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Just What was Jesus Saying? Two Interpretations of the Parable of the Shrewd Manager*

Bruno Dyck, Frederick A. Starke, and Calvin Dueck — University of Manitoba

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Abstract

Many Bible passages have been applied to the practice of management. One particular passage — the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16: 1-15) — is conspicuous by its absence. Why is this parable, where the central character is a manager, rarely referred to? In this paper, we interpret the parable of the shrewd manager from both a Conventional materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view, and from its Radical counterpoint-of-view. Readers are challenged to consider the implications of the different interpretations of the parable and to think clearly about their own moral-point-of-view of management.

Christian scholars have drawn from a wide variety of biblical passages as they think about and develop management theory and practice. For example, more than 1500 biblical passages were cited in

the first decade of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business (JBIB)*. Of these, the five most frequently cited passages (Genesis 1: 27-28; Matthew 5: 13-16; Romans 12: 1-2; I. Corinthians 13: 12-13; and John 13: 12-17) emphasize four common themes: 1) the differences between God's way of managing versus the way of the world; 2) a call for new ways of thinking in order to transform the ways of the world; 3) the identification of servant leadership as a way for managers to manifest the ways of God; and 4) an emphasis on the importance of humility and nonjudgmental discernment (Dyck & Starke, 2005).

While it is helpful to examine common themes among frequently cited passages, it is also instructive to examine passages that are conspicuous by their absence. Accordingly, in this paper we focus our attention on one particular

passage — the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16: 1-15) — that is rarely mentioned in the literature that attempts to link biblical teachings with management theory and practice. Despite *JBIB*'s explicit focus on the integration of biblical teachings with management theory and practice, none of the articles published in the first decade of *JBIB* cite this particular parable.¹

This paper is organized as follows: First, we review some of the literature that informs our analysis of the parable of the shrewd manager. Second, we analyze the parable from two perspectives: first from a Conventional materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view, and then from a Radical counterpoint-of-view where materialism and individualism do not trump other forms of well-being. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our analysis for management theory and practice.

Materialism, Individualism, Moral-Points-of-View and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Dyck and Schroeder (2005) note that in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max

Weber (1958, original 1904) identified two hallmarks of modern management theory and practice: individualism and materialism.

Individualism can be traced back to the idea of calling introduced during the Reformation. Rather than having salvation determined by the church (e.g., via confession to a priest, or taking the holy sacraments), the preachers of the Reformation argued that it depended on how *individuals* lived out the calling, or vocation, that God had given to them. In particular, there was emphasis on disciplined work habits in their jobs. Weber also linked *materialism* to this emphasis on calling, suggesting that preachers of the day argued that religion leads to hard-working and frugal individuals, which in turn cannot help but result in material riches. Solomon and Hanson (1983) suggest that this link between material wealth and salvation provided unprecedented legitimacy to the pursuit of profit.

These two dimensions — individualism and materialism — give rise to four “ideal-types” of management, where the Conventional ideal-type is characterized by high individualism and high materialism, and its Radical

counterpart is characterized by low individualism and low materialism. It is clear that Weber does not consider the Conventional type to be “ideal” in any normative sense. Rather, he uses the term “ideal-type” to denote a proto-typical managerial style or organizational form. In contrast to Conventional management, Radical management does not place primary emphasis on materialism, individualism, efficiency, productivity, or competitiveness, nor does the goal of profit trump other legitimate goals. Instead, alongside financial well-being, Radical managers promote spiritual, physical, social, aesthetic, and intellectual well-being (Burch, 2000). Dyck and Schroeder (2005) note that the Radical perspective is not inconsistent with Mennonite/Anabaptist theology. Dyck and Weber (2005) examine a data set of Christian managers and find that, as hypothesized: a) materialism and individualism are indeed independent constructs and can be used to form a 2 x 2 matrix; and b) managers who are more materialist-individualist tend to place greater emphasis on conventional management virtues (specialization, centralization, formalization and standardization) and less

emphasis on radical management virtues (sensitization, dignification, participation and experimentation) than their less materialist-individualist counterparts.

Weber's own dislike for the emphasis on materialism that characterizes the secularized Protestant Ethic moral-point-of-view is captured in his well-known metaphor of the “iron cage:”

The care for external goods [italics added] should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate has decreed that the cloak should become an *iron cage*. [italics added] ... material goods have gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. (1958, p. 181)

Weber argues that, just as the prophets of the religious Reformation helped to usher in the materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view that underpins Conventional management theory and practice, so also we now need new prophets to help us escape the iron cage that the materialist-individualist

paradigm has given rise to. Charles Perrow (1985), a leading critical management theorist, challenges readers to describe what organization and management theory might look like if it were based on a radical interpretation of the teachings of Jesus — the same Jesus, ironically, whose teachings were originally invoked (Weber, 1958) as a basis for the Conventional materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view.

In challenging readers to reconsider the biblical teachings of Jesus, Perrow implies that if we read the biblical record from a Conventional moral-point-of-view, and if we expect to see Jesus' teachings as supportive of this point of view, then our interpretations of Jesus' teachings will be consistent with our expectations. However, if we view Jesus' teachings from a Radical moral-point-of-view, we may be surprised to find that our interpretations are qualitatively different.² While many *JBIB* readers may lean toward a radical view — one that suggests that Jesus' teachings point to a way of managing our lives that permits escape from the "iron cage" associated with the status quo — interpretations of Jesus' parables are often

implicitly premised on the former materialist-individualist view.

Expectations generated by a given moral-point-of-view can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, one which creates the very behavior it is predicting. The notion that our moral-points-of-view act as a self-fulfilling prophecy that influence how we interpret a text like the Bible is also evident in the larger management literature, where leading scholars are pointing out that "bad" management theory and practice have resulted from two underlying, self-fulfilling assumptions: (1) people inherently behave in ways that are consistent with the maximizing assumptions of classical economic theory (i.e., materialism), and (2) people are self-interested and primarily motivated to compete and get ahead (i.e., individualism). Many writers note that the dominant management paradigm, with its unquestioned acceptance of maximizing shareholder value, is built on a foundation of individualism and materialism that has led to some very unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecies in terms of the way that people treat one another (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone, 2004; Margolis & Walsh, 2003). For

example, Ferraro et al. (2005, p. 11, 13) note that economic theory — the “reigning queen of the social sciences” — is characterized by an emphasis on self-interest and extrinsic rewards. They identify several mechanisms by which social science theories become self-fulfilling, thereby creating the very behavior they predict. A similar line of thinking is pursued by Ghoshal (2005), who observes that an “ideology-based gloomy vision” (i.e., the pessimistic view of human nature), when combined with the notion of self-fulfilling prophecies, has contributed to problematic management behaviors that we have witnessed during recent years.

In sum, Weber argues that current management theory and practice was originally grounded on a particular (Protestant Ethic) interpretation of biblical teachings, characterized by its emphasis on materialism and individualism. This materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view has become secularized and serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy that, among other things, leaves us captured in an iron cage. Although himself an agnostic, Weber recognizes the importance of developing a religious basis to develop radical management theory and practice

that permits escape from the iron cage (see also MacIntyre, 1981). Perrow (1985, p. 22) even notes that it is possible to ground this liberating non-conventional approach to management theory and practice explicitly on the teachings of “the Man from Galilee and his radical social doctrine.” This challenge is consistent with the common themes of current scholarly work that integrate biblical teachings and management theory and practice, which were noted at the beginning of this paper (Dyck & Starke, 2005).

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager: Two Interpretations

Jesus' parables have proven particularly useful for applying biblical teachings to the practice of management because they were designed to teach certain values as they applied to everyday life and work (Tucker, 1987, p. 44; see also Moxnes, 1988, p. 56, 62; Oakman, 1986). Parables help to put flesh-and-bones to what the Kingdom of God³ is like, and how it differs from the ways of this world. In this way, parables help to “ground ideas of local resistance [to the status quo] in specific empirical contexts” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999, p. 206).

Moreover, if we think of parables as metaphors of what Godly living is like on-the-ground, then a parable can “become the vehicle through which paradigms become actualized in the mind of the theorist” (Burrell, 1999, p. 397; see also Morgan, 1988).

As noted earlier, many writers who apply biblical principles to the practice of management have often ignored the parable of the shrewd manager. Why might this be so? Perhaps because it is one of the “most difficult” (Capon, 2002, p. 302), “puzzling” (Herzog, 1994, p. 233) and “notoriously difficult” (Liefeld, 1984, p. 986) of Jesus’ parables to comprehend. This difficulty in interpretation is evident in the variety of headings that are used in different Bible translations for this text. There is wide agreement that the central character in the parable is a “manager” (NRSV, NIV, Good News), sometimes called a “steward” (NASB, New Jerusalem Bible). However, there is considerable disagreement as to the adjective used to describe this manager. In many translations he is clearly a shady figure, called “dishonest” (NRSV, KJV) and “unrighteous” (NASB). In other translations the emphasis is on the manager’s

cleverness, and he is called “shrewd” (NIV, Good News) or “crafty” (NJB). For the remainder of this paper, we will call him a shrewd manager because as we shall see, that label seems appropriate when analyzing both the Conventional, or mainstream, and the Radical interpretations of this passage.

To better analyze the meaning of the parable and to grasp what Jesus was saying, it is helpful to first understand the role of a manager in Jesus’ time. The word used in this passage is *oikonomos* and describes someone who managed the farm estate for an absentee owner. According to Aubert (1994) managing an estate was considered beneath the dignity of the landowner. Consequently, the job of managing a farm was given over to a trusted slave, or perhaps on rare occasions, to a freeman. It should also be noted that a farm was considered to be a safe investment; a place for steady but not spectacular returns on investment. Since the owner did not get involved in the day-to-day affairs of managing the farm, there was considerable latitude for dishonest managers with ambition to amass their own wealth, as long as the owner received some steady

income. This situation was so pervasive that the Latin equivalent term for manager (*institores*) had “acquired a derogatory meaning and has a flavor of greed, luxury and debauchery” (Aubert, 1994, p. 17). So, although social norms required nobility to entrust their farms to managers, it is interesting to note that:

The typical *institor* was viewed by the nobility as a necessary disease to be contained within strict limits. This was mainly achieved by social segregation, the upper classes pretending to abstain from potentially very profitable activities which became the preserve of lower classes. (Aubert, 1994, p. 24)

This attitude towards managers must surely have been shared by the lowest classes who were exploited by unjust managers. The manager thus found himself caught in the middle, being despised by both the rich and the poor. By using a manager, the rich person could claim full obedience to the law while implicitly requiring behavior from the managers that they could claim not to condone. The poor, on the other hand, suffered under those managers who

lived up to their reputation as agents of injustice and greed.

These background facts should be kept in mind as we present two alternative interpretations of the parable, first from the Conventional management perspective, and then from a Radical management perspective. Table 1 presents the biblical text and a brief overview of our two interpretations. We encourage readers to think critically about these two interpretations and to come to their own conclusions about which moral-point-of-view is most helpful in applying Christian principles to the practice of management. Readers should keep in mind that we offer these two as ideal-types or “extremes” — we are not arguing that the two moral-points-of-view are the only ones for readers to choose among, nor are we arguing that these are necessarily the best ones with which to interpret the parable of the shrewd manager. We do, however, think that juxtaposing these two points of view gives us new insights into what the parable might be saying.

TABLE 1: Parable of the Shrewd Manager, with Conventional and Radical Interpretations

I. Body of parable (Luke 16: 1-8)	Conventional interpretation	Radical interpretation
a) Manager is accused: ¹ "Jesus told his disciples: 'There was a rich man whose manager was accused [<i>diaballo</i>] of wasting [<i>diaskorpizon</i>] his possessions.	A manager fails to safeguard a rich man's financial self-interests.	A manager purposefully disperses a rich man's resources.
b) Rich man's first response: ² So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'	The outraged rich man fires the manager.	The rich man strips title from manager and asks for an accounting.
c) Manager's response: ³ The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg — ⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' ⁵ So he called in each of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' ⁷ Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'	The manager does an instrumental cost-benefit analysis of his options, and decides that it is in his own financial self-interest to unilaterally reduce the amounts that debtors owe to the rich man (thereby the manager ingratiates himself to the debtors).	The manager does some soul-searching, notes his personal financial poverty, and purposefully continues to scatter the rich man's resources (thereby cementing his radical reputation and bringing honor to the rich man).
d) Rich man's second response: ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager [<i>oikonomon tes adikos</i>] because he acted shrewdly.	The rich man admires the manager for out-witting him.	The rich man admires the manager for acting righteously and bringing honor to him.

II. Meaning of parable (Luke 16: 9-15)	Conventional interpretation	Radical interpretation
<p>a) Jesus' lesson: <i>For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are people of the light.</i> ⁹<i>I tell you, use worldly wealth [mamona tes adikos] to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.</i> ¹⁰<i>Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest [adikos] with very little will also be dishonest [adikos] with much.</i> ¹¹<i>So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth (adikos mamona), who will trust you with true riches?</i> ¹²<i>And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?</i> ¹³<i>No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."</i></p>	<p>Christians should be just as shrewd in managing God's true riches as the manager was in maximizing his own financial self-interests. In part, this means being trustworthy (by conventional standards) in managing someone else's property, and thereby showing that they serve God rather than money.</p>	<p>If you cannot be trusted to purposefully manage to "scatter" (mere) worldly wealth to those who need it (even in the role of an employee of the very rich), how can you be expected to be a good manager of God's true riches? In their "scattering," managers reveal who their true master is.</p>
<p>b) Listeners' response: ¹⁴<i>The Pharisees, who loved money heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.</i></p>	<p>Lovers of money equate money with true riches.</p>	<p>Lovers of money feel threatened by Jesus' teaching.</p>
<p>c) Jesus' response: ¹⁵<i>He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.</i></p>	<p>Don't love money more than God (but, of course, don't "waste" money either — duty to "conventional" justice).</p>	<p>Woe to teachers whose love for money trumps the obvious value of its purposeful scattering.</p>

Interpretation of the Parable From a Conventional Moral-Point-of-View

A Conventional interpretation of this parable starts from the assumption that the rich man wanted the manager to maximize the rich man's financial wealth. Any actions by the manager that failed to safeguard the rich man's possessions would be deemed to be wasteful, dishonest, and unrighteous. From this materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view, the rich man is outraged to hear that the manager has squandered his resources; he therefore fires the manager.

From a Conventional moral-point-of-view, the manager's subsequent behavior is not surprising, given that he is about to lose his job and that his future job prospects look dim (bad reputation as a manager, unable to do physical work, unwilling to beg). The manager acts in his own financial self-interest, and "buys" himself some friends by unilaterally lowering the amounts of money owed by others to the rich man.⁴ Although this seems to cement his reputation as a dishonest manager, he is hoping that he will later be able

to sponge off the debtors whom he has helped.

Then comes the first surprise in the parable. When the rich man finds out about the deals that the manager has struck, he commends the manager for acting shrewdly. This unexpected response from the rich man may have occurred because he was impressed by the resourcefulness of his former manager. Put another way, the rich man grudgingly admires someone who can beat him at his own game and is impressed at how shrewd the manager was in dealing with people like him.

The second surprise comes when Jesus does not condemn either the manager (for his behavior) or the rich man (for praising the manager's unjust [*adikos*] actions). Instead, Jesus praises the manager, and encourages listeners to do likewise: "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (v. 9). From a Conventional perspective, it seems inconceivable that Jesus actually meant that we should manage other people's possessions in a way that harms (i.e., does

not maximize) their financial self-interest.

In trying to deal with this apparent contradiction, commentators who interpret this parable often argue that Jesus was not commending the managerial *practice* of wasting an employer's wealth; rather, they argue that Jesus was emphasizing the *idea* of managers being shrewd for God (Lockyer, 1963). Thus, in terms of the Conventional moral-point-of-view, the parable is interpreted to suggest that, just as worldly managers shrewdly use material wealth to protect their own financial self-interest, so also should God-fearing managers creatively use material wealth to achieve God's goals. Chewing et al. (1990, p. 97) illustrate this approach when they say that "Jesus used this story to suggest that Christians should be just as creative and clever in working in the world for kingdom values as this manager was in taking care of his own needs."

Another problem that this parable poses for Conventional interpreters is evident in the very strong "either-or" statements that Jesus makes about money versus God ("either you will love the

one and hate the other," and "you cannot serve both God and money"). Taken at face value, these harsh statements seem to contradict the Conventional view, which holds that managers should work to maximize owners' financial self-interests (e.g., many managers who hold to Weber's version of the Protestant Ethic assume that there is no conflict between loving God versus managing to maximize riches). To address this concern, the Conventional interpretation suggests that Jesus is condemning a narrow segment of people like the sneering Pharisees, who love money *more* than they love God. In this view, Jesus uses the strong "either-or" language merely as a way of emphasizing the importance of loving God more than loving money. As a result, managers still can serve owners' financial self-interests, so long as they do it out of a love for God (e.g., evident in the idea of "calling" associated with the Protestant Ethic) rather than out of love for money.

A contemporary Conventional example. What might a modern Conventional manager look like? Consider Jack Welch,

the former CEO of General Electric, who is the most often-cited manager in leading management textbooks (Dyck & Starke, 2005). He has been called a visionary “prophet” (Litz, 2003, p. 671) and a “modern saint” whose “miracles” have inspired a host of “apostles” (Hegele & Kieser, 2001, p. 298). Under Welch’s leadership, GE experienced over two decades of consecutive annual dividend increases, a near-perfect record of ever-higher profits, and a greater than one thousand percent increase in the value of its shares (O’Boyle, 1998). He was voted the Most Respected CEO four times by *Industry Week*, named the “manager of the century” as well as “America’s toughest boss” by *Fortune* (O’Boyle, 1998, p. 83), and called the “gold standard against which other CEOs are measured” by *Business Week* (Hegele & Kieser, 2001). Like the shrewd manager in the parable, Welch comes highly commended!

Consider the following specific example where Welch’s actions are somewhat akin to those of the shrewd manager in the parable, who was accused of

wasting his master’s possessions. One of GE’s main “masters” is the U.S. government, GE’s largest customer accounting for nearly 20% of its revenues. Unfortunately, GE earned “the dubious distinction of leading corporate criminal among the Pentagon’s one hundred largest defense contractors” (O’Boyle, 1998, p. 266). Welch’s GE was both accused and found guilty of “wasting” the resources of the government (GE’s “master”). In 1985 GE was indicted on a Minuteman missile contract and then suspended from doing business with the U.S. government. However, in this case Welch fared better than the manager in the parable; he met with the Defense Secretary and got the suspension lifted within two days. Like the shrewd manager in the parable, Welch was good at “buying” friends, for example, by “exhorting GE executives to give more money to the corporate political action committee so that GE could engender more goodwill with friends in Congress” (O’Boyle, 1998, p. 270). Welch enjoyed formidable connections inside the Beltway.

By placing managers like Welch front-and-center in our textbooks and classrooms, we are essentially approving of his Conventionally-defined shrewd actions and telling student to “go and do likewise.”

Interpretation of the Parable From a Radical Moral-Point-of-View

A Radical interpretation of this parable is based on two assumptions: (1) that there is nothing inherently righteous or commendable about managers who maximize the wealth of people who are already rich, and (2) that the manager is commended by Jesus because he is actually modeling truly righteous behavior (even though that behavior is clearly “dishonest” from a Conventional moral-point-of-view). Most readers will not find the first assumption problematic, but some may at first have trouble accepting the second assumption.

A key issue is how the words *diaballo* and *diaskorpizon* are translated (see Luke 16: 1). The term *diaballo* is often translated as slander or false accusation. In the context of this parable the

word could serve as a hint that the charges against the manager are false. However, the word that is more important to the meaning of the passage is *diaskorpizon*. Most Bibles translate the word as “wasting” or as “squandering.”⁵ The image is that of a meaningless waste of resources. However, it is striking that in other Bible passages *diaskorpizon* is usually translated as “scattering,” and is never translated in the same pejorative manner that translators have given to it in this passage.⁶ For example, in the parable of the talents, the master gathers where he did not “scatter” (Matt. 25:24; see also Deut. 9:4; Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27; Luke 1:51; John 11:52; Acts 5:37).

The meaning of this parable changes considerably when the accusation against the manager is translated as “scattering” instead of as “wasting.” The manager’s behavior then becomes more purposeful since the word *diaskorpizon* carries with it the connotation of deliberate action, as opposed to scattering due to carelessness. Thus, we could say that the manager was accused of deliberately dispersing the owner’s money in a way that

some others found objectionable, hence their complaint to the owner. Whereas “wasting” implies that the rich man’s resources are being used in a way that benefits no one, “scattering” or dispersing the resources implies that others may be benefiting from the redistribution. And, as we learn in the parable, this dispersing of resources does not maximize the rich man’s financial self-interest (or the manager’s, for that matter) but may enhance other forms of well-being and, more importantly, fulfills the righteous requirements of the Law.

If the rich man believed that the manager was “wasting” his resources, as per a Conventional interpretation, then why does the rich man not *immediately* fire the manager? Rather, the manager is given some additional time to further “scatter” the rich man’s resources. What the rich man does not realize at first, and which we as listeners are cued into by the manager’s speech — in which he indicates extreme poverty if he loses his job — is that the manager has not been using his master’s wealth for his own personal gain. If the man-

ager had followed conventional wisdom and unlawfully taken money out of the estate for himself, then he would not be facing such dire financial straits.

Furthermore, the rich man commends the manager for being *oikonomos tes adikos* (literally, a manager of unrighteousness or dishonesty). This unusual manner of speaking begs the question: What exactly is being called unrighteous or dishonest? Is it the manager (a conventional interpretation), or is it the larger socio-economic system that he is part of (evident, for example, in the unrighteousness of those who would call him to account for his scattering). If it was the manager who was dishonest, then why not use a more common expression such as *adikos oikonomos* (literally, an unjust manager). Clarification comes by way of another unusual expression. In explaining the meaning of the story, Jesus urges his listeners to use *mamona tes adikos* (literally, money of unrighteousness) to gain friends.

Taken together, these phraseologies (awkward from a Conventional view) raise an important question: What is the unrighteousness that both the

manager and the money are a part of? From a Radical perspective, it is the unrighteousness of a socio-economic system which rejects the scattering of resources for friendship and the common good, and denigrates managers who challenge such a system. Such an “unrighteous” economic system demands that goods and services be paid for and properly accounted for, regardless of who needs them. Such a system creates an “iron cage” that both secular and biblically-grounded scholars long to escape.⁷ By reducing the debt of oil and wheat (which were necessities of life), the manager was, even if unintentionally, circumventing the economic system and the systemic prejudicial views of himself in the role of manager, in favor of true justice and mercy. This radical manager is commended for modeling the character of a righteous man in his seemingly audacious transactions.

Moreover, by scattering resources the manager also brought honor to the rich man who would be seen as someone who is concerned about righteousness. Landry and May (2000, p. 201) point out

that “the manager’s actions make his master appear to be generous, charitable, and law-abiding.” This would have been an important consideration for the owner, because, as scholars point out: “In both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies of New Testament times, honor was just as important as wealth — if not more so — to a man’s social status” (Landry & May, 2000, p. 208). So, maximizing the financial return on his possessions was likely not the only priority for the rich man. Indeed, it seems that honor comes when actions subvert the Conventional financial self-interest view:

While some modern [Conventional?] people see it as unbelievable that a rich man would praise an employee for giving away his money, almost every scholar who employs the honor-shame paradigm would dispute this. Many sociologically-oriented critics have pointed to the frequency with which the rich engaged in benefactions and the spectacular amounts often involved as proof of their claim that honor is more

important than money.
(Landry & May, 2000,
p. 304)

Thus, from a Radical interpretation it makes sense for Jesus to echo the rich man's praise of the manager. Jesus is saying that we *should* be like the manager, who acted in ways that were "dishonest" from a Conventional socio-economic systems perspective.⁸ Jesus asks, if we can't be trusted to share *worldly* wealth (*adikos mamona*) — that is, if we constantly seek to maximize our own financial self-interest — then how can we be trusted to manage *true* riches? A Radical interpretation suggests that Jesus was actually encouraging his listeners to literally follow the example of the manager and to redistribute worldly wealth in a non-wealth-maximizing way, that is, in a way that seems "unjust" (*adikos*) from a Conventional point of view.⁹ Such distributions would benefit others (particularly debtors and the poor), would win friends, and would nurture community. All of these outcomes *are* consistent with Jesus' teachings. So, although the manager's scattering is viewed

as "wasteful" and "unjust" from the Conventional perspective, it is commendable when viewed from a Radical perspective.

You cannot serve God if you are fixated on trying to *maximize* profits. Whoever can be trusted to use mere worldly wealth in a Radical way can also be trusted with true wealth, but whoever blindly follows the Conventional mantra of self-interested wealth-maximization cannot be trusted to nurture interpersonal relationships, build community, and gain true riches. A society has true riches (e.g., friendship, consideration, trust, and community) if it manages to disperse wealth to those who need it, even if such scattering may be deemed "wasteful" and "unjust" from a Conventional perspective.

Finally, the sneering response that Jesus receives from the Pharisees — who were key teachers of the day — is entirely consistent with a Radical interpretation.¹⁰ Woe to today's management teachers and practitioners who justify their theories and actions by trusting in a materialist-individualist view — what is highly-valued among people is detested by God. Woe

to lovers of money who sneer at Radical views—God sees the underpinning moral-point-of-view that we use to justify our wealth management. God wants us to manage our lives by deliberately and purposefully scattering resources, even though this goes against conventional wisdom. From a Radical perspective, the parable points to an understanding of management theory and practice that differs substantially from what is found in standard textbooks.¹¹

A contemporary Radical example. Aaron Feuerstein, CEO of Malden Mills Industries in Lawrence, Massachusetts, illustrates certain aspects of the Radical shrewd manager (Dyck & Starke, 2005). When most of the Malden Mills factory burnt to the ground in 1995, the then seventy-year-old Feuerstein could easily have taken the \$300 million insurance money and enjoyed retirement. Or, he could have taken the advice of (Conventional) advisors who counseled him to follow the trend of moving his operations south, where labor costs were lower. Instead, Feuerstein, who found guidance in the Torah,

decided to deliberately “scatter”¹² his resources in his community by rebuilding the factory on the same site, even though the insurance covered only three quarters of the reconstruction costs. He also voluntarily kept all three thousand employees on the payroll during reconstruction: “I simply felt an obligation to the entire community that relies on our presence here in Lawrence; it would have been unconscionable to put three thousand people out on the streets” (Batstone, 2003, p. 133). His willingness to “scatter” resources to nurture community attracted a lot of media attention: “I got a lot of publicity. And I don’t think it speaks well for our times. ... At the time in America of our greatest prosperity, the god of money has taken over to an extreme” (The Mensch of Malden Mills, 2003).

The contrast between Conventional and Radical shrewdness was evident in 2003, after Malden Mills had been forced into bankruptcy (due to successive warm winters and cheaper overseas goods)¹³ and was now owned by a group of creditors led (ironically) by GE,

who was looking to sell it. Again flying in the face of conventional wisdom, radically-shrewd Feuerstein tried to buy back the company and keep jobs in Lawrence, one of the poorest cities in America, in a deal where his partner Winn Cos would develop 600 units of housing on land owned by Malden Mills next to its new state-of-the-art factory. However, the Feuerstein-Winn offer was deemed “far too low to be acceptable” according to a spokesperson for the conventionally-shrewd GE: despite the socio-economic merits of the offer, the deal would compromise GE’s ability to maximize profits because it meant that GE would get \$2.7 million less than the asking price (Bailey, 2003).

Discussion

In this paper, we observed that: (1) management scholars generally accept Weber’s argument that Conventional management theory was initially underpinned by a specific (Protestant Ethic) interpretation of the biblical text; (2) the materialist-individualist management theory and practice that characterizes modern management is being

increasingly linked to problematic societal outcomes (e.g., the iron cage); and (3) scholars are beginning to look to the biblical narrative to underpin a Radical counterpoint-of-view which will serve as an alternative to the Conventional status quo (e.g., Dyck & Starke, 2005; Perrow, 1985; Weber, 1958).

In developing these themes, our paper provided two interpretations of the parable of the shrewd manager, one from a materialist-individualist perspective and the other from its Radical counterpoint. Because a Conventional interpretation starts with the assumption that any use of resources that fails to maximize the financial self-interests of the rich man is deemed to be wasteful, and because Jesus seems to commend precisely such behavior, the parable has been difficult to reconcile with a materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view. Conventional interpreters are to be commended for their clever interpretation that the parable is saying that, just as the manager was clever in managing the rich man’s resources to meet the manager’s own financial self-

interests, Christians should be as clever in managing God's true riches for the glory of God. Unfortunately, because such a Conventional interpretation suggests that readers should (obviously) not follow the example of the shrewd manager, readers are left with little practical guidance about how to go about managing God's resources for God's glory. Presumably Conventional managers believe that they are glorifying God by honestly managing to maximize the financial interests of shareholders. However, because such a view is not inconsistent with secular Conventional management theory, there is little left to differentiate the ways of the Kingdom with Conventional management theory.

In one sense, the "punch line" of both the Conventional and Radical interpretations is similar—don't love money more than you love God—but because the Radical interpretation sees the shrewd manager's actual behavior as exemplary, it provides much more direction as to how to manage to put this sentiment into practice. From a Radical perspective, Jesus is interpreted as

saying that managing according to the Kingdom is characterized by a purposeful redistribution of resources. Such a radical teaching has all sorts of implications for developing an approach to management that differs substantially from conventional wisdom and challenges today's dominant socio-economic systems. Listeners are driven to think about what kind of redistribution is God-pleasing. For example, for whom should debt be reduced? By how much? When? The parable seems to suggest that it is acceptable for wealth to be distributed unequally throughout society (e.g., the rich man is still rich at the end), but when are the rich too rich, and the poor too poor? How can wealthy people promote wealth-creation among poor people? And so on.

In sum, a Radical interpretation points to a way of managing that is qualitatively different from conventional wisdom. In stark contrast to a Conventional interpretation, a Radical interpretation challenges status quo socio-economic systems, and calls for much work in rethinking management theory and practice. Moreover, it shows what

Kingdom management looks like in a specific empirical context.

Societal Implications

Because it flies in the face of conventional wisdom, some readers may find the Radical interpretation controversial. They may also be reluctant to act on it. Others may agree with it in principle, but be inclined to dismiss the Radical approach as too idealistic to be of practical value in the rough-and-tumble real world of everyday management. However, the Radical approach may have more to commend it as practical than we might first think. For example, a growing body of scholarly research shows that a materialist-individualist approach to life contributes to significant negative outcomes. These include a lower satisfaction with life (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser, 2003; Kasser & Ryan, 2001), poorer interpersonal relationships (Richins & Dawson, 1992), an increase in mental disorders (Cohen & Cohen, 1995), environmental degradation (Brown, 1998; Thurow, 1996; McCarty & Shrum, 2001), social injustice (Rees, 2002), interpersonal

manipulation, and less connectedness with others, less generosity, less empathy for others and greater conflict (for an excellent review, see Kasser, 2003).

Moreover, society seems to be ready for a more Radical approach to managing our everyday lives. In a recent survey, 93% of respondents thought that “there is too much emphasis on working and making money, and not enough emphasis on family and community” (New American Dream, 2004). More than half of those responding have opted not to maximize their material wealth in order to facilitate other forms of well-being (e.g., social, physical, ecological, aesthetic, spiritual or intellectual). Idealistic perhaps, but Jesus did teach his listeners to pray and work to manage relationships here on earth “as it is in Heaven.”

Implications for Business Schools

We have already seen how a growing number of management scholars are lamenting the materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view that underpins Conventional management theory and practice. Pattison (1997)

argues that management has become a *religion* which preaches that managers should put their faith in maximizing efficiency, competitiveness, profitability, and productivity. The leading “priests” and “prophets” of this Conventional faith are management professors and practitioners, and business schools serve as the “churches” where adherents learn about the basics of the faith. A study by the Aspen Institute (2002) found that “the assumption that the primary, if not the sole, purpose of the firm is to maximize wealth for shareholders has come to dominate the curricula of business schools and the thinking of future managers” (Margolis & Walsh, 2003, p. 271). This dominance of Conventional management may be changing, given the growing interest in corporate social responsibility and business ethics. Also, it is unclear whether these Conventional views are as prevalent in smaller religious liberal arts colleges, where instructors may be more likely to reflect the views such as those described in Alford and Naughton (2001), who recognize that financial criteria

are not the only ones that are important. In any case, the most widely-used management textbooks in all schools continue to emphasize the maximization of shareholder value.

The Conventional management assumptions contained in widely-used textbooks have had a definite impact on the students who attend business schools. Even though surveys among management students in our university indicate that a majority aspire to be Radical managers, their preferences are at odds with standard business education. A longitudinal study of how the values of MBA students change between the time they enter the program and the time they graduate found that they became more *materialistic* as they proceeded through their program. Graduates placed more emphasis on enjoying a comfortable life, pleasure, and being capable, and less emphasis on non-materialistic pursuits like wisdom, inner harmony, or a world of beauty. These students also became more *individualistic*, placing less emphasis on developing true friendships, world peace, family and national security, being

helpful, loving, and polite, and instead placing more emphasis on being independent and enjoying social recognition (Krishnan, 2003).

Perhaps the time has come to re-think the business school curriculum.

Implications for Readers

As noted earlier, we are not arguing that the two moral-points-of-view that we have described here are the only ones or the best ones for readers to choose among. The important message of our paper is not in its details, and we do not want readers to lose sight of the forest because of the trees. Our larger message has three interrelated parts. First, everyone has a moral-point-of-view. There is no such thing as value-neutral management theory or practice. All theory and practice are implicitly based upon certain assumptions. Conventional management theory is based on a materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view that values things like maximizing efficiency, productivity, competitiveness, and profitability. These are value-laden assumptions that

beg scrutiny. Why should competitiveness be valued over cooperativeness? Why should efficiency be valued over relationships? Why should shareholder self-interest be valued over society's interests?

Second, our moral-points-of-view tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. In this paper we have demonstrated that a person's moral-point-of-view influences his or her interpretation of the Bible and of management behavior. For example, from a materialist-individualist perspective, managers like Jack Welch may be seen as heroes, while managers like Aaron Feuerstein may be seen as fools. But from a Radical perspective, the social and environmental costs created by Welch's profit-maximizing strategic actions are bad, while the community-building facilitated by Feuerstein is good. Our moral point of view affects what we see.

This argument is not new, but it is often forgotten. As a result we are often seduced into non-critically adopting the dominant socio-economic systems as our own. This is particularly problematic for

management scholars because the materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view is so well entrenched. So strong is the Conventional hold on our thinking that, for example, even enlightened scholars in the corporate social responsibility movement feel compelled to defend it on the grounds that corporate social responsibility is good for the bottom-line (Margolis & Walsh, 2003).

Third, to be a moral person one must be aware of one's own moral-point-of-view and then act upon it. In this paper, we have offered two moral-points-of-view. Since there may be as many specific moral-points-of-view as there are readers, we are not suggesting that readers must choose between one of these two. However, we *are* exhorting readers to carefully consider what their moral-point-of-view is. Failure to do so prevents us from being fully moral persons, and leaves us vulnerable to the dominant (and often unstated) moral-point-of-view that underpins the status quo. Sire (1997) makes a similar point when he notes that we need to live an examined life and be aware of

how our worldview influences our perceptions and interpretations of the world.

Conclusion

As management scholars, we have a responsibility to help our students become increasingly moral persons. This means (1) allowing them to see how different moral-points-of-view influence how they perceive their world, (2) helping them to understand the implications of the various moral-points-of-view for management theory and practice, and (3) giving them the necessary tools to discern where they stand. This is a dynamic and on-going process, and our views will change and grow as we discern in community what is good and bad. May we scatter these resources widely.

Bruno Dyck, Frederick A. Starke, and Calvin Dueck

University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
CANADA R3T 5V4

Endnotes

¹Three authors *did* briefly mention Jesus' explanation of the parable's meaning as described in Luke 16: 9-15. For example, in discussing the relationship between Christian ethics and profit, Hoover (1998, p. 51, 71) notes that we are to place friends before wealth (verse 9), and reminds us of Scripture's warning against the love of money (verse 13). Smith (1999, p. 89) quotes verse 10 in the context of *trust*, and Chewing and Haak (2002, p. 66) also cite verse 10 under the heading of *integrity*.

²This idea that one's moral-point-of-view has an effect on how one interprets Jesus' teachings will not come as a surprise to biblical scholars or to readers who are familiar with social construction theory (e.g. Berger & Luckman, 1967). For example, much has been written about differences in the way that Jesus is interpreted among the four Gospel writers which, for example, leads to discussion comparing Luke's "Jesus" to Matthew's "Jesus." We build on these observations, and we note that Western biblical interpretations are often influenced by the dominant materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view, and that there is relatively little sustained rigorous scholarly interpretation of any of the Gospels from what we call a Radical moral-point-of-view [some exceptions include Hauerwas and Willimon (1989), Gay (2004), and Finn (2006)]. This emphasis on the materialist-individualist view is noteworthy in light of the fact that our contemporary notion of individualism was unfathomable in biblical times, and that in biblical times assumptions about economics and production (e.g., the economic pie as a fixed sum) would have resulted in a very different understanding of what it might mean to be materialistic.

³Jesus' teachings about the "Kingdom of God" should be of particular interest to management scholars because, as Dyck and Schroeder (2005) note, a contemporary translation of that phrase might be rendered as "the managerial character of God" (e.g., do Jesus' teachings promote a Conventional or a Radical managerial character?). They argue that, because God's "Kingdom" is not primarily territorial or national in nature, a more accurate translation might be the "kingly rule," "sovereignty," "reign," or the "managerial character" of God. However, because the contemporary notion of management would not have been fathomable in biblical times, we do not argue that these passages are limited only to applications in the workplace, or even that Jesus' teachings are *primarily* directed at managers.

⁴The first debtor owes 800 gallons of olive oil, which represents the yield of about 150 olive trees and a debt of about 1000 denarii (one denarii is the equivalent to about one day of wage labor). His debt is reduced by 50%. The second debtor owes about 1,000 bushels of wheat, the equivalent of about 100 acres of land,

worth about 2,500 denarii. His debt is reduced by 20% (taken from Herzog, 1994; Liefeld, 1984). Some scholars suggest that the differences in the loan reductions were related to the inherent “riskiness” of the commodity, and reflect the “interest” built into the debt. For example, because oil could easily be adulterated, it was discounted at a higher rate than wheat (Wright, 2000, p. 226; cf Herzog, 1994, p. 256-257). Others point out that in each case the reduction was the equivalent of about 500 denarii (Liefeld, 1984, p. 988).

⁵The Greek word *diaskorpizon* is translated as “wasting” in three translations of the Bible (King James Version, New International Version, Revised Standard Version), as “squandered” in two others (New American Standard and New Revised Standard Version), and as “cheating” in one other (New Century Version).

⁶The only two places in the New Testament where translators have given the word the pejorative twist of “wasting” is this parable and the parable of the prodigal son wasting or scattering his possessions (Landry & May, 2000, p. 306). Context is important in biblical exegesis, so we examined the parables that preceded and followed the parable of the shrewd manager (the parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, respectively) as preparation for our analysis of the parable of the shrewd manager. Because of space limitations, we do not discuss how the parable of the prodigal son might be affected by translating the word as scattering, but in the parable of the shrewd manager the translation is of particular importance for interpreting the parable.

⁷Jesus and his listeners would have been familiar with the frequent passages in the Old Testament where readers are exhorted to give to those who need it without expecting a return. [E.g., “If your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself...you shall maintain him.... You shall not lend him your money at interest, not give him your food for profit” (Leviticus 25: 35-37).] Indeed, at the start of his public ministry Jesus quotes from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4: 18-19). Recall that the Year of Jubilee required regularly redistributing financial resources so that everyone had enough.

⁸Note that the manager’s “dishonesty” vis a vis the Conventional materialist-individualist moral-point-of-view is very different from the dishonesty evident in modern-day events like Enron and so on. As Bonaventure (1221-74) noted long ago, but modern commentators seem to forget (Wright, 2000, p. 228), unlike the Enrons of our time, the manager in the parable did not line his own pockets by making deals with the debtors. Rather, the manager is trying to build friendships. It is unclear whether his actions make it less likely that he will find future employment

as a manager (because he cannot be trusted to profit-maximize) or more likely to get another job as manager (because his actions bring honor to his employer).

⁹Note that this dispersing is purposeful and planned — not haphazard squandering — and different from hand-outs that create a dependency that may lead to a lack of motivation for recipients.

¹⁰Another Radical way to understand the parable is to argue that it is the *wealth* of the owner that Jesus is calling unrighteous. If this is the case, then the manager becomes a manager of unrighteousness (*oikonomon tes adikos*) because he is managing dishonest wealth. It is only after it is revealed how much wealth the rich man had that the term *adikos* is used and it is used in a way that allows us to interpret it as someone who manages unjust riches. The rich man had far more than enough and yet had apparently lent, not given, the basic necessities of life (wheat and oil) to others expecting full repayment. In another place Jesus argues that we are to give to the one that asks of us expecting nothing in return. Jesus, here, likewise exhorts us to use money of unrighteousness (*mamona tes adikos*) — money that is more than we need for the basics of life — to make friends, not to reinvest for more monetary gains. It is in this sense that Jesus then lumps all wealth into unrighteousness (*adikos mamona*). If you are not trustworthy in handling unjust (or as many translations say, worldly money — *adikos mamona*, that is, more than you need to live on) who will trust you with true riches? This may more fully account for the sneers of those who love money.

¹¹Seeing the parable as a story of how a just, or faithful, person responds to unrighteous economic systems also helps to explain another puzzling aspect of Jesus' response to the Pharisee's sneers. In Luke 16: 16-18 Jesus indicates that, although the Kingdom of God is evident in the Law and the prophets, people need to "force" their way into it because of the dominance of un-Kingdom-like socio-economic systems. It requires considerable strength of character and will to challenge the rules and norms evident in "unrighteous" economic systems that favor the accumulation of wealth over that of justice and righteousness. The Law does not change (it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of the pen to drop out of the Law), therefore, when our socio-economic systems are not oriented toward justice as a primary motive, those who wish to truly follow the Law must reorient even their economics toward the justice called for by the Law.

¹²Or to "waste" his resources, as his actions would be interpreted by Conventional observers.

¹³It is important not to confuse being Radical with being financially successful. Most people admire Feuerstein for doing the "right thing." As Margolis and Walsh (2003) note, managers and scholars alike would be wise not to argue that doing the right thing will be rewarded with financial success; thankfully the world is much too complex for such simplistic arguments. Doing the right thing sometimes leads to results that, in the short term, can seem as negative as death on a cross.

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