

THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

If I were to ask you what is the most difficult parable of Jesus to understand which one would it be? Chances are you would probably answer with either of the two parables that are found in Luke chapter 16 – either the parable of the unjust steward or the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Personally I've found those to be the two most challenging parables to understand. Some parables of Jesus are fairly easy to interpret while others take diligent study to unlock their meaning.

During one of our men's speaking club meetings I was given the assignment to be topicsmaster with the theme of the parable of the unjust steward. I had the easy part of just asking the questions. I found the responses given by the men to our brainstorming biblical discussion quite helpful. In this article I would like to explore the parable of the unjust steward and hopefully provide a little more clarity to better understand this tricky parable.

The parable is found in the first half of Luke 16. The story part of it is in verses 1 to 9. The first seven verses are relatively simple. The last two verses, verses 8 and 9 are the really contentious and difficult verses to understand. Following the story Jesus gives some principles related to the parable in verses 10 to 13 which will shed light on the meaning of the more difficult part of the parable. So with that overview of the structure of the parable let's dive in now and start in Luke 16 from verse 1:

“And He [Jesus] also said to His disciples”.

It is important to know to whom Jesus is addressing this parable. The parable is for the benefit of the disciples, but in the audience were Pharisees as well as is noted in verse 14 which says: “And being lovers of money, the Pharisees also heard all these things.”

The emphasis on them being lovers of money here argues that Jesus was also having a not-so-subtle dig at the Pharisees as seen in verse 15 where He said that they justified themselves in the sight of men but implied their hearts were not right with God because they esteemed that which God hated such as putting money before God.

“There was a certain rich man who had a steward. And he was accused to him, that he had wasted his goods. And he called him and said to him, What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you may no longer be steward.”

The parable begins with a rich man calling his steward before him to inform him that he will be relieving him of his duties of mismanaging his master's resources. A steward is a person who manages the resources of another. The steward had authority over all of the master's resources and could transact business in his name. This requires the utmost level of trust in the steward.

The most probable cultural setting for the parable is that of a large estate consisting of land divided into portions, where the steward is entrusted with carrying the business of that estate. The debtors are most likely renters who had agreed to pay a fixed amount of produce for the yearly rent. The master was probably a man of good character as he cared enough to fire a wasteful manager when someone reported it to him.

Continuing on we read: "And the steward said within himself, What shall I do? For my lord is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am put out of the stewardship they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors and said; to the first, How much do you owe my lord? And he said, A hundred baths of oil. And he said to him, Take your bill and sit down quickly and write fifty. And he said to another, And how much do you owe? And he said, A hundred cors of wheat. And he said to him, Take your bill and write eighty."

The produce of oil and wheat that formed the currency of the debt shows that the master was likely a landowner. The steward has been caught out so he concocts a plan to save his own skin. He knows he is going to be fired as he says to himself the stewardship is being taken from me. He's too lazy to dig and work the land and too proud to beg so he decides to cut some deals with his master's debtors to change how much they owe the master and if these deals are good then they may provide him with shelter after he's fired.

Now some commentators believe that he was cooking the books while other commentators argue that he was actually fixing the books.

Yet another view held is that the deals were the steward's suggestion and were made to the debtors with the master present and that the master praised him for negotiating better deals that were more likely to be paid and not fallen behind on. This last view seems unlikely because of the haste he stresses with one of his debtors, which would be unnecessary if the master knew about it.

This is what one commentator writes about the view that the steward was actually fixing the books:

"Schulz argues that prior to the time of the steward's dismissal he had been extracting more from the debtors than he actually turned over to his master, perhaps using the difference to support a wanton lifestyle. The debt reductions, then, were not a falsification of the records, but rather a rectification of past wrongs. The new amounts on the bills and the amounts actually collected and passed on to the master finally agreed. The steward thus abandoned his earlier dishonesty. According to Oosterzee, the parable had special relevance for both the tax collectors and Pharisees, reminding the former of their duty as disciples now to make restitution wherever possible, while, at the same time, warning the latter of their status as stewards for whom a day of reckoning was coming."

The more common point view is that the unjust steward in the deals that he cuts with the debtors is actually cooking the books, not fixing them. K. E. Bailey contends that any "extras" the steward may have received would have been "under the table" and "off the record" and would not have been included in the accounts and that the debt reductions authorised in verses 5 to 7 were, therefore, dishonest and would have meant economic loss for the master. The steward was no doubt making extras "under the table," but these amounts were probably not reflected in the signed bills.

In verse 8 he is referred to as an "unjust steward" as opposed to someone who was correcting previous wrongs so it is more likely that he was cooking the books rather than fixing them.

In verse 8 we read: “And the unjust steward's lord commended him because he had done wisely [or shrewdly as it's translated in some versions].

As we've just seen it is more likely that the deals he cut with the debtors were dishonest and done at the economic expense of his master so why does the master commend or praise him for acting wisely or shrewdly? One commentator answers this puzzling question this way:

“It would be quite safe to assume that there is some sort of celebrating occurring in the homes of the renters as they rejoice in, what they think is, the generosity of the landowner. Soon the whole community would be aware of the kind heartedness of the landowner and think honorably of the generous landowner.

“He has two alternatives: First, he could gather the renters and tell them that the reductions were unauthorized and thereby showing his stinginess and risking ridicule from them and the community. Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise that is even now being showered on him, and allow the clever steward to get away with the scheme. Obviously, the steward knew the master was a generous person, otherwise he would not have taken such a risk; after all, he wasn't jailed to begin with.”

So we see that the actions of the steward were fraudulent, but the underlying foresight and skill is quite amazing as seen from the position that the master later found himself in.

Jesus then goes onto say: “For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say to you, Make friends by the mammon of unrighteousness for yourselves, so that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings.”

Is Jesus saying to imitate something about the shrewdness or wisdom of the children of this world? Is He telling us to imitate the unjust steward's way of making friends, who did so by fraudulent deals? What are we to make of these comments of Jesus in verses 8 and 9? There are a couple of schools of thought in regards to the interpretation of these couple of verses.

One is that the children of light can be less wise than the children of this world and need to be a lot better at being “wise as serpents but harmless as doves” as Jesus said in Matthew 10:16. This viewpoint sees unbelievers are often wiser in the things of this world than believers are about the things of the world to come. Following on from that we are to use money more wisely to benefit others so when we fail or die we'll be received into the Kingdom of God.

Another school of thought is that Jesus really isn't chiding the children of light for their lack of wisdom but using irony to show the utter foolishness of acting like the unjust steward.

D. R. Fletcher writes: “Make friends for yourselves,” he seems to taunt; “imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?”

That's the end of the story part of the parable. Let's now finish off with the principles that Jesus draws from the parable and some practical take aways points we can apply in our

own lives. Jesus then goes on to say starting in verse 10: "He who is faithful in the least is also faithful in much. And he who is unjust in the least is also unjust in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who shall give you that which is your own?"

The ERV version translates verses 8 and 9 this way: "The master told the dishonest manager that he had done a smart thing. Yes, worldly people are smarter in their business with each other than spiritual people are. I tell you, use the worldly things you have now to make 'friends' for later. Then, when those things are gone, you will be welcomed into a home that lasts forever."

Now we have already seen that the unjust steward was unfaithful in the unrighteous mammon or the money he was entrusted with yet Jesus here is telling us to act in a completely different way by being faithful with whatever money and wealth that we are entrusted with in this life. This seems to give some support to the irony viewpoint I mentioned before.

If one is faithful in "little", then one will be faithful in much. Similarly, if one is dishonest in little, he will also be dishonest in much. If we can't be faithful with earthly wealth, which isn't even ours to begin with, then how can we be entrusted with the "true riches" in God's kingdom. This begs the question: "What is our attitude towards the little things we are entrusted with in our lives?"

Let's look at one last verse over in 1 Peter 4:10. The Apostle Peter here writes: "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God". We have each been different talents, resources and tremendous knowledge of the plan and laws of God. God expects us to use whatever we have to benefit others and not just wastefully squander those resources just for our own benefit.

Jesus concluded by saying "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". Wealth can have a corrupting influence and greed for money often leads people to commit terrible sins. Wealth is not inherently evil, but the love of money can lead to all sorts of sins as Paul wrote about in 1 Timothy 6:1.

In conclusion, the moral points that Jesus was trying to drive home with the parable of the unjust steward are that He wants us to be faithful with whatever money or any other resources we are given in this life whether a little or a lot and also to never allow the pursuit of wealth to ever to displace God's rightful place as number one in our lives.