

# The "Shrewd" Steward - A Call to Cleverness

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

*Catholic San Francisco* – September 17, 2010

*Amos 8:4-7*

*Psalm 113:1-2, 4-6, 7-8*

*1 Timothy 2:1-8*

*Luke 16:1-13*

In the Romantic comedy, *As Good as it Gets*, Melvin Udall is a blissfully miserable obsessive compulsive, whose only joy in life is harassing Simon, his neighbor, Verdel, Simon's dog, and Carol, the only waitress willing to wait on Melvin at the cafe where he has his daily breakfast. Melvin's self-centered routine is centered on his ill treatment of these three. Suddenly, his world begins to collapse around him as his routine is abruptly interrupted. Simon is brutally attacked by robbers. Unable to work, he soon loses his apartment next to Melvin's. At the same time, Carol's chronically ill son is in greater need for his mother to work closer to home, and Carol becomes absent from the cafe.

In a desperate effort to maintain his neurotic status quo, Melvin hires a doctor to take personal care of Carol's son, so she can return to work at the cafe. He also takes Simon on a road trip so he can be reconciled with his parents, after which he allows Simon to move in with him, so that Simon and Verdel will continue their presence in the apartment. Throughout this period of desperation, Melvin, rather unintentionally wins their sincere gratitude and friendship for his selfless generosity; and in this unlikely way, learns the virtue of basic human kindness.

One of the most unusual stories told by Jesus is the Parable named *The Dishonest Steward*; a man who is fired for squandering his master's property, but is driven by desperate circumstances to exercise generosity toward those who are in debt to his master. Biblical scholarship suggests that what the steward writes off is his own commission in collecting the debt, leaving to his master's debtors only the amount they owe (minus his commission). In doing so his reputation is transformed from one of a thief, who squanders his master's property and takes advantage of his master's debtors, to one of generosity, as he lightens the debt of those who owe money, depriving himself of the commission that he would have received; all in order to secure for himself some stability, wrought from gratitude, after he is discharged.

While usually understood negatively, the word "shrewd" is also defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as, "marked by clever, discerning awareness and hardheaded acumen," acumen meaning "keenness and depth of perception, discernment, or discrimination especially in practical matters." In Matthew 10:16, Jesus, Himself, tell his disciples to be "shrewd as serpents, but innocent as doves" because "I am sending you out as sheep among wolves." This is interesting since the serpent is the well-known tempter of Adam and Eve, and a mythological antagonist to humanity in multiple ancient cultures. Nonetheless, Jesus praises those children of the light who show a clever shrewdness in dealing with the people of the world, all in an effort to promote the Gospel against which the world is particularly hostile.

Examples of this can be seen in the lives of certain saints. Saint Paul certainly showed a particular shrewdness when, in the face of conviction by Roman-Judean authorities in the face of Jewish accusations against him, he used his secular Roman citizenship to appeal his case to the Emperor, presumably to preach the Gospel before the highest authority in the land (the fact that the Emperor was Nero was a particular inconvenience).

Perhaps the best example of this kind of shrewdness is seen in St. Thomas More, who was faced with choosing loyalty to his King, Henry VIII, and loyalty to his faith and conscience. As portrayed in *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas engages in a great deal of shrewd legal wrangling, to the great frustration of those who sought to accuse him of treason; always dodging the accusations with his legal acumen, until finally, he could no longer avoid the choice; whereupon he chose his God, and his Church, over his king.

The Dishonest Steward showed shrewdness when faced with the possibility of being reduced to poverty after losing his position, when he earned the gratitude of the debtors after exercising generosity in writing off some of their debt.

We too are called, not to use our worldly cleverness for corrupt, dishonest ends, nor are we to cower in the face of trouble, opposition, crisis, or even persecution. Rather, we are called to be clever and shrewd in outsmarting those whose priorities are of this world as we strive to live and promote the call of the Gospel, which calls us to the world that is to come.

Fr. William Nicholas