

In the gospels we read about Jesus and the situations Jesus found himself in. We also read the stories that Jesus told. Jesus told some great stories and was involved in some amazing situations. Take the story of the woman caught in adultery for example. She had been caught with another man and was called out publicly for her unfaithfulness by the scribes and Pharisees. They were ready to stone her for her actions. They drug Jesus into the situation by asking him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” Jesus bent down, doodled in the sand, and then straightened up and said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Wow! What a story. What a lesson on how we shouldn’t be so quick to pass judgment on others. I could preach and preach on that story and feel confident about the message.

I could also preach on this story. Jesus was teaching and ministering to a great crowd one day – 5,000 men plus women and children. The crowd was getting hungry and Jesus’ disciples thought it would be a good idea to send the people away so they could get something to eat. Jesus had other plans though. He told the disciples that they would feed them. “With what?” they asked. Jesus replied, “How about the five loaves of bread and two fish?” Then the miracle happened. Everyone was fed and there was more than enough left over. What a great story! I could preach and preach on that one all day. What a great message it would be – giving God whatever we have and asking him to bless it and multiply it. That would make for a good sermon.

If I didn’t preach on that story then I could certainly choose the one when Jesus called Matthew to be one of his disciples. Matthew was a tax-collector and was sitting at his booth one day when his life was turned upside down. Jesus walked up to his booth, looked him in the eye and said, “Follow me.” And that was it! Matthew got up from his work and followed Jesus. I would love to preach on that story. Talk about commitment and courage. We could go on and on about Matthew’s willingness to leave it all behind for the sake of the call.

I’ll be honest with you, I would much rather preach on the woman caught in adultery, the feeding of the five thousand, or the calling of Matthew, or almost anything else in the Bible than I would this text we have before us today. I just don’t know what to do with this. To put this story in

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perspective for us today I wanted to read you a contemporary version of this story that Richard and I ran across this week. Listen to this and you tell me how we should preach on this because I need all the help I can get today.

Jesus: There was a rich man – for the sake of this lesson, let’s call him Donald Trump – who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this “manager” was squandering the rich man’s property. So the rich man called him over and said,

Rich Man: Is it true what I’ve been hearing about you? Are you taking advantage of me and wasting my property?

Manager: Uh.....

Rich Man: You’re Fired!

Manager: What?

Rich Man: Turn in your books so I can see how you’ve been handling my funds. Until I am assured of your ability to manage, I have no need of you. You’re fired!

Manager: What am I going to do? I’ve never been jobless before? I’m too wimpy for a construction job, and I’m too proud to beg. I’ll be the laughing stock of the whole company when they find out what’s happened to me! I know what I’ll do!

Jesus: The manager called in everyone who owed money to the rich man. To the first one, he said,

Manager: How much do you owe the Donald?

Debtor Number One: I owe him for one hundred jugs of olive oil.

Manager: We sell olive oil? Okay, take your invoice and make it read “fifty jugs of olive oil.”

Jesus: To the next one who owed his boss the manager said,

Manager: How much do you owe?

Debtor Number Two: I owe your boss for a hundred shipments of wheat.

Manager: Take your invoice and change it to “eighty shipments of wheat.” Don’t ask any questions, just do it.

Jesus: When the rich man saw what the manager was doing, he said,

Rich Man: I have to hand it to you: you’ve been very shrewd in making these people pay their bills to me. Shrewd I like – reminds me of myself. You’re not fired after all!

Jesus: The people of this generation are more shrewd in their business dealings than those who are called the children of light! I tell you this: make friends by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes.

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What on earth are we to do with this story? One way this story has been interpreted is that the manager was taking his commission off the top when he made the offers to the debtors. In other words, he was the one taking the hit when he reduced the bill from a hundred to fifty. While that is a nice try in cleaning up the story, it still doesn't solve the "dishonest" part. The more likely view is that the manager falsified the bills to gain favor with those who might help him after his job loss. I think we should take note that the rich man commended the shrewdness of the manager and not necessarily the dishonesty. It was the shrewdness that was valued.

The word shrewd means – having keen insight, artful, cunning, penetrating, searching. I don't know about you but I have never thought of God placing much value on us being shrewd. Sure, God must smile when we love our enemies, forgive those who have hurt us, and when we offer grace to those in need, but shrewdness? Does God smile with approval when we go through the back door? According to this story, the answer is "yes", as long as the purpose of our shrewdness is in connection with furthering the kingdom of God.

You have no doubt heard or spoken the phrases: "Two can play at that game" or "There is more than one way to skin a cat", well, the same applies to furthering the kingdom of God. In other words, sometimes you have to use unconventional means to achieve the desired outcome, and in some cases, it is only by unconventional means that success is possible. Call it whatever you want – sneaky, tricky, under the table – but sometimes you've got to be creative.

Let me give you an example. We have a large group of kids who have been coming to our youth group on Wednesdays. They have really come together as a group and have been faithful on Wednesdays. They share a meal together and have a lesson with Walt and Kortney. What we noticed, however, is that most of these kids do not come to church on Sunday mornings and they have missed the worship experience. Well, if they won't come to the worship we will bring the worship to them! We started a Wednesday night service earlier this month and one of the great things about this service is that it catches the kids. Right there between the supper and the lesson, we have sneaked in a worship service on them. I don't even think they know what has hit them!

There is a passage in Matthew's gospel where Jesus instructed his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves". Just because we

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are followers of Jesus doesn't mean that we check our brains at the door. When Jesus said to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves he meant that it is not only okay to be crafty, but he actually encourages it at times.

With that being said, we still haven't dealt with what the manager did in this story. He discounted what was not his to discount. I had a strange experience last weekend. We had a garage sale and I actually half-way enjoyed it. But beyond that we even made a nice profit on the thing. Garage sales are always fun because you get to talk to your spouse about what to sell and what not to sell. I'm of the opinion that we sell everything but the kitchen sink! I tried to sell our toaster and can opener but Alisha wouldn't let me. The one thing we had a slight disagreement over was the baby stroller we had for sale. This was one of those double strollers where you could put two kids in at the same time. We bought the stroller a few years ago at a resale shop, but don't be fooled, this thing came with all the bells and whistles. This was a BMW stroller complete with an alarm system! Alisha insisted we sell the stroller for a minimum of \$30. I, on the other hand, would have been content with \$10. Alisha went inside to get some change and I was left alone in the garage, and sure enough, a lady walks up and asks how much I would take for the stroller. It was getting near the end of the garage sale and at that point I was willing to sell anything if I didn't have to haul it back inside. I said, "Thirty dollars." She kicked the tires a little bit and then counter-offered, "How about \$15?" I thought real hard about it! You know the old saying, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." But I resisted. I said, "I would sell it to you for less than \$15 but I promised my wife we would sell it for \$30."

The stroller was special to her and in her mind it was worth at least \$30 and to take anything less would have been unacceptable. I think about this story with the manager discounting the oil and wheat. It was not his to discount but he discounted it anyway. I don't know if this is an appropriate interpretation or not, but what if the oil and wheat in our story represents God's grace and forgiveness? It's not ours to offer and never has been. We are simply messengers who tell others about it and have no business pretending that we have the market on it. But maybe, just maybe, sometimes it's okay to be more forgiving than we should be. Maybe sometimes God smiles when we think we can give away his grace.

Would the rich man have taken fifty jugs of olive oil instead of one hundred? Probably not. Would he have taken eighty containers of wheat

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instead of one hundred? Probably not. But sometimes, even with God's grace, a little is better than none at all. Perhaps that is the reason Jesus finished this story by saying, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."

In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock wrote: "Life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat." You see it's not like we lay a \$100 bill on the table and say, "Here it is Lord. Here is my life. Here is what I'm giving of myself to you once and for all." No, in reality, we wake up each day and make the decision that day to follow and be a disciple for that day -- not tomorrow, not next week, not next month -- today. Instead of looking at our lives like a \$100 bill on the table, it's more like a penny here and a penny there. It's the small things that make the big difference over a lifetime.