

The Parable of the Unjust Steward

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Many people find the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16 the most difficult of all parables to understand. Why would the steward's master commend him for stealing money from him? Why would Jesus use the dishonest manager as a positive example? Is the parable saying that we can use unrighteous mammon to do good works so that we can be received into heaven? In this article, I'm going to try to shed some light on this story so that we can see the lesson that Jesus was teaching.

The Parable of the Unjust Steward is found in Luke 16:1-13:

He also said to his disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a manager. An accusation was made to him that this man was wasting his possessions. He called him, and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

The manager said within himself, 'What will I do, seeing that my lord is taking away the management position from me? I don't have strength to dig. I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from management, they may receive me into their houses.' Calling each one of his lord's debtors to him, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe to my lord?' He said, 'A hundred batos of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then said he to another, 'How much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred cors of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

His lord commended the dishonest manager because he had done wisely, for the children of this world are, in their own generation, wiser than the children of the light. I tell you, make for yourselves friends by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when you fail, they may receive you into the eternal tents. He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. He who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? If you have not been faithful in 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 aren't able to serve God and mammon."

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There is some debate over whether Jesus intended this parable for His disciples or for the Jewish leaders. As the Bible clearly states, however, Jesus spoke the parable to His disciples. Yet, as we'll see, the Pharisees overheard it, and Jesus was certainly aware that they were listening.

Before going further, let's make sure we understand what a steward is. "Steward" is not a word we use too often today. *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary* defines "steward" as, "one employed in a large household or estate to manage domestic concerns (as the supervision of servants, collection of rents, and keeping of accounts)." This seems to fit the parable very well. The Greek word is *oikonomos*. It's the word from which we derive the English word, "economy." It literally means, "house manager." Many modern translations simply translate it as "manager."

The Steward's Predicament

This steward had great authority in his master's house, and he should have been trustworthy. Unfortunately for the master in this parable, his steward was a spendthrift who squandered the master's property. The word translated as "was wasting" in verse 1 literally means "was winnowing." In other words, it was as if he were throwing his master's goods into the wind as chaff. It's the same word Jesus had just used in Luke 15:13 of the prodigal son who "wasted his property with riotous living."

Someone blew the whistle on the steward, accusing him to his master, and his master soon called him on the carpet and gave him his notice. The steward now does some quick thinking. His time is short. He can't think of anything else he can do for a living, so he comes up with a clever scheme. By cooking the books and lowering the debts of his master's debtors, he will make friends of them. When he's removed from his position, they will take him into their houses.

What lesson are we to learn from this? To understand, we must examine the key verses.

Luke 16:8-9

I would say that the pivotal verses of this parable, and the ones that cause so much confusion, are Luke 16:8-9. Verse 8 says, "His lord commended the dishonest manager because he had done wisely, for the children of this world are, in their own generation, wiser than the

children of the light." The master had to admit that even though his steward was dishonest, he was admirably shrewd. He used his position with his master, while he still had it, to make friends for himself. He did it for purely selfish reasons, but it was, nevertheless, clever.

Jesus then says, "I tell you, make for yourselves friends by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when you fail, they may receive you into the eternal tents" (Luke 16:9). Jesus is not saying to follow the steward's example of dishonesty or selfishness. But He is telling us to follow the same principle as He teaches in Matthew 10:16: "Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."

There is a question over whether this verse should say, "you fail" or "it fails." Some Bibles, including the *World English Bible* that I've used here, say, "you fail." That's because they based their translation on Greek texts that say this. "You fail" either refers to the end of your life in this physical world or to the end or failure of your material goods (i.e. you fail when your finances do). Other Bibles, based on other Greek texts, say "it fails," meaning when the mammon—the wealth—fails. It's difficult to say which is correct, but either way, Jesus is saying to use your money to make "friends" until either it or you expire.

By using the term "unrighteous mammon," Jesus is not saying we are to gain money through unrighteous deeds the way the steward did. He is simply using the term to describe the money of this wicked world. Elsewhere, the Bible says that the love of money is a root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10), and it is called filthy lucre (1 Peter 5:2; 1 Timothy 3:3; etc). Jesus didn't commend the unjust steward for being unjust and cooking his master's books. He commended him for using the time he had left and his economic position to gain friends.

The people of this world are often very shrewd, managing their time and resources to gain advantage for themselves. We Christians, on the other hand, are often foolish, not using our time and resources to accomplish as much for the kingdom of God as possible. Paul exhorts: "Therefore watch carefully how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise; redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16).

The "friends" in the parable refers to those we will later meet in "eternal tents" (*aiōnious skēnas*). Jesus' use of the term "eternal tents" seems to be similar to that found in the apocryphal book, 2 Esdras. Chapter 2, verse 11 of that book says, "Their glory also will I

take to me, and give these the everlasting tabernacles [or tents], which I had prepared for them."

The only people, besides the Trinity and the holy angels, who can possibly be receiving us into eternal dwellings are saved Christians. How do we use our money to make such "friends?" We can't buy our way into heaven with good works. That can't be what Jesus meant because it so violently contradicts the Good News that we are freely saved by grace alone. For example, Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast." We cannot buy our way into heaven because Jesus has paid our way already. But we can use our money to further the Gospel so that it can reach sinners in need of salvation.

Jesus saves sinners. We don't save them with either our preaching or our money. But God uses our preaching and our money (which is really His money) as secondary means to accomplish His work. He uses our "unrighteous mammon" to fund the preaching of the Gospel, the printing of Bibles and Gospel literature, internet ministries, the helping of the poor as an example of His love, and so on. As Paul wrote, "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are the same, but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's farming, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:7-9).

The "friends" will receive you into eternal habitations because you used your "unrighteous mammon," not to buy your way into heaven with good works, but for the furtherance of the Gospel that reached them wherever they might have been in the world. You were a coworker with the Lord in the salvation of these "friends." They will be in eternity to welcome you.

Now let's look at verses 10-12 again: "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. He who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? If you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" Do you see that these verses teach the same principle as the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-28? And Paul writes, "Here, moreover, it is required of stewards, that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). We are to be faithful with the resources and responsibilities God has given us.

Unlike the unjust steward who cheated his master when he forgave his master's debtors, we are not cheating our heavenly Master when we use the means He has given us to announce forgiveness. God wants us to use the resources He has put under our charge to announce the forgiveness of sinners' debts if they will but believe on His Son.

We are to use our mammon, our physical resources in this world, to serve God, not to serve the mammon and not to serve ourselves. Unlike the Pharisees, who remained aloof from sinners and uncaring about their wellbeing (see Luke 15:2), we are to concern ourselves with their physical and spiritual welfare. We are to announce that our Master will forgive the debts of all who will put their trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior. And we must not be double-minded in this: "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 aren't able to serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). Instead of loving money, we are to use our financial resources for the furtherance of the work of the kingdom: "But seek first God's Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Jesus came to save sinners (Luke 19:10), and He is still doing that work today.

An Application to the Pharisees (Which Is Also a Word to the Wise for Us)

In Luke 15, immediately before Jesus gave the Parable of the Unjust Steward, He spoke parables He intended for the Pharisees. These parables showed that we should be rejoicing over repentant sinners and not holding the critical, unforgiving attitude of the elder brother of the prodigal son. After the Parable of the Unjust Steward, in Luke 16:14, we see that, although Jesus gave the parable to His disciples, the Pharisees also heard Him. They scoffed because they were lovers of money. They were serving mammon instead of God.

In the verses that follow, Jesus lays into the Pharisees because they were lovers of money, ignored or hindered the Gospel, and lived as hypocrites (Luke 16:14-18). He then speaks the parable of Lazarus and the rich man against them. Like the rich man, the Pharisees did little to help the poor. Even the dogs (Jewish symbolism for unclean sinners and Gentiles) helped the poor man more than the rich man did (verse 21).

Was the Parable of the Unjust Steward also for the Jewish leaders? I believe it was, at least indirectly. Jesus certainly would have known they were overhearing Him. The parable could have a special meaning for them. They were God's stewards at that time. They sat on Moses' seat. But they were wastrels who didn't properly manage God's heritage. God was about to remove them, which He did in AD 70 when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. As Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation bringing forth its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).

We Christians in these latter days might now do well to also heed this warning part of the parable. We are stewards of our Master in heaven. In our case, our Master wants us to tell the sinners of the world that if they will believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior, He will forgive not just part but all of their debt. This is the Great Commission He has given us: "Go into all the world, and preach the Good News to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16); and, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20).

All of us, of course, must make a living in this world, and we have family responsibilities, and so on. But as much as possible, we are to be using the time and resources God has given us as good stewards to fulfill our Master's orders in the Great Commission. He did *not* commission us to use those resources to build church buildings, to pay full-time clergy to run churches like worldly corporations, to support political parties as the answer to the world's ills, to found organizations to lobby congress, and to build Christian television networks that promote false charismatic and health/wealth and works-based gospels. If we continue to squander our resources like this, might He not say to us, "You can no longer be manager"? This doesn't mean a loss of anyone's salvation (see 1 Corinthians 3:11-15). But it is just the kind of change that Paul talks of as a breaking off and grafting in of branches in Romans 11:17-22:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them, and became partaker with them of the root and of the richness of the olive tree; don't boast over the branches. But if you boast, it is not you who support the root, but the root

supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in." True; by their unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by your faith. Don't be conceited, but fear; for if God didn't spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. See then the goodness and severity of God. Toward those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

So, let's be good stewards devoting the resources our Master has put under our authority to announce the Good News of our Master's desire to forgive the debts of all who will believe on His Son as their Savior. Then we can look forward to being welcomed by our saved "friends" into eternal habitations.