

# The Shrewd Manager



Luke 16:1-13  
Year C Proper 20

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

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■	<b>Matthew</b> - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	■
▲	<b>Jesus</b>	▲
▲	<b>Peter</b> - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲
▲	<b>Judas</b> - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲
▲	<b>Joanna</b> - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲
▲	<b>James</b> - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲

## Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Matthew , Peter

*{Jesus comes upon a group of the disciples listening to Matthew telling stories of his days as a tax collector.}*

**Matthew**     *[in the middle of telling a story with relish]* Okay, so you have to imagine the fix this guy was in! Deep in the red, no hope of even getting square, must less earning any profit, and the boss is going to audit his books in three days! *[suddenly uncomfortable seeing Jesus]* Oh! Hello!

**Jesus**         Don't let me interrupt you.

**Matthew**     *[embarrassed over the story he was telling]* Oh, um, okay. But did you have something you wanted to talk to us about?

**Jesus** No, no. I just came over to hear whatever it was you were saying. It looked quite fascinating from across the camp.

**Matthew** They were just some stories from my tax collecting days. Boring stuff.

**Peter** *[enthusiastically]* Boring nothing! They were the funniest stories I've heard in a month! Come on, get on with it!

**Judas** I agree. I think the rabbi would enjoy them, too.

**Matthew** *[to Jesus]* It's just that, well, they're from my days in a very shady line of work. They're all about the stuff people tried to pull. Bad stuff.

**Joanna** *[supportively]* Not true. One of your old friends saved his daughter's life!

**James** *[with a raucous laugh]* Yeah, by bilking some poor sap of half his life savings to pay the doctor's bill!

**Matthew** *[apologetically]* Really, rabbi, they're all like that. There's nothing edifying about any of them.

**Jesus** *Everything* is edifying. Please resume your story.

**Matthew** *[in a much more subdued manner than before]* Well, okay. So, this old associate of mine was about to get fired. He was the manager of a rich man's finances, and had taken lots of losses.

**Peter** Come on, tell it like you were before!

*{Matthew is silent, unsure how to proceed without scandalizing Jesus.}*

**James** *[jumping in to tell it the way Matthew had]* The guy was part crook, part incompetent, and part unlucky gambler!

**Judas** It started with a fondness for dice. Plenty of fondness, but zero luck. Then he had to find some way to pay off his debts.

**Joanna** He tried stealing from his boss, but wasn't able to get enough that way. So he got the idea to invest what he stole.

**Peter** But he was terrible at it and lost everything!

**Matthew** *[beginning to get caught up in the story again and losing his earlier self consciousness]* You see, he was under the gun. Ordinarily, he was a good investor, but the bits he'd been diverting from the household accounts came to the attention of his boss. Not enough to spell, "larceny!" but enough to maybe to suggest mismanagement. He had to cover his tracks fast, or everything would come out.

**Jesus** This seems very edifying so far - in so many ways!

**James** It gets better. The guy then tries to *extort* some of his boss's debtors!

**Judas** He goes to some of the people who owe his boss money and threatens to increase their debts unless they pay him off.

**Joanna** He starts with the smaller debtors, just to try the idea out first.

**Jesus** And did it work?

**Peter** It backfired! They all ratted him out to his boss!

**Matthew** *[almost back to his earlier storytelling form]* And though he didn't totally believe their complaints (because people - especially successful ones - tend to go into denial at first about being wronged or cheated) they were enough to get him even more concerned. He ordered an immediate audit!

**James** So now this guy has only days to make good on all the money he'd blown. Not to mention cover his tracks.

**Jesus** So what happened then?

*{They've reached the point in the story Matthew was at at the start of this play. They all turn to him.}*

**Matthew** *[totally back into it now]* So...three days to judgment and not a cent in his pocket to work with. Half his boss's debtors already enemies, and banned from every dice game in town. What options were left to our hero?

**Peter** Armed robbery!

**Matthew** Nope. Don't forget, he was basically an accountant. He couldn't have forcibly robbed a child.

**Judas**            Could he have tried an out-of-town game? No, wait, he has no more money to bet with.

**Joanna**            Repentance! Just like in the parable of the younger brother. He throws himself on the mercy of his boss.

**James**            Aw, come on! What kind of ending is that?

**Matthew**           One the rabbi might like better, but no, that's not what he did.

**Jesus**            *[carefully thinking it through]* By your own listing of his remaining assets, all he had left was...the *other* half of his boss's debtors.

**Matthew**           Exactly!

**Peter**            What'd he do, try the same scam on them?

**Judas**            Somehow, I don't think so.

**Joanna**            *[with a wink at Matthew]* It wouldn't be as good a story if that's all he had to do.

**James**            Come on, we give up, what'd he do?

**Matthew**           *[relishing keeping them all in suspense]* Well...he paid a little visit to his boss's biggest debtor, a trader who owed him some nine hundred gallons of olive oil, and told him, "I'll tell you what, make it four hundred and fifty and we'll call your debt settled!" Well, the man was delighted and instantly arranged for the payment. Then the manager went to the second biggest debtor -

**Peter**            Wait, what'd he do?

**Judas**            He gave the man a break on what he owed. But how would that help? Did his boss consider all that money a lost cause? Was he happy just to get part of it back?

**Matthew**           Nope. These were regular business partners of his, and he was expecting to be paid in full.

**James**            Did your friend divert the payments to himself?

**Matthew**           Nope. Everything went to his boss.

**Peter** Then what was his angle? What was the scam this time?

*{Matthew just smiles at them, loving their cluelessness.}*

**Joanna** *[to Matthew]* We interrupted you. Go on with the story.

**Matthew** Well, then he went to the next biggest debtor, who owed his boss a thousand bushels of wheat, and said, send us five hundred and we're square. Which of course he did immediately. Then he approached the third biggest debtor, who owed pure cash, and settled for half once more. Then he went to a certain -

**James** *[impatiently]* All right, all right! We get the picture. What was the scheme?

**Judas** And did it work?

**Matthew** Three days later, the books were opened and everything came out: the gambling, the stealing, the extortion, and of course the sweetheart deals he gave all those big debtors. His boss was furious, and he made no attempt to defend himself or hide anything that had happened. I still remember that day. He'd told me what was about to go down and asked if I'd meet him afterward, and we sat right in front of the Temple while he told me all about it.

*{Matthew goes silent, apparently done.}*

**Peter** *[loudly]* But what happened? You can't stop now, you jerk!

**Jesus** *[to Matthew]* You're a very good storyteller! I do believe you could steal every follower I have away from me if you wanted to.

**James** *[with loud humor]* Just tell us the end of the story already, and I'll leave him to join you right now!

**Matthew** That was over three years ago, and I've kept in touch with the man. Where would you guess he is today?

**James** In jail!

**Matthew** No, no. In this day and age, you can be arrested for stealing a hundred dollars, but not, apparently, for stealing a hundred thousand.

**Judas** Okay, I know I'll be wrong, but just to keep things rolling: out of work and in poverty.

**Matthew** Nope.

**Peter** He must have thought up some other scam, and he's raking it in in another city or country somewhere.

**Matthew** No, he's actually still in Jerusalem, and gainfully employed, doing the same kind of management work he did before, as a matter of fact, and maybe even at a higher salary.

**Joanna** Did his boss forgive him after all?

**Matthew** Nope.

**James** Then he found some other rich man who needed his services.

**Matthew** You're close. The problem was, his boss made sure to spread the word all around about his dishonesty and incompetence, so who could he possibly have found that would still hire him?

*{Everybody is stumped. There's a long silence.}*

**Judas** Someone willing to overlook his past. But why? Not anything "edifying" like generosity or a desire to help him reform, right?

**Matthew** Right. Think about what other motivation there might be.

*{Another silence.}*

**Joanna** *[suddenly getting it]* Gratitude!

**Matthew** Bingo!

**Peter** What? Gratitude how? Who?

**Joanna** Someone who owed *him* for a great favor he'd done them.

**Jesus** *[suddenly getting it, too]* One of those debtors!

**James** Of course! I love it!

**Judas** That's why he gave them all a break! He was hoping that one of them would take him on after he was fired.

**Matthew** And as it turned out, he got more than one offer!

**Joanna** Matthew, that was the best story yet!

**Peter** Even the rabbi liked it. *[to Jesus]* Didn't you?

**Jesus** I did indeed! *[to Matthew]* So much, in fact, that if you'll give me permission, I'd like to use it as one of my teaching parables from now on.

**Matthew** I'd be honored. Of course you can use it. But - what exactly would the lesson be?

**Jesus** Oh, that shouldn't be hard with a story as rich as this one. How about this? If you prove yourself to be responsible over the small things, you will earn responsibility over big things. "To those who have shall be given!"

**Judas** Um, yes, but the manager *wasn't* very responsible for the small things. That's what started it all. And yet, he ended up in charge of yet another rich man's accounts.

**Jesus** Good point. Okay, how about this? Worldly wealth is the lesser thing, and Heavenly wealth is the true treasure. But if you're irresponsible with worldly wealth, how will you ever earn Heavenly wealth?

**Joanna** But there's nothing in the story that shows the manager losing out on anything because he was irresponsible at first. And what he gains by his subsequent cleverness is just more worldly wealth.

**Peter** And besides, haven't you taught us that we can't serve both money and God?

**Jesus** Hmm. That was going to be my next try. Well, does anyone have any suggestions?

**Judas** Well...to me, the best part of the story was how the guy made use of his position while he still had it to set himself up for the future. That seems like it might make a good lesson.

- Jesus** *[mulling it over]* How he made us of his position while he still had it. Yes, there might be something there.
- Matthew** How about: Come to God while you can? Do what you have to do now while you're in the world to secure a "new job" in the next.
- James** Because we're all going to get "fired" from this world soon!
- Peter** Hey, I like that!
- Jesus** Okay, let me work out the exact wording...here we go: The people of this world are often more concerned and inventive about securing their material futures than the people of God are about securing their eternal futures. Therefore, while you're in this world, use your worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself who will secure you a place in the next life!
- {Everyone is befuddled by this very odd formulation, and there is silence for a while.}*
- Peter** *[working his way slowly through it]* "Use your worldly wealth to gain friends" for the next life. Does that mean we can get to Paradise by donating money to the temple or bribing a priest or something like that?
- Jesus** *[realizing that that's exactly what his wording suggested]* Oh dear. This is going to be harder than it looked.
- Joanna** It's just that you keep wanting to use the worldly wealth literally, but if this is going to be a parable, the money in the story should just be an allegory for some spiritual thing in the lesson. I don't think it works to mix money and Paradise in the lesson.
- Matthew** But what could the money be an allegory for? *[to Jesus]* Haven't you taught us that there's nothing hard or tricky about getting into the kingdom of Heaven?
- Judas** Maybe the parable could be about the Kingdom rather than about Heaven.
- James** What kingdom could it be if not the kingdom of Heaven?
- Judas** The kingdom we're trying to establish right here on the Earth.



**Peter** You mean the Revolution?

**Judas** That's right. The Kingdom of the Messiah.

**Matthew** If that's the case, then what's the money in the parable?

**Judas** The money is the money, exactly how the rabbi's been trying to use it.

**James** I think I see. Here we are trying to overthrow the Romans, but the money we actively solicit and use freely is still their money. We don't refuse to recognize it. We don't refuse to use it.

**Joanna** But we do make better use of it than others who are just looking to live within the Empire for the rest of their lives. We use it to prepare the way to a better future.

**Judas** And it's important that we use it as effectively and cleverly as anyone.

**James** And maybe the money means more than just the money. The Romans rule by force, and while we want to establish a kingdom of peace, we'll still use force if we have to.

**Matthew** That's perfect! Rabbi, what do you think?

**Jesus** *[suddenly sad, knowing what he knows about how the kingdom they're all excited about isn't going to happen, and knowing what will happen instead]* It's been a long day. Let's sleep on it. I'm sure we'll be able to work this out better in the morning.

**James** Um, sure. Of course.

**everybody** Goodnight. Goodnight. *[etc.]*

*{Everybody exits except Peter and Judas.}*

**Peter** I guess we didn't get it right, after all.

**Judas** *[realizing for the first time that maybe Jesus is not intending to overthrow the Romans after all]* Maybe. Or maybe we got it *too* right.

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