

The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Lk. 16:1-13)

Intro: Last year we focused on the character of Christ; this year we are focusing each month on the parables of Christ, looking at the lessons He taught as He preached the good news of the kingdom of God.

Today we look at a parable that often troubles those who read it; for it appears that Jesus commends actions on the part of one of the characters that seem to be contrary to His personal ethics and teaching. That parable is sometimes called the parable of the unjust steward.

Let's hear the parable together

*"NOW He was also saying to the disciples, 'There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 'And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' 'And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.' 'And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 'Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He *said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 'And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.*

"And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Luke 16:1-13, NASB)

This parable was intended to teach a lesson to Jesus' disciples, though He apparently said it in earshot of the Pharisees who were lovers of money. In other words, there was something about the character of the unrighteous steward that Jesus thought commendable to His disciples as a point of imitation; but what is that point? Let's investigate together.

Interpreting the parable's message

The setting of this parable would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners. Often wealthy landowners would lease some of their land to sharecroppers or land tenants who would pay for the land by giving a share of the crops to the landowner. It was often the case that a wealthy landowner would not want to handle the minutia of his farming operation, but would entrust the management of the farm to a trusted servant or manager. In this case, the landowner had put the management of the land and its creditors into the hands of a trusted steward.

However it is clear from the parable that the steward had not proven himself worthy of the trust given to him. He had "squandered" his master's possessions. The word could suggest that instead of seeking to return as much profit as possible to the owner, the steward manipulated the business for his own self-interest and in so doing wasted much of what had been earned through the contracts with the land's lessors.

In the course of time, word got back to the landowner who called the steward to give an accounting of his actions. Of course the accounting would take some time as the steward gathered his paperwork and prepared to present them to the land owner presumably to pass along to his successor. The steward knew that he had been guilty of mismanagement and that his dismissal was imminent.

That meant that he had to act quickly, since he knew that no one else would hire him after knowing of his mismanagement. Knowing that the alternatives before him were to either to beg for money or engage in hard labor (neither of which anyone would look forward to) he thinks of a solution that would once more serve his self-interest. While he still had authority to do so, he called in his master's debtors and systematically reduced the contract amounts they owed the master from the harvest. The amount forgiven were quite large: 800-900 gallons of olive oil for one customer,

The steward reasonably expected based on cultural norms that his generosity to his master's sharecroppers would engender their good will and be reciprocated; and he could consequently have a place to go after his dismissal from service. They, he reasoned, would be compelled, out of gratitude for the reduced contracts he had offered them, to help him out once he was without a job.

When the master at last realized what the steward had done, he of course would not have been pleased to know that he had just been bilked out of even more of his wealth; but he had to confess that the steward had been shrewd or prudent in his actions.

And Jesus observed that it is often the case that the "sons of this age" (that is the carnal, those who seek or focus upon the rewards of this earthly life) are often more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than "the sons of light" (that is, the spiritual who seek the rewards of eternal life).

This then is the point of emphasis for Jesus. He could not commend the steward's unethical and self-serving tactics; but He could commend the foresight and decisive action that he took for his own self-preservation in a moment of crisis.

It is that attitude that stands behind Jesus' application of the parable to His disciples. The proclamation of the good news of the kingdom announces the end of the rule of Satan and the inauguration of the eternal kingdom of God. Jesus' message presupposes that there will be a day of reckoning for all humanity at the judgment and that judgment will be made on the basis of how we have responded to the good news of the kingdom's arrival. Would the disciples respond with the decisiveness and prudence that this man had shown in worldly matters?

Jesus' applies the parable's message

First Jesus wanted his disciples to realize that there is a spiritual counterpart to the worldly shrewdness of the unrighteous steward:

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Lesson one—We need to act decisively for our eternity while there is opportunity.

Just as the unrighteous steward "made friends" for himself by discounting their obligations to the landowner, so disciples may also "make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness."

The term mammon means riches or wealth; and the mammon of unrighteousness is the only wealth that the worldly person may achieve in this life; thus it is called "the mammon of unrighteousness."

Jesus' point is that disciples too can make use of their wealth or possessions to situate themselves well for eternity. Whether we think of the "friends" as those in need around us or those we support in teaching the gospel or the members of the Godhead, the point is the same. By the proper use of our wealth we may secure a better future for ourselves by laying up treasure in heaven.

But that leads Jesus to a second observation:

He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. "If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?"

Lesson two—We need to be faithful and righteous in the use of the portion God has given us.

If there is any tendency on our part to think, what difference does it make what I do with the little I possess, Jesus would respond, "What you do with a little you would also do with a lot." If you are unfaithful with a little, you would be unfaithful with much. If you are faithful with little, you would be faithful with much. The size of our estate will not determine the content of our character; but rather our attitude toward God and our accountability to Him.

Jesus also wants his listeners to also see that what we do with our earthly wealth determines whether or not the “true riches” will be entrusted to us. The reality is that we are not able to keep any of the wealth we have. (Note how Jesus points out that all earth wealth ultimately “fails.”) Whether righteous or not, this wealth will be surrendered at death. But there are the “true riches,” the eternal wealth that endures forever and is of real ultimate and eternal value. Jesus wants to see that none of our wealth is truly our own; all that we have is on loan from God to be used for His glory. But if we are faithful in the use of what is His (another’s), then there is hope that we will be given someone of our own to keep forever.

All of this hopefully is clear; but there is yet one other concern that Jesus voices:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”” (Luke 16:1–13, NASB)

Lesson three—We need to understand that money is a useful servant but a terrible master!

When it comes to earthly possessions and wealth, we need to beware of the power that it can have over us. We can become enslaved to our possessions; and in the course of becoming so, we can no longer be the servants of God.

Being a lover of God mutually excludes being a lover of self or money. Thus Jesus matter-of-factly affirms that it is impossible to serve both God and riches.

And this suggests that we must make a deliberate and decisive choice about our future. What do we want? To hold on to what we cannot keep? To exchange it for real spiritual treasure which we can call our own? It prompted the famous saying, “He is no fool who surrenders what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose!”

Understanding Jesus’ parable in the contexts of Luke’s gospel

It becomes apparent that Luke wants disciples to understand that there are things we can do with our wealth that Jesus calls “laying up treasures in heaven.”

To help the needy around us is to lay up treasure in heaven. Not surprisingly, Luke follows this parable with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus reminding the readers that a wealthy man who neglected the poor man who lay at the gate of his estate ended up in eternal torment for his selfishness.

Likewise to assist our brethren in time of need is to lay up treasure in heaven. Jesus reminds us that at the judgment the righteous will be invited into the eternal kingdom because their faith in Jesus led them to show helpfulness and compassion to their brethren:

““And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’” (Matthew 25:40, NASB)

To support the teaching of the gospel is to lay up treasure in heaven. The apostle Paul summarizes God's requirement of kingdom citizens:
"Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." (1 Timothy 6:17–19, NASB)

Conclusion: The unjust steward had the foresight to act decisively for his future. Now Jesus is asking you, "do you?"

As Wilcock points out in his commentary: one thing is certain in every man's future: his 'dismissal' from his present sphere into the unknown regions of eternity. And one means is available for ensuring *now* that he will have 'an eternal home' (16:9, NEB) to go to *then*: the right use of the opportunities of daily life.¹ What have you done with those opportunities?

The steward about to be dismissed knew very well that his gig was over; we however can be lulled into a sense of complacency about it all. Don't let that happen to you!

¹ Wilcock, M. (1979). *The Savior of the world: the message of Luke's gospel* (p. 160). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.