

The Unjust Servant

Luke 16:1-13

With Study Questions

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He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. ² So 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.'³ "Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.'⁵ "So he called every one of his master's debtors to *him*, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'⁸ So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. ⁹ "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches*? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ "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" (Luke 16:1-13).

Introduction

Shortly after Roe v Wade I was invited to a pro-life meeting; but they didn't call it a pro-life meeting. In fact they didn't have a term to describe their position. A man stood who was savvy to the ways politics unfold. He informed us of how the language had been "seized." "Pro-choice" (a

term that has no inherent meaning) had won the day. We were told that if we were to wage any significant movement in defense of the unborn we needed to seize the language. That was the night I was introduced to the term “pro-life.”

Writing a monthly column for a local secular newspaper I open myself to public comment and scrutiny. Depending on the subject I may find comments coming from all over the world. If I happen to write on traditional or biblical marriage the comments have reached the thousands. It’s as if there are search engines and networks of attentive laborers looking for, and tirelessly commenting, on these issues in an effort to win public opinion. Sometimes they argue with acumen and wit; sometimes they just blather away. Either way, they whittle and chip and I must admit at times I find it exhausting.

At the risk of sounding overly nostalgic there was a time when the best thinkers, writers, scientists, artists, musicians were all associated with the church. Leading up to and through the Reformation the lion’s share of wisdom and true progress somehow emanated from the visible representation of the kingdom of God; it is where people went for the truth. And there was no shortage of persevering excellence.

People now seek excellence from the universities, business models, political systems and structures—all of which have been sadly lacking and a bitter disappointment when it comes to the human spirit. They may know how to observe things and draw external conclusions—they establish focus groups and succeed in selling products—they control popular thinking with sound bites. But their saddest accomplishment has been to convince people that they have no soul or that it is of little consequence.

Churches have consequently been reduced to benign citadels ministering to felt needs—with little or nothing to say about the real world. They help people through their day. But the real needs, the real answers are found elsewhere. The real work is done by the inhabitants of the city of man.

The problem is not unique to our generation. Even though we may have seen a peak in wisdom and influence in the church during the Reformation, clearly during the time of Christ the church had been reduced to a **“den of thieves”** (Luke 19:46) clergymen who were **“serving two masters...lovers of money...those who justify (themselves) before men”** (Luke 16:13-15).

Jesus shames the lethargy and lack of wisdom in the church in this parable with the words: **“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8b).**

About Parables

We learn a bit about parables with this parable. We learn not to press parables beyond their basic lesson. If we were to do that with this parable we would commend offering sacrifices to God out of the **“fruits of extortion.”**¹ We would also draw the unwarranted and ungodly conclusion that unrighteous loot can purchase friends who can somehow ensure our inclusion in an everlasting home.

We must be careful not to read more into parables than their primary purpose. That is not to say that some of the things mentioned in parables can't be used as a springboard into various topics. But in briefly pursuing the various topics, let us seek its main point.

He also said to His disciples: “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. ² So 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’ (Luke 16:1, 2).

Giving and Account

One example of a topic we can safely springboard into is that of giving an account.

So then each of us shall give account of himself to God (Romans 14:12).

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 (2 Corinthians 5:10).

¹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Lk 16:9). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

I think we are easily within the boundaries of the Christian faith to acknowledge that, similar to this unjust steward, we will be found wanting when it comes to how we handled that which belongs to God—even our own lives (Psalm 24:1). We don't even see the steward attempting to defend himself. Like David the only statement might be:

Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you (Psalm 143:2).

Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' ⁵ "So he called every one of his master's debtors to *him*, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty' (Luke 16:3-7).

Resigning to the Inevitable

We see the steward resign to the inevitable. Then he begins to plan for his future. Like the many phone calls I receive from friends who get the terrible news of the death of a loved one or their own fatal illness. It spurs questions regarding eternity, heaven, hell and how people get to one place or the other. The good news is that it is never too late to prepare for one's eternal home. The bad news is that God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7).

Years ago I heard a fairly young man with very young children make a statement that has stuck with me these many years. He said: "I'm trying to teach my children how to die; because it is not until they know how to die that they will truly know how to live." This man is trying to figure out how to die.

So he begins to consider who he is going to be at the mercy of. Who can help him? He calls his master's debtors and begins cancelling debts; 400 instead of 800 gallons of olive oil, and 800 instead of 1,000 bushels of wheat. The steward reckons when he loses his job these heavy hitters will welcome him into their houses. It is here that the parable takes a funny

turn. The master could have justifiably thrown this steward into prison. Not so.

So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. ⁹ “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home (Luke 16:8, 9).

Shrewd/Wise

The master commends the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. The word shrewd is a translation option. It is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 7:24 that is translated wise. It means understanding.

It’s reminiscent of a Seinfeld episode where George is dating a prison inmate. When she is up for parole George decides he prefers her to be in prison. When interviewed by the warden she asks if she has indicated to George any plans or goals. His response was “plans, goals...schemes!”

It would appear that the difference between wise and shrewd is the context. We shouldn’t understand this as an affirmation of unprincipled dexterity; as if God commends sinister behavior because it happens to be well-played.

No, Jesus uses this parable, as it were, to shame the “**sons of light**” (sons of God-John 12:36; Ephesians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:5) by comparison. The sons of this world are more diligent and conscientious in conducting their affairs than the sons of light are in terms of their heavenly reward. The academic, athletic, artistic, business pursuits of the world (and even our own) often receive deeper consideration and effort than that which is called to be the treasure of our hearts.

Make Friends

When Jesus exhorts us to make friends with unrighteous mammon, He is not suggesting we can somehow buy friends who can ensure our inclusion in an everlasting home. Simply put, I believe the point Jesus makes is that we should recognize all our possessions (regardless of their inherent value or lack of value—even filthy lucre or loot—mammon has this negative connotation) are to be aimed toward the glory of God.

This is not to say that we earn or merit heaven via our success in this endeavor (to honor God with our possessions) but that it testifies or gives evidence of who we trust and who we believe owns it all. Like this unjust steward we recognize who we will be at the mercy of and act accordingly. It would appear that Jesus is challenging His followers to serve their master with as much vigor as the world follows theirs.

Jesus finishes the lesson with the words:

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.¹¹ Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?¹² And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?¹³ "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" (Luke 16:10-13).

Least/Much

In short, if you're not faithful to tithe when you make a thousand you will not be faithful to tithe when you make a hundred thousand. If you're not faithful to clean your room you won't clean your house. If you're not faithful to the vows you make to your wife there is no reason to expect you'll be faithful in other vows.

Our character is revealed as much in little things as in big things. If we practice faithfulness in little things we will be more prepared to be faithful in big things.

If we have not exhibited any faithfulness in these temporal things given us on loan, who will commit to us the permanent gifts—the true riches of eternal life!

Perhaps the entire parable can be summed up in these final words that no one can serve two masters. It is an exercise of sublime wisdom for us to daily consider who our true master is and in what manner that master is being served.

Questions for Study

1. Where is excellence sought in the world today? Why do you suppose that is (pages 2, 3)?
2. What had the church become during the time of Christ (pages 3, 4)?
3. What do we learn about parables through this parable (page 4)?
4. What does it mean to give an account before God? How will you do in that (pages 4, 5)?
5. What does the unjust steward do when he realizes he's losing his job? How does that apply to us (pages 5, 6)?

6. Discuss the master's response to the steward's actions. Were the steward's actions justifiable (page 6)?
7. What does it mean to make friends with unrighteous mammon? What is the benefit of that? Explain your answer (page 7).
8. In what ways can we demonstrate our faithfulness in small things (page 7, 8)?