

Biblical Shrewdness

Luke 16:1–9 (NIV)

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

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Synopsis

Biblical Shrewdness is astuteness or craftiness in dealings with others, especially in using one’s understanding and judgment to one’s own advantage and mutual edification. Scripture commends it when it is seen in wise words and actions directed towards a worthy goal, but condemns it when it takes the form of cunning and deceitful scheming for sinful and selfish ends.

I. Shrewdness as astuteness

A. It is encouraged in believers

Jesus Christ explains the parable of the dishonest manager (Lk 16:1-7) and urges his disciples to be shrewd in their use of worldly wealth.

Matthew 10:16 (NIV) — 16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Luke 16:8–9 (NIV) — 8 “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. **9** I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

B. Practical demonstrations of astuteness

Matthew 7:24–25 (NIV) — 24 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

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C. Jesus Christ’s wisdom in answering his enemies

On the matter of paying taxes to Caesar

Matthew 22:18–22 (NIV) — 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? **19** Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” **21** “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” **22** When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

On the question of the resurrection

Matthew 22:31–32 (NIV) — 31 But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, **32** ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

Regarding the woman caught in adultery

John 8:7 (NIV) — 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

D. Further examples of astuteness

David’s shrewdness in fleeing from Saul

1 Samuel 23:22–23 (NIV) — 22 Go and get more information. Find out where David usually goes and who has seen him there. They tell me he is very crafty. **23** Find out about all the hiding places he uses and come back to me with definite information. Then I will go with you; if he is in the area, I will track him down among all the clans of Judah.”

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Joab’s ruse to persuade David to call Absalom back from exile

2 Samuel 14:1–3 (NIV) — **1** Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king’s heart longed for Absalom. **2** So Joab sent someone to Tekoa and had a wise woman brought from there. He said to her, “Pretend you are in mourning. Dress in mourning clothes, and don’t use any cosmetic lotions. Act like a woman who has spent many days grieving for the dead. **3** Then go to the king and speak these words to him.” And Joab put the words in her mouth.

Solomon’s wise judgment

1 Kings 3:28 (NIV) — **28** When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.

Rehoboam acts wisely to secure his kingdom

2 Chronicles 11:23 (NIV) — **23** He acted wisely, dispersing some of his sons throughout the districts of Judah and Benjamin, and to all the fortified cities. He gave them abundant provisions and took many wives for them.

Daniel avoids eating royal food and wine

Daniel 1:11–13 (NIV) — **11** Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, **12** “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. **13** Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”

Herod is outwitted by the Magi

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Matthew 2:16 (NIV) — 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

The Syro-Phoenician woman’s wise response

Mark 7:27–29 (NIV) — 27 “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” **28** “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” **29** Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

II. Shrewdness as crafty and deceitful scheming

A. It demonstrates human sinfulness

Psalm 64:6 (NIV) — 6 They plot injustice and say, “We have devised a perfect plan!” Surely the human mind and heart are cunning.

B. It is condemned by God

God is shrewd in dealing with those who cleverly deceive others

2 Samuel 22:26–27 (NIV) — 26 “To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, **27** to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the devious you show yourself shrewd.

Job 5:12–13 (NIV) — 12 He thwarts the plans of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. **13** He catches the wise in their craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are swept away.

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C. Others dislike it

Proverbs 14:17 (NIV) — 17 A quick-tempered person does foolish things, and the one who devises evil schemes is hated.

Proverbs 25:23 (NIV) — 23 Like a north wind that brings unexpected rain is a sly tongue — which provokes a horrified look.

D. It is a characteristic of Satan

2 Corinthians 11:3 (NIV) — 3 But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

E. The craftiness of Jesus Christ’s enemies

The Pharisees try to trap Jesus Christ over paying taxes

Matthew 22:15–17 (NIV) — 15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. **17** Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

The religious leaders plot Jesus Christ’s death

Matthew 26:3–4 (NIV) — 3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, **4** and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

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F. Further examples of crafty scheming

Jacob buys Esau’s birthright

Genesis 25:31–33 (NIV) — **31** Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” **32** “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” **33** But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Isaac is tricked into blessing Jacob

Genesis 27:15–16 (NIV) — **15** Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. **16** She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins.

Pharaoh plans to reduce the number of Israelites

Exodus 1:10 (NIV) — **10** Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

The Gibeonites deceive Joshua

Joshua 9:3–6 (NIV) — **3** However, when the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, **4** they resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. **5** They put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy. **6** Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the Israelites, “We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us.”

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Jonadab plots for Amnon against Tamar

2 Samuel 13:3 (NIV) — 3 Now Amnon had an adviser named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David’s brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man.

Paul sarcastically echoes the slander against him that he tricked people into giving him money

2 Corinthians 12:16 (NIV) — 16 Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!

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I N V I T A T I O N

H e a r

Romans 10:17 (NIV)

¹⁷ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

B e l i e v e

Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

R e p e n t

Acts 17:30 (NIV)

³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

C o n f e s s

Romans 10:9–10 (NIV)

⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

B e B a p t i z e d

1 Peter 3:21 (NIV)

²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

R e m a i n F a i t h f u l

Galatians 5:4 (NIV)

⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.