The goal of prayer is not to get God to do what we want, but to claim what God wants to give us.

13. Do these parables convict you, comfort you or guide you?

Convict me of #1 and 2, Comfort me that God is even more gracious and generous than the models in the parable. God gives me something even better than I asked for. Guides me now only what to pray for, but what to pray with: persistence, confidence, faith.

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus calls us to use our possessions shrewdly in this world in order to meet our heavenly goals.
- One of the shrewdest uses of our possessions is to create avenues for sharing the gospel with others.
- We can pray boldly and persistently, trusting that our heavenly Father wants to listen to and answer our prayers.

Some of Jesus' parables do use surprising role models for us to emulate. But consider his point carefully! Being honest and innocent doesn't mean that we aren't shrewd as we pursue heavenly goals. And being respectful of a loving God doesn't mean that we aren't bold and persistent before him. People of God, pursue your true heavenly goals in how you work with your neighbors and in how you approach your heavenly Father!

During the Week

1. Pray boldly and without ceasing for blessings that you have "given up on."
2. Consider your friendships with those who don't know Jesus. Which of those provide some avenues that you can use to spread the gospel?
3. Are there lay ministry endeavors you could create or support at your congregation that would be points of contact for sharing the gospel?
4. Prayerfully consider how you provide financial support for gospel ministry through your estate plan.