

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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We live in a society where a lot of importance is placed on taking care of our own interests, getting what we want. I am sure we have all heard people say they will do whatever it takes to get what they want, or maybe we have said it ourselves since we are encouraged to do it. I have even heard pastors and seminary students use this statement that they will do whatever they need to do in order to save their church or do their ministry. After all, they may say, the ends justifies the means. But, even when we have good intentions, saying we will do whatever it takes could lead us down a morally dangerous path

It seems that is what happened to the steward and we can see how he got caught in this trap as we can see looking closer at the story

1. A master hears that his steward has been misappropriating funds. He resolves to save himself from a negative public perception by immediately dismissing the employee.
2. The steward then faces a crisis. Being a steward is the only thing that he knows how to do, and his poor performance means he will not be hired anywhere else as a steward. He tries to get himself out of trouble by restoring his master's honor and salvaging his reputation as a good, loyal steward. He forgives a portion of the amount owed by his master's debtors. People would assume that the steward was acting on the master's orders, so the master now looks generous and charitable in the eyes of society. The prestige and honor gained by this compassion would far outweigh the monetary loss to the master.
3. The master hears what the steward has done and praises him for his actions since his honor has been restored. Moreover, the steward is now in a position either to keep his position with this master or to secure one elsewhere, since his reputation for loyalty and good service has been recovered.

The steward in our story was facing a crisis and did whatever he could to save himself. We can say that makes sense but we are still left with the question of what the lesson in this story is for us? Scholars agree that this is one of the most difficult parables to understand. Jesus appears to commend the steward even though he did not engage in what we would consider ethical behavior. Perhaps Jesus is using this story to wake us up, to look at the situation from a different angle and develop new definitions.

The people of this age Jesus referred to know how to use resources wisely to be shrewd. The word "shrewd" means to be clever, cunning, and calculating. If we look at the positive aspects of the steward, we see that the steward is one called to take care of things and was commended for being shrewd. So how are we being shrewd? If being shrewd means being clever, how are we using our minds to use our many resources wisely? America is not a country short of resources. We are short in access to resources. Some people have learned well how to access

resources and organize money. These are the people who are doing well financially. There are many in this congregation who have this knowledge. So how are we using that cleverness? How are we going to find new ways to educate people on how to access resources so that everyone will find food to eat and a home to live in?

Being shrewd also means being calculating. So we ask how we are calculating our priorities. How we spend our money is one way of showing our priorities and commitments. Perhaps we might benefit from a "publicity test." Would we pass muster if our friends and fellow church members knew the specifics of our decisions concerning money at home, in business and at church? Would we be willing to show our checkbooks and investment portfolios, and reveal our priorities? Could we explain to someone who is starving why we spend our the money the way we do?

So perhaps our new definition of being shrewd means that we use our cleverness and calculating to help others, not just help ourselves. A radical example of this is found in the story of Dick and Patricia Warren. Five years ago, they won \$40 million dollars in the lottery, after taxes. After the initial flurry of media attention, phone calls, and over 700 requests for money in the first week, the attention died down, and the Warrens began concentrating on what to do with all their money. They were already retired, so there were no jobs to quit. They sold their house and bought a smaller one in the same small town where they had lived for years, kept the same friends, and the same phone number. Although they could certainly afford it, they haven't gone on lavish spending sprees. They haven't traded their lifestyle for that of the rich and famous, although they did buy a new car, swapping their old Ford Explorer for a new Lincoln Navigator. "We're living about the way we always have." The Warrens realized that winning the lottery doesn't have to turn you into a different person than you were before. But, they added, it's hard to stay the same. "We sure found out that we have a lot of friends and non-friends," he said with a laugh. "For us, we put the emphasis on how to give the money away," Dick said the couple has given away millions so far, mostly to well-known charities, serving a wide variety of causes. Much of the rest of the winning is managed in investments. The Warrens chose to help people through known charities because, "you hear a lot of strange stories from people." "We want to donate it ethically and effectively. We think we've done very well at that."

The Warrens are an unusual example because they won the lottery. We could spend time pondering what we would do if we won the lottery, but it probably is not going to happen to us, especially if you are like me and never buy tickets. Bu the Warrens are a good example of thinking about others. BY giving their money away, they are helping to make the world a better place. They are being good stewards of their resources.

As we search for ways to apply these ways of being shrewd in our daily lives, perhaps we look for ways to be more open and giving like the Warrens. We live, work and play in this world and are all stewards of the many resources we are given. But we are also called to be children of light. As children of light, we need to attend to our relationship with others and with God. We are called daily to account for how we express our values, and yes, the way we use money. Each little choice we make every day has important repercussions for God's future. Take stock. The

time is at hand. As we move into our stewardship meetings, we will be discuss how we will plan for and live into God's future. We will discuss, each one of us, how we are making use of our resources, both time and money. Make no mistake, God will have God's future whether we choose to participate or not. The question for us is much more fundamental: Shall we move with the grain of the universe or drift in the current flowing around us?

The manager in Jesus' story used all his resources to secure his future. We must be no less resourceful. At our disposal we have hope in God's justice, faith in God's peace, and trust in God's grace. These are the best possible resources. We must use them so that it will be said of us, "And the master commended them because they acted so shrewdly." (Jennifer Copeland, Christian Century)

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