

Jesus tells this parable to the disciples. He is training them to be stewards of his “property,” of the kingdom/commonwealth of God. This is Jesus’ version of a management training seminar.

The same Greek word employed to describe the prodigal son’s *squandering* of his wealth is used to describe the charges against the manger/steward. The term has the connotation of careless or irresponsible spending. The master, unlike the forgiving father, dismisses the steward without allowing him to offer an explanation or bothering to verify the charges.

The manager considers restitution for his embezzlement, but he’s unwilling to resort to manual labor, and he’s too proud to ask for charity. So, he does what he was originally accused of doing, but on a much larger scale. He visits all the vendors who owe his employer money and persuades them to falsify their invoices so that it appears they owe the company less than they do.

He does this in order to develop a quid pro quo relationship: if he does the vendors a favor, then they’ll be more likely to do him a favor. Maybe they will give him a job once he is fired. If they don’t, he can reveal their trade secret: they falsified their invoices.

I suspect the disciples were as surprised as we are by Jesus response to the fraudster: Jesus praises him! Does Jesus want us to save ourselves by deceiving and cheating others? Or does Jesus think being stewards of the commonwealth of God requires a shrewdness comparable to the shrewdness exercised by the most cunning business executive?

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Fred Craddock writes of the Christian bias against words like “shrewdness” and “cleverness.” The words have so commonly been associated with self-serving behavior, if not ethically questionable behavior, that it is difficult to speak of a “shrewd saint.”

But the problem, Craddock observes, is not with the behavior but with the anti-intellectual bias in the church and the unwillingness to conceive of thinking, especially thinking critically, as a vital Christian activity. This despite being commanded to love God with all our minds!

In praising the manager, Jesus is not praising his dishonesty; rather, he is praising his shrewdness and creativity. He’s praising the manager’s ability to think critically. Jesus believes his disciples need to learn this skill; Paul wants Timothy to learn it as well. Timothy was a young management trainee of Paul’s. Paul tells him God intends all human beings to be *saved* and to come to a *full knowledge of truth*.

Critical thinking is critical to our well-being. Misinformation about COVID and about vaccines led many to behave in ways that jeopardized their health and the lives of others. Disinformation

about the election has led to jail time for some and death for others. Heresy distorts the faith and corrupts the practice of the church.

I heard an interview this week with a conservative church leader very concerned about the “Watchman Decree.” I never heard of it. It is recited in a number of churches like a confession of faith. “Watchman” refers to people who pledge to watch over the nation and make sure it’s run according to conservative Christian principles. It reads, in part:

- we, the Church, are God’s *governing* Body on earth
- we have been given *legal power* from heaven and now exercise our authority
- we are God’s ambassadors and spokespeople *over* the earth
- through the power of God, we are *the world influencers*
- because of our covenant with God, we are equipped and delegated by Him to *destroy* every attempted advance of the enemy.

What follows is a number of decrees and declarations, including one for each branch of government. The judicial system’s rulings are to be biblical. It concludes with a decree that AMERICA SHALL BE SAVED!

It takes just a smidgen of reflection to know the god served by this decree is not the One revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but power. It takes but a wee bit of critical thinking to know this decree is not about faith, hope, and love, but about domination. It takes only a moments consideration to know this decree claims divine sanction for violence against its enemies.

Christian nationalism is a heresy which will destroy both church and country. If you think I exaggerate, please read a little history of Germany in the 1930’s when the church colluded with the National Socialist.

Jesus was not naive. He knew shrewdness, critical thinking, cleverness even, was an essential skill for stewards of the commonwealth of God. I think of Pope John Paul II. The night he died, the President of Poland, Alexander Kwasniewski, declared “We wouldn’t have had a free Poland without him.” And, beyond that, there would have been no collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe.

For the health and well being of all, the children of light must become, not more pious, not more patriotic, but shrewder than the children of this age.