

## Luke 16:1-13

This is a story about a bill collector who works in the accounting division of a rich man's estate. The bill collector - or manager - has been pulling a scam – hustling his boss' clients by overcharging them and keeping the difference.

When he finds out that he's being audited, he scrambles to those clients and offers to "fix" their bills. The clients think that they're cheating the boss; and they never catch on that they've been cheated themselves. The bill collector is brilliant. When the audit is finished, and everything appears to be in order, his boss shakes his head and sighs: "I don't know what you were doing, but I know it was shifty. Well, you got away with it. Congratulations, you're still fired!"

The master commended the dishonest manger because he had acted shrewdly. Then Jesus said, "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

What exactly does shrewd mean? In a way, shrewdness is wisdom; wisdom that ran away from home as a child and learned how to survive on the streets of Toronto, or New York, or Vancouver. Shrewdness is cunning.

The word shrewd can be applied to a poker player who is so good at the game that there's almost no element of "gambling" involved. He knows all the statistical angles, and he is able to "read" the other players to perfection. A shrewd poker player doesn't have to cheat to win because he can probably win even when everybody else is cheating!

By sharing the parable, Jesus was saying: "If you want to see shrewd, you're probably going to have to look outside the community of God's people." After all, God's people are uncertain about shrewdness – it's like we don't want to upset God by appearing too smart.

I don't think we need to worry too much about embarrassing God by outsmarting God. It's very unlikely that God is intimidated by our wisdom. But, God may very well be infuriated by our foolishness. 80% of North America's churches are not growing. The number of people worshipping God in our churches, at best remains level, or at worst, lower from year to year. 19% of our churches are growing in ways that ARE NOT working. They appear to be growing, but in reality, they're simply winning a game of "musical chairs" with other local churches. Only 1% of our churches are growing in a way that works. These are the churches that are increasing because they are attracting people into God's family.

In other words, 99% of the North American churches are not working! This is surprising news. 99%! These statistics have been validated by every major denomination. Imagine God looking down at his church and saying: "Something isn't adding up. I think we need an audit."

The top-level leaders of many of our churches are like the manager in Jesus' parable: they're dishonest – with themselves. But at the same time, they are unlike the manager in Jesus' parable – they're not panicking!

When the manager in Jesus' parable heard that he was going to be audited, he panicked. He got shrewd. He made radical changes to survive. The leaders of many of our churches are not panicking. And they're not being shrewd. They don't understand that their "books" don't line up with God's Big Book. They've got funds in the bank, and they've got fabulous buildings, but they don't have any fish in the boat!

Our mission is not to raise funds or buildings. Our call is to be "fishers of men and women." We've organized ourselves into the best-looking, wealthiest "soul-fishing" institution in the human history; but we're not catching any fish.

At the beginning of the parable, the dishonest manager is stealing from people. At the end of the story, he is no longer stealing. He repented, although "accidentally." Obviously, he didn't repent because he felt that stealing was wrong; he repented because he knew that it was no longer going to work. In other words – he got caught! We could say: "That kind of repentance doesn't count!" He didn't have any kind of moral awakening; there was no contrition or restitution. His selfishness just changed from one form to another.

Imagine that we were able to get this shrewd manager to sit up here in front of us so we could confront him. We would point out all the ways that his "repentance" doesn't count. Then he'd say: "So my kind of repentance doesn't count? Whatever. Guess what people? YOUR KIND of repentance – just doesn't work!"

Jesus told this story to remind us that religion without results is ridiculous! When we look at our churches today, it is obvious that something is wrong. Jesus is saying: "If you're too proud to confess that your version of Christianity is all wrong, will you at least consider that it's not working?" Jesus would be happy with the "accidental" repentance of our churches, especially if we made radical changes for our very survival!

John Wesley was born in 1703 - well after the Reformation. He was a well-educated, very refined Oxford student; ordained by the Church of England. Wesley observed that many of the traditional things that "counted" in the high class Church of England didn't "work" out in society. When he observed that the Christian religion of his day did not bring about results, Wesley panicked. He started making radical changes in the way he ministered to God's people: If something appeared to "count" but didn't appear to "work" – he abandoned it. If something appeared to "work" but didn't appear to "count," – he applied it anyway.

He abandoned aristocratic religious language. He quit trying to convince the upper

classes that God was worth a few moments of their time. And he went “fishing for men and women.” He netted at least 100,000 during his life – which qualifies him for a “Master Angler” award in anyone’s book! He also ticked off a lot of people in the Church of England. They accused him of trying to start a new church. (Sounds familiar - doesn’t it?) He wasn’t. He just wanted to get the old church working. And that is how the Methodist Movement began - not unlike the Lutheran Reformation. This movement was an accident. This was an “accidental” renewal, much like the manager’s accidental repentance. Whether it counts or not, it did reform the nation of England and helped form the character of North America. Whether or not it counted, it worked!

Wesley prohibited Methodist preachers from coercing people into the faith. He was opposed to fire and brimstone preaching; he refused to “frighten” people into God’s family by preaching about the wrath of God. To his fellow pastors, he sent the following: “If you can’t reason a man into the truth, never attempt to force him. If your love will not compel him to come in, leave.” Wesley carried two things in his evangelical toolbox: logic and love.

Wesley was shrewd; he observed that people who were “frightened” into making religious decisions hardly ever grew up into mature Christians. They usually left the church. When they remained in the church, their spiritual immaturity was a terrible discredit to the Gospel.

Wesley preached with love and logic; this usually drew great crowds. When he reached the end of a sermon, he invited people to learn more about God by joining a small group he called “class meetings.” These small groups were led by ordinary Christians; each class had about twelve members. During these classes, curious people asked honest questions, and ordinary Christians gave simple answers. These groups were informal; they weren’t organized like a traditional Bible study or prayer group.

It was a time for people to meet and share conversations. In the church, small social groups are vital for spiritual growth. In the hands of ordinary people, small social groups serve a significant spiritual purpose. This is because “ordinary Christians” have more credibility than the ordained clergy. According to research results: when first-time visitors to a church receive a “glad you came” visit or phone call within 36 hours, 85% of them will return. If the “glad you came” call is received 36 to 72 hours after the first visit; the percentage drops to 60%.

These statistics represent the reaction from church visitors who receive a rapid response call by someone OTHER than the pastor. Yet, something interesting happens when first timers get a quick follow up call from the pastor. When the “glad you came” call is given by the pastor – the percentage of returns is cut in half. Giving someone a “Glad you came” call does not guarantee they will return. If a quick call is made by someone in the

congregation, there's an 85% chance they will come back.

If the call is made by the pastor, there's a 52.5% chance that they won't. It's not about the pastor, personally, it's about common sense. Visitors know that the pastor is on the payroll. A call from him/her is about as special as a call from a telemarketer. They consider it to be just part of the job.

The faithful life can be thought of as a brand new car, and the pastor as the car salesman. When a car salesman says, "Hey, I just want to help you find a great car because I really care about you," people think: "Yah – whatever."

As an "ordinary church member," – you're like a car owner. People are going to be interested in your opinion; they know that you're not working on commission. People don't choose this church because they like me; people choose this church because they sense that you like them. Small group socializing "works" – because it creates opportunities for spiritually curious people to share conversation with ordinary people like themselves. Once they sense that you like them, they will feel safe; safe enough to start observing you and even ask questions about your faith life. Faith is shared through friendships.

We digest the sermons we hear, the books we read, and the thoughts we think by having conversations with others who help us sort stuff out. That is why social small groups are such an important spiritual tool. Faith is shared through friendships. When we help people belong, we are ultimately helping them believe.

A lot of churches are consulting with all kinds of experts, trying to figure out how to achieve growth. Shrewd churches have a wiser focus: they endeavour to make their church WORK. 95% of the "growing" churches don't work; but each and every "working" church will grow – it's inevitable! A growing, non-working church is usually obsessed with trying to force growth in one or two isolated areas; like attendance and finances. A working church is also growth-focussed, but in a more balanced way. There are four areas of growth that need to occur in a working church:

1. Internal Growth: which takes place in the lives of people who are already coming to church. When members of a congregation are growing closer to God and each other, then internal growth is taking place.
2. External Growth: takes place when new people start showing up in church. There are three kinds of external growth: Biological; when members have babies; Receiving people from other churches by transfer; and Conversion, that is reaching lost people and bringing them into God's family
3. Extension Growth: takes place when members of a congregation reach into their community. Jesus did not tell all the world to go to Church; He told the Church to go into all the world.
4. Bridging Growth: which occurs when churches deploy people as "missionaries" to

reach out to people in other geographically distant parts of the world.

Today's parable illustrates that we can stumble into repentance – quite accidentally. Jesus didn't commend a shrewd man for acting dishonestly; He commended a dishonest man for acting shrewdly. Shrewd churches are continually sorting things out: they abandon the old things that don't work and apply new things that will. If we are willing to take assessments and make adaptations, then our church will keep working. And if our church keeps working, it will keep growing.

So, when you see a visitor today - or any other Sunday – give them a call. They'd rather hear from you than they would from me. And don't forget to party! It doesn't matter if socializing "counts;" it's quite obvious that it "works!" It works – (and counts) – because faith spreads through our relationships. Amen.