

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD STEWARD

Luke 16:1-13

Of all the parables of Jesus, the parable of the shrewd steward is probably the most difficult one to interpret. The story raises many puzzling questions. Particularly troubling is the commendation by the master of his manager who, in the text, is presented as a dishonest person. How can this unrighteous manager be held as an example for the Christians to follow? We will consider this question in a moment. First, let's read the story.

Luke 16:1. He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.

2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'

3 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, and I am ashamed to beg.

4 I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.'

5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

6 He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And 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?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

8 The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.

10 "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches?

12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

13 No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Into the world of business

This is the story of a manager who was running the affairs of a rich man. It seems that he had extensive financial responsibility and freedom, and was able to make contracts in his master's name. Unfortunately he was accused one day of 'squandering' (v. 1) his master's goods. The charge was a very serious one and his predicament was just as serious. He was informed that he was dismissed and was instructed to prepare a final accounting.

This situation forced him to think about how best to handle his coming unemployment. Having been a manager, he did not feel capable of digging (i.e. doing manual labor). Begging was out of the question. And the mismanagement of his master's money would cause no one else to hire him for the same position. So what can he do?

The answer which came to him was that he must quickly win himself some influential friends so that, as we read in v. 4, 'when I lose my job, they may receive me into their homes'. His plan was to call in each of his master's debtors, and to get them to alter the documents relating to their debts in a way that was greatly to their advantage. The first one owed a hundred measures of oil and was told to write fifty – a fifty percent reduction. The second person owed a hundred measures of wheat and was told to write eighty – a twenty percent reduction. And so, the steward went systematically through the inventory of bills, one debtor at a time. Each debtor was asked to declare his debt, and the steward determined how much to lessen the debt.

The story ends in v. 8 with the comment that 'the master praised the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly'. This is the sentence that has caused all sorts of problems to commentators.

The main theme

What is the central point of the story? I would like to suggest that this whole parable is about stewardship. The main theme is stewardship. This can be shown from a purely statistical perspective. What I mean is this. The word 'stewardship' in the Lord's teaching occurs three times, and they are all in this parable (vv. 2, 3, 4). The references to the word 'steward' again in the Lord's teaching occur four times. Three out of four are found in this parable (vv. 1, 3, 8). The other occurrence is in Luke 12:42 – the parable of the faithful and unfaithful steward which obviously has a lot to do with stewardship. And finally, the verb 'to be a steward' occurs only once in the NT, and it is here in this parable (v. 2).

No passage in the Bible has such a high concentration of words related to stewardship. We can therefore say from these statistics that this parable is concerned with the subject of stewardship, and more specifically with being a good steward of material possessions. The question of money continues throughout the whole of Luke 16 in the comment about the Pharisees 'who were lovers of money' (v. 14), and then in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in v. 19.

What does stewardship mean? The word that is translated as 'steward' is actually the word from which we have the term 'economics'. The Greek word is *oikonomos*. 'Economics' in English, *oikonomos* in Greek. It is composed of two parts, *oikos* (which means 'house') and *nomos* (which means 'law'). So it is the law of the house, i.e., the principles of running a household. We might say that it refers to 'household management'. And from there, we have developed the idea of economics, of how money matters in general are to be managed. So a steward was somebody who was in charge of a household. In this parable, the steward was in charge of a big business, as we can see from the

large amounts involved in the renegotiating of debts – one hundred measures of oil (the yield of about 150 olive trees) and one hundred measures of wheat (the yield of around 100 acres of grain).

Stewardship for the Christian

What does stewardship mean spiritually? Well, let's begin with some basic points. Everyone of us who have become Christians have been bought by God. We have been bought with a price – the blood of Jesus Christ (1Corinthians 6:20; 7:23). We now belong to Him. This means that we don't live for ourselves anymore. We live for God. From now on, all our thinking, all our activities are done for Him. Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God' (1Corinthians 10:31). But it also means that God gave Himself to us. It goes both ways. Becoming a Christian not only means that we belong to Him, but also that He belongs to us. He has committed Himself to us in giving us eternal life in Christ. Now, eternal life is given to us not just for our enjoyment. It is given to us so that we do something with it. In that sense, eternal life is a God-given stewardship for which we are responsible. And it starts here on earth. One day, we will account for the way we lived our lives. God will ask us to explain what we have done with His grace.

Peter tells us in 1Peter 4:10 that every Christian is a steward of God's 'varied grace'. He says, *As each one (each Christian) has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God* (the believer is a steward of God who looks after and uses the gift he has. Two gifts in particular are mentioned). V. 11: *If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God* (the word of God). *If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever.* That is the goal, to live for the glory of God.

The apostle Paul has more to say about stewardship. He explains in 1Corinthians 4:1 that he is a steward of the gospel of Christ. And in the following verse, he goes on to say that what is required of a steward is faithfulness. *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful*. The supreme quality required of a steward is that he be faithful to his master. This applies to all believers, not just the apostles. God is faithful to us. It is our responsibility to be faithful to Him. And this is what was lacking in the steward of the parable. He was not faithful in running the estate of his master.

Bad stewardship

You probably noticed that the story speaks of a dishonest steward. We read in v. 8, *The master commended the dishonest steward...* But was the steward really dishonest? I don't think that the word 'dishonest' is the best translation. Let me explain why.

The reference to the 'dishonesty' of the steward alludes back to the charges in v. 1 where we are told that he has wasted the master's goods. But to waste does not necessarily imply dishonesty. In the Bible, this word *diaskorpizo*, to waste, is often translated by the verb 'to scatter'. Let's take a look at a few examples to get a better understanding of its meaning.

It is used in Matthew 26:31 where we read about a shepherd being struck down and sheep being scattered. *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'.* If you strike down a shepherd, the sheep have no more leader. There is nobody to care for them anymore. Then of course the sheep will scatter away.

It is used also in John 10:12 with the same meaning. *But a hireling ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.* Here a hireling sees a wolf coming. So he flees and leaves the sheep to be scattered by the wolf. They go in all directions, running for their lives.

We find the same word in the parable of the lost son where we are told that the prodigal son squandered his property. He scattered his possessions until he had nothing left. *And not many days later, the younger son ... went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living* (Luke 15:13). He squandered, he threw away his wealth through an undisciplined conduct.

And this is what the shrewd steward did. He squandered his master's goods. He wasted them in the sense that he was careless, that he mismanaged what was entrusted to him. But it doesn't mean that he committed any dishonest actions. Maybe he did, maybe not. The meaning of the Greek word *diaskorpizo* does not carry the notion of dishonesty. Yes, he wasted his master's possessions but that doesn't automatically make him a dishonest person.

An unfaithful steward

But doesn't v. 8 say plainly that he was a 'dishonest steward'? That is correct. Some Bibles have the word 'unrighteous', an 'unrighteous steward'. In Greek, it is the word *adikia* which has the basic meaning of 'wrongdoing'. It is used twenty-five times in the NT. And though it is true that in several verses it has the nuance of dishonesty, it is certainly not true for every case.

Take for example 2Corinthians 12:13 where Paul says, *For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this **wrong** (adikia)!* The 'wrongdoing' that Paul talks about is to have refused to take money from the Corinthians. It was not a question of dishonesty. The same point can be made in Romans 3:5. Paul writes, *But if our **unrighteousness** (adikia) demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.)* The context where this word 'unrighteousness' is found gives *adikia* the nuance of 'unfaithfulness'. Speaking for an objector, Paul is saying, 'If my unfaithfulness gives God a chance to show His justice and to fulfill His word, how can He punish me for that? Is He not unjust in inflicting punishment?' Here it is the notion of unfaithfulness that is emphasized, not dishonesty as such.

And I would like to suggest that in the particular case of the steward, it is also the notion of unfaithfulness that is in view, not dishonesty. He was unfaithful, not dishonest, in running the estate of his master. So his problem was more a problem of monetary mismanagement than of outright immorality.

You might say, 'But look at the story. How do you interpret the actions of the steward? The master had debtors and the steward cut their debt! He basically defrauded him. Don't we call that dishonesty?' Well, if the steward were being dishonest, then why did he remit, out of 100 measures of wheat, only 20 measures? Twenty percent is not that much considering that he was about to lose his job. If he really wanted to make friends who will receive him into their homes, he could have said to the debtors, 'Forget about the whole thing. From now on, you don't owe anything.' Why twenty percent? Why even fifty percent?

We need to discuss his dealing with the debtors in the light of the commercial practices of the day. A very important work was done by professor J.D.M Derrett of London University in England in his book entitled Law in the New Testament. The following explanation is based on that book.

An astute plan

You see, a business organization functions with the expectation of making profits. And one way of making money is to lend something with interest. Banks lend you money so that you can buy a

house for example. So you borrow the money and accept that you have to pay back an interest – the profit that goes to the bank.

We have a similar situation with the oil and the wheat. The steward told the creditors to reduce the amount they owed by 50 measures of oil and 20 measures of wheat. What he did was simply to remove the interest charge.

This means that a loan on oil carried an interest of 100% (50 measures + another 50 measures of interest on that loan, for a total of 100 measures). The high interest was a precaution against fraud which was not uncommon in those days. Dishonest people could easily cheat the lender by mixing cheaper oil with the more expensive one because methods to determine its purity were inefficient. If the commodity happened to be wheat, the interest rate was 25% (80 measures + another 20 measures of interest). It was much more difficult to adulterate wheat and therefore the interest was correspondingly lower.

You see what the steward was doing. Faced with the loss of his employment, he protected his future by getting the debtors to rewrite the bonds so that they no longer carried interest. From the point of view of the debtors, the steward showed great generosity to them. Though they were not aware of his motive, the story tells us that he looked for a reciprocal kindness that very day when he would be out of work. By doing a favor for them, he could require a favor from them.

Some might say, ‘It is still cheating because the interest belongs to the master’. Well, according to the Mosaic law, Jews were forbidden to take interest from fellow-Jews when they lent their money (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36; Deuteronomy 23:19). It was generally assumed that if someone has to borrow money, that person was in need. Therefore you should let him have what he needs without taking advantage of the situation. But later, taking interest was allowed by the religious leaders. Their reasoning was that the law was concerned to prohibit the exploitation of the poor. It was not meant to forbid business transactions that were mutually beneficial and where payment of interest amounted to the sharing of profits. So by removing the interest charge on the debts, the steward was actually bringing his master in line with the law. He gave his master an opportunity to show himself as a religious and law-abiding person.

You can see from this whole discussion that there is not much in the text to make us think that the steward is an immoral person.

Being as shrewd as the steward

Jesus said that the steward ‘had acted shrewdly’. Why? Because he correctly appraised his situation, made some decisions, came up with a plan, and did what was needed. The steward’s shrewdness is seen in his foresight and diligence to follow through and make friends in a way that they would be indebted to him.

Then Jesus sums up the point of the story in the second part of v. 8. *...For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.* Notice the shift from ‘the shrewdness of the steward’ to ‘the shrewdness of the sons of this world’ in dealing with their own kind. Jesus’ remark is that those of the world often give more foresight to their future, and in that sense, they are more shrewd in their dealing with people than are God’s children. The implication is clear. Believers, who have a heavenly future, should be as diligent in assessing the long-term effect of their actions as those who do not know God are in protecting their earthly well-being.

How would that be manifest? Put specifically, Christians would use their money generously with eternity in view. In the following verse, v. 9, Jesus says, *And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.* Jesus parallels the disciple’s situation with the parable. The steward, realizing that

his future was at stake, made friends by showing generosity to his master's debtors. Likewise the way to make friends for the people of the light is to be generous with their money. They do not set their heart on worldly possessions. They give some of their assets away to those in need or to help others find Christ. In doing so, their earthly investment will bring eternal benefit. Jesus put the same truth in those terms, *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven* (Matthew 6:19-20).

Money matters

To some Christians, talk about money may sound materialistic and unspiritual. Isn't it our attitude that matters, not our financial dealings? Jesus' sayings about 'laying up treasures' in Matthew 6 is followed by a universal truth: a man's heart will be upon what he treasures most. *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Matthew 6:21). Yes, it is our attitude that matters, but our attitude and our material things are not separable. How we invest our money reflects our attitude.

Money is in eternal terms a triviality, but the use of money is a measure of faithfulness and of a person's fitness for the greater wealth of the kingdom. Jesus says in v. 12 of the parable, *And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?* Here Jesus broadens the scope beyond money to caring for another one's affairs. If you cannot be trustworthy in caring for someone else's things, who will give you responsibility for your own things? Life is a test of stewardship. As we mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, we don't own our life. Our life belongs to God and we are no more than stewards of it. Our faithfulness in handling our life and our possessions determines what we will be trusted with eternally. If we handle them badly, we show that we are not fit to be trusted with greater things from God. If we handle them well, we will be given the true heavenly riches in the life to come.

Jesus' teaching in this parable can be summarized by these three points:

- (1) Each disciple, being a steward of God, will be called to give reckoning of the nature of his service to Him.
- (2) Preparation for that reckoning must involve a wise use of all our resources, especially in the area of money.
- (3) If we are faithful and generous towards others in this world, we will be rewarded with the eternal treasures of heaven in the age to come.