

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF WISDOM

The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Read Luke 16:1-13

This is one of Christ's parables that concerns just an individual. He was an estate manager for a rich man, the kind of manager Eliezer might have been for Abraham, or Joseph for Potiphar. It is said of Potiphar that *"he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate"* (Gen. 39:6). The man in Christ's story had that kind of authority. But unlike Joseph or Eliezer, who were models of integrity, this man was dishonest. He cheated his master, and the story begins with the revelation of his dishonesty. The master called him in and asked him, *"What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward."* (Luke 16:2).

The steward was faced with a crisis. What was he to do? He took stock of the situation and concluded that he did not have the strength to do manual work and that he was too proud to beg. So, he got on a plan in which he reduced the debt of all those who owed his master anything. One debtor owed eight hundred gallons of olive oil. He reduced it to four hundred. Another owed a thousand bushels of wheat. He made it eight hundred. He assumed that by doing that, he would so endear himself to his master's debtors that when he lost his job, as he was sure to do, they would welcome him into their homes.

THE PARABLE

This parable has been a problem for many readers because they have imagined that our Lord is commending dishonesty. But of course, that is not what Jesus is doing. At first glance we might conclude that the steward was cheating his master by reducing the money owed by his master's debtors. But if this were true, why would the master commend him? Because of this apparent conundrum there have been many theories as to what this parable is teaching. Here is the explanation that gives context to this parable.

In our culture, an employee, such as a manager, keeps track of the moneys owed to his employer by his customers and in return, the employer pays the manager a wage. If that manager reduced the bills that his employer's customers owed to his employer, and was caught, he would most likely be fired and may even find himself in jail. However, in this parable, the master commended this unjust steward. Why? In the first century, the master (the employer) did not pay the steward (the employee) a wage. Instead, a steward made his money by adding his fees onto the bills of his master's debtors (the customers). When the debtor receives the bill from the steward, he does not know what amount on the bill belongs to the master and what amount belonged to the steward, only the steward would know. When the debtors would pay their bill to the steward, the steward would pocket his portion of the bill and then forward the remaining money to his master.

As this steward is called "unjust," we can assume that he was placing an extraordinary high amount on the bills for his fee, in order to make large amounts of money, at the expense of his master and his master's debtors. However, when he found out he was going to be fired, he took the debtors bills and reduced, or eliminated, the amount owed to him. Thereby currying favour with these debtors in the hopes that one of them may hire him due to his perceived "generosity."

One of the ways in which this manager or steward is set before us as an example is in his ability to see what was coming and plan for it. "Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward." He knew the "game" was up and he needed to plan for his future. He was eminently wiser

than countless today who must give an account before God but are doing nothing to prepare for that day.

“Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...”
(2 Corinthians 5:9-11)

“**Give an account of your stewardship**” are words that everyone will hear, both sinner and saint. All will have to give account in some way, and we will give account to God. We will give account of our stewardship regarding our time, our talents, our substance, and our influence.

For each of us, our stewardship will one day come to an end. The preacher’s voice will end, our mental faculties, and strength will not last forever. The wealth of this world may not last even in this life. A mother’s stewardship over her children changes and diminishes greatly. If Jesus does not come first, we all will die and pass from this life to the next... and then, give an account.

The master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly: While not approving his conduct, the master did in fact approve the steward’s shrewdness. Jesus added the thought that the businessmen of his day (sons of this world) were more wise, bold, and forward-thinking in the management of what they had (more shrewd) than the people of God were with managing what they had (the sons of light).

Q: In what way are the sons of this world more shrewd than the children of light?

Q: How are you managing or stewarding your time, talents, substance, anointing, or influence for the profit of the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ assessment is still true: the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. If we pursued the Kingdom of God with the same vigour and zeal that the children of this world pursue profits and pleasure, we would live in an entirely different world. It could be said that it is to the shame of the Church that Coca-Cola is more widely distributed than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Simply, it is because the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

If the Lord were spelling out the points of the parable He might say at that juncture, "It would be good if all people could see the issues as clearly as that dishonest steward could. You are all stewards of what God has entrusted to you. Are you are wasting His possessions? One day you must give an account. Think how it will stand with you in that day and prepare for it."

“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.” (v9)

This verse is perhaps, the most indirect in this parable. Some have explained it to mean that Jesus is recommending that “unrighteous mammon” be used to help the poor and aid generosity so there would be treasures in heaven for such person. My concern for this view is the following:

- What type of friends will you make by unrighteous mammon? If your guess is as good as mine that these are unrighteous friends then, the next phrase becomes even more concerning.
- “when you fail”. In terms of eternal consequences, stating “when you fail” is not a good place to be.
- If point 1 is true, then where will these friends potentially receive you?

Reading this verse in the context of the parable, I would say this verse is sarcastic in nature.

The Lord says to use money to make friends as a sarcastic phrase. He said: *“make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.”* With money, make friends so when you fail in your Christian journey or in your stewardship, these friends can receive you into their everlasting home (hell).

In verse 1, the parable stated part of the audience *“He also said to His disciples...”* and verse 14, the remainder of Jesus’ audience: *“Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him.”*

He was speaking to “lovers of money” and this parable would have been a direct hit on them; as well as speaking to His disciples on kingdom principles in relation to giving an account to the Lord on the last day.

“He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?” (vv10-12)

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much: In these words of Jesus, money is one of the least things. Therefore, if a person cannot be faithful in managing the things that are least (finances, tithe, offering etc), they should not be trusted to be faithful in handling the things that are much. If one is false and unfaithful in everyday life, it does not matter if they know how to project a Christian image; they are also false and unfaithful in their spiritual life – and no one should entrust them with true riches (spiritual riches).

If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? In this sense, every believer in Christ must be good managers of their own money. If a person cannot be faithful before God with the money He gives, how can they be faithful with spiritual things especially spiritual giftings?

If you have not been faithful in what is another man’s: Here, Jesus seems to refer to the fact that all our riches belong to God, and we must see that we are managing His resources. Faithfulness in this will result in blessing that is our own (who will give you what is your own).

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (v13)

Jesus states that serving two masters is a simple impossibility. If you think that you are successfully serving two masters, you are deceived. One can have both money and God; but one cannot serve both money and God. Certainly, Jesus spoke about the heart here. Many people would say they love God, but their service of money shows that in fact they do not. How can we tell Who or what we serve? One way is by this principle: You will sacrifice for your God. If you will sacrifice for the sake of money, but will not sacrifice for the sake of Jesus, do not deceive yourself: money is your God.

Many try, or pretend to, but it cannot be done. Either God is Lord and, therefore, He determines how our wealth and other possessions are to be used, or money is lord, and it will determine what place (if any) we have for God and His concerns.

Some think that just because they are not rich, they are not a slave to money (mammon). But you do not have to be rich to serve mammon; the poor have just as much potential for greed and covetousness as the rich have.

