All of us, if given a chance, might have horror stories to tell of contractors that have turned unreliable or even shams by people we had learned to trust. The outrage that overcomes us when we find out of having been taken is in reference not only to the financial loss incurred but also to the loss of trust, to the violation of respect and to a sense of disregard of personal value and mattering.

Anger is always the most evident expression of much deeper feelings. Digging deeper we may often find, behind anger, feelings of fear, sadness, and helplessness. The angry reaction of the master to the rumor of having been cheated by his own property manager in today’s gospel story is quite understandable. Who wouldn’t be? He is not getting the expected respect nor financial return. He is seeing his potential income and wealth growth go to waste. What’s his wealth manager doing? Is he involved in shady financial dealings? Is he being complacent and too benign with his master’s debtors and not going after his master’s money? Who does the manager think his landlord is, a fool, a weakling? And yet, he shows himself to be that much when he merely asks his estate manager to turn in the records without an outside independent audit and simply dismisses him instead of having him arrested. Or when, by the end of the story, he praises him for his astuteness. He will probably even reinstate him to his position! How can the landlord expect respect if he sets himself up to be so easily fooled? How can he be so trusting of his manager? How can he show so much benevolence and nobility?

The parable of the Shrewd Manager is quite perplexing and convoluted to us, 21st century Westerners. But it must have been rather self-evident and intuitive in an ancient Middle-Eastern agrarian society.[[1]](#footnote-1) Reading between the lines, Jesus is highlighting, in the first place, the slanderous accusation (the rumor or gossip) that was at the basis of the whole story. The level of distrust, the emotional resentment, the jealousy and the continuous alertness present among the different players in mercantile interactions (especially for those at the lower end of the scale) must have been a cause for constant stress. “Middlemen [...] were vulnerable given the cutthroat nature of the oppressive system within which they worked. They were unpopular with the peasants because they collected the landlord’s tribute, which included a cut for themselves.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The potential trauma caused to the manager by his job loss is expressed in the fear of having to compete with other daily laborers for low paying jobs with skills he does not possess. Failure in securing a job he is not trained for would result in the unbearable shame of begging for mere survival. Disease and impoverishment would lead him to an undignified and painful death. So his lament “What shall I do?” carries with it a clear tone of near despair. This is Jesus’ point for telling the story: gossip can kill some ones’ character, and induce one to total wretchedness, as Martin Luther explained in his comment to the Eighth Commandment.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even if the accusation is not too far off the mark and the steward’s silence somehow confirms the basic truth of the common practice, still the camaraderie built on gossip is not inducive to a healthy society.

The plan of action devised by the manager for which he is commended by the master, in the end, is rather simple: call in all salesmen and ask them to cut their debt to his boss with the hope of gaining favor with them in the future. Now, this is not cheating for he is not lowering the cost of the goods and his master’s profit. He is simply renegotiating the cut he would get and probably also the hidden arbitrary interest rates the landowner would impose on the merchants for the period it took them to sell the goods before they spoiled. The plan would benefit the landlord as he now appears generous to the salesmen. It also keeps them more indebted to him, for by giving them a lower interest rate he keeps an invisible thumb on them. That is the reason why the manager is praised by the landowner who probably, at this point, will think twice about firing him.

The happy ending to this parable makes me think of our relationship with God. The Creator has entrusted us with much: a bountiful Earth, intelligence and creativity, a spiritual connection to God, to one another and to the rest of creation, and the ability to choose to render God the glory and promote the well-being of all people. The youth of the planet are being the rebuking voice of God as they remind us that our antiquated environmental policies are rapidly robbing them of their future.[[4]](#footnote-4) But already now we are seeing the disruptive force of nature unleashed in many parts of the world with so many record-breaking hurricanes, melting of the glaciers, and rising sea levels.[[5]](#footnote-5) When world leaders deny and discount the alarming scientific research available for personal or corporate profits, then the policies they are introducing are not only antiquated but also ill-intended, unethical and criminal. People are dying and the planet is being destroyed because some in our midst pursue the love of money and power showing no sympathy for those who suffer. This is Jesus’ second point: one cannot serve both God and money! Love for God motivates us to do the righteous thing and promote the common good. On the one hand, each one of us has been put in charge of little: the money we have. We may use our resources in a way that is helpful to our neighbors.

On the other hand, much has been entrusted to us: intelligence and creativity, relationships and communities, institutions and systems, democratic ideals and spiritual values. The whole of creation is waiting “with eager longing” the manifestation of the children of God ([Rom. 8:19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+8%3A19&version=NrsV)). We may have abused God’s trust in us; we may have been complacent, unaware, and unskilled. But God reveals an insane love for us, bordering on foolishness, and calls us once again to repentance and recovery of our senses. Our political and economic choices may bear freedom and health not simply to us as individuals but to the whole planet. We may still surprise God and cause God to enthusiastically call us shrewd and respectful of the trust given. A diseased planet and global community bespeak of diseased souls in need of healing and redemption.

How can we secure a healthy balance and praise the Lord once again ([Ps. 113](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+113&version=NrsV))? How can we follow the lead of our youth and advocate for a healthier future for the planet? Let us not desert our duty to seek deep within ourselves for that divine energy that alone can restore us to God and one another. Amen.

1. Brad Young, The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation, p. 232-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Longenecker (ed.) The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables, p. 224-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Small Catechism (check it out in our hymnal, the Evangelical Lutheran Worship or ELW on p. 1161). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/climate/100000006726110/greta-thunberg-congress.html> and <https://lasvegas.cbslocal.com/video/4170517-climate-change-protests-happening-around-the-globe/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/big-thaw/> and <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kionasmith/2019/09/20/40-year-old-radar-data-shows-antarcticas-thwaites-glacier-is-melting-faster-than-we-realized/#45adb4fe4548> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)