

Luke 16:1-13

The Unrighteous Steward

It might come as a surprise to learn how often Jesus spoke about wealth. After all, He never had much money. He did not own land (which was the measure of wealth in the ancient world) or a house. He did not have many possessions. Other than perhaps some carpentry when He was younger, He never had a wage-earning job. He was not financially independent enough to even be an itinerant teacher; His ministry was supported by others. Yet of the nearly forty parables that are recorded in the gospels, nearly one in three has something to do with wealth.

I think that says something more about human culture than it does about Jesus. Since the beginning of history humankind has been concerned about wealth. We know that writing emerged independently in three places (Mesopotamia, China, and Mesoamerica), though Egypt may be a fourth. In each case, the earliest writings we have are not religious texts or great epics. They are not laws of governance or moral philosophy. They are simply records of possessions. In fact, it is quite likely that writing evolved first and foremost as a way to keep track of what people owned (and naturally what taxes they had to pay as a result). The importance of wealth has not diminished. Today there are innumerable books on how to make money, invest money, save money, spend money, etc. Our anxious and covetous society is predicated on wealth.

Since wealth is so fundamental to our human condition, we should expect that the Bible would have much to say about it. For example, scripture talks about the right way to make money, “in all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Proverbs 14:23). Paul told the church at Thessalonica “the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). The Bible reminds us to be thoughtful in planning with regards to wealth,

“²³be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds;
²⁴for riches do not endure forever,
and a crown is not secure for all generations” (Proverbs 27:23-24).

And, of course, we are not to steal, “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). We must be free from the love of money, “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10).

The Bible also has much to say about how we are to use money. We are to take care of our families “anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). We are to use our wealth to support our country “this is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing” (Romans 13:6). And we are to use our wealth for the benefit of others “¹⁵suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, ‘go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16).

In this particular parable, Jesus used a character who combined incompetence and deceit in a way that offered an illustration of how Christians ought to think of wealth. It also gave Jesus the chance to expound upon a subject that He had spoken of before, namely coming to a clear understanding of Who we serve.

The Story

The scene had changed since Jesus finished the three parables about the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. Certainly His audience was different. Now, Luke records that “Jesus told his disciples” (v. 1). While there were, no doubt, Pharisees still in the crowd and listening, for Luke does not suggest that this was a private conversation, Jesus was directing this parable to those who followed Him. While the word used for disciples included not just the twelve but a wider collection of those who followed Jesus, it is clear that this is not a message of salvation, but of discipleship.

Jesus told of “a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions” (v. 1). The rich man was probably the owner of a large estate who had hired someone to manage the day to day affairs. The steward was not a slave. If he had been, he would have been killed, not fired. Remember the story of the steward who neglected his master’s business and was found unprepared upon his return, “the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers” (Luke 12:46). This steward was literate and was capable of managing the accounting for the estate. While some who performed those tasks were slaves, the way the owner treated this steward shows that he was not.

The owner arranged for parts of his estate to be worked by others. He was paid not with money, which was very scarce in those days, but with materials produced on the estate. He was owed a contractually defined amount. Furthermore, the amounts owed showed that these were not impoverished tenant farmers, but well established men in their own right who worked as part of a very large agricultural estate. The owner was probably never much at this particular estate. Perhaps Jesus was trying to create in the imagination of His disciples a Roman overlord of the senatorial class whose latifundia were rare, but not unheard of, in that part of the Roman Empire.

This steward was ‘accused’ of mismanagement. Someone had told the owner of his steward’s incompetence. The word used, *diaballo*, means to slander. It is the same root word of *diabolos*, from which we get devil. That is, the steward was accused by someone with malicious intent. We are not told who, or why, the steward was accused. Perhaps a debtor who felt he had been treated unfairly made the complaint. Scripture does not say. The accusation was that the steward was wasting his owner’s money. The same wording is used to describe the prodigal in Luke 15:13, where the prodigal “squandered his wealth in wild living.”

The owner “called him in and asked him, ‘what is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer’” (v. 2). Notice that the accusation is of incompetence, not illegal actions. If the steward had been accused of fraud, the owner would have brought him before a magistrate and begun legal proceedings. It seems, then, that the steward was simply not very good at his job.

But the owner was not particularly clever himself. While he fired his steward without giving him a chance to explain (thus implying that the owner knew the truth of the accusation and was not unaware of his steward's incompetence) he nevertheless allowed the man to remain at his post. Though told that he would not be the "manager any longer," as we shall see, the steward still held onto the accounting records, met with tenants, and handled contracts.

The steward used this to his advantage. Rather than trying to rebut the accusation (giving further evidence that even he knew he was incompetent), he instead pondered his options. His future looked bleak. "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg" (v. 3). He knew himself. He was a "white-collar" worker. He had neither the aptitude nor the physical constitution to be a laborer. He also had his pride. He was probably well known in the community, after all, he was responsible for the day-to-day operations of a great estate and there were not many in any one given community. Everyone would mock him if he became a beggar. The shame was too great.

Apparently word had not reached the tenants of the steward's downfall, and that made possible his escape from the dilemma. "I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses" (v. 4). The debts incurred by farmers were to be paid after the harvest. This unrighteous steward made the transition from incompetence to sin by deciding to reduce the amounts owed by the farmers so that they would be in his debt instead.

The steward "called in each one of his master's debtors" (v.5). Though only two examples are given, the steward must have called in more than two of those who owed debts. Jesus simply chose to give these two examples. When the first debtor arrived, an extraordinary conversation ensued. The steward "asked 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, sit down quickly, and write fifty'" (v. 5-6).

This was an extraordinary boon to the debtor. A measure of oil was about $8\frac{3}{4}$ gallons. That meant the original debt was approximately 875 gallons of oil. To produce that much oil about 150 olive trees were required. The cost of such a quantity of oil was about one thousand denarii, or the equivalent of almost three years wages for a common day laborer. This huge debt had been reduced by half. Now only about 475 gallons were required, still a vast sum, but obviously more manageable.

But the steward was not finished. "Then he said to another, 'and how much do you owe?' And he said 'a hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'take you bill, and write eighty'" (v. 7). Again, this was an extraordinary debt. A hundred measures of wheat would cost a day laborer about the wages of eight years hard work. To reduce the debt by twenty percent was a windfall for the debtor.

Three questions present themselves. First, why did the steward want the transactions done "quickly"? Was he concerned the owner might return at any moment? Was he concerned that the news of his demise would soon reach the ears of the village? We are not told, but the action adds urgency and a sense of evil to the steward's actions.

Second, what did the debtors think? I think it is reasonable to presume that the debtors believed the reduction was legitimate. It was not uncommon for a generous owner to modify a contract because of unfavorable weather conditions, such as an infestation of insects or any other of the uncontrollable calamities of the ancient world. Since the contract was made at the beginning of the planting season, and the debt settled with the harvest, there was a certain amount of speculation on both sides of the transactions. Long-term business dealings required a certain amount of flexibility for both parties to survive. For example, if the fulfillment of a contract would impoverish a debtor and perhaps require him to leave the area, there would be no one to work the land the next year. A prudent owner knew when to modify a contract.

Finally, what did the owner think when he discovered the work of the steward? He could not go back against the modified contract, since it would make him look greedy and as if he could not control his own employees. The owner was undoubtedly being celebrated for his generosity. He had no choice but to go along with the changes.

But it is the response of the owner when he found out that was the twist in the story. No doubt the disciples were waiting for judgment and a lesson on honest behavior or honoring those in authority. Instead, Jesus said “his master praised his unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly” (v. 8). The word, *phronimos*, means to behave with wisdom and insight. The owner was impressed with the way the steward had used the circumstances to his advantage. The steward had wisely planned for his future when he realized he had lost his position. The owner appreciated that. But notice, too, that while the owner praised his steward for his shrewdness, he did not hire him back. He was not that impressed.

And also, this raises another contextual issue. Some argue that the word used for owner in verse 8 actually referred to Jesus. That is, it was Jesus who was praising the steward. That cannot be since every other use of the word, *kurios*, in the passage refers to the owner. Jesus was telling the parable, not playing a role in it. Jesus explained this as He continued, “for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.” (v. 8). Jesus was not telling us to be duplicitous in our dealings. He was not holding up the unrighteous steward as a person to emulate. He was not encouraging us to cheat those for whom we work. He was simply stating the fact that sinners (that is people outside the kingdom of God) are often more astute in matters of the world, than believers are about the things of God.

Another interpretation is that Jesus was, in fact, praising the steward because he had saved the poor. This argument works something like this. Since it was against the Mosaic Law to take interest of other Jews, the Pharisees had designed a loophole that allowed such interest unless the Jewish debtor was poor. In the parable, then, the owner had charged exorbitant interest to all of his debtors, and the steward was simply remitting the debt of those poor Jews who couldn't pay and therefore was keeping the Law. It seems, however, that if Jesus were telling such a complicated and elaborate story, He would have given more details about those transactions and not left it to the imagination of His audience.

The Interpretation

We must again assert that Jesus did not excuse the steward's duplicity or unfaithfulness to the owner. Jesus was teaching that believers ought to be looking ahead shrewdly as they use their own resources.

Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and we ought to be preparing for that future. “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” (v. 9). This unrighteous mammon are the possessions of this fallen world - that is, our earthly wealth. All that we have here will one day be no more; it will pass away. But it can be used, in the meantime, for God’s kingdom and His glory. Jesus challenged His disciples to use whatever they have to further the kingdom of God so that when they die, they will be welcomed into heaven by those whom it benefited.

Jesus was repeating what He had said previously in Matthew 6:24. This ought not surprise us, since Jesus often repeated teachings that were especially significant and needed to be heard again and again. “¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). This parable is about investing eternally. The steward provides us with an example to be followed only in that he is thoughtful of providing of the future. We, too, will one day leave our present place of habitation. We, too, should be making preparations.

Also, Jesus was not teaching on being unfaithful, but being faithful, “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” (v. 10). After all, “a faithful person will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished” (Proverbs 28:20). One measure of the depth of our faith are the details. Jesus taught about “little things” as the best test of character. And so they are. The details of our life matter. They are important to God and therefore must be important to us as well. We cannot make excuses for not honoring God in the details.

We also know that it simply is not true that if we had more money we would be more generous. Some people have much and give nothing, other have nothing and give a great deal. It is not what you give, but what you hold back that is the measure of your stewardship. God’s economy has a different value system, “¹As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ²He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³‘Truly I tell you,’ He said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:1-4).

Jesus continued, “if therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust true riches to you” (v. 11). He was teaching that if we are not good stewards of our earthly possessions, it should not surprise us if God does not trust us with heavenly possessions prepared for us. We must remember that we are coming into an “inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). Therefore, we should “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

It ultimately comes down to whom we serve. We can choose to serve our own fleshly desires of this world or we can chose to serve God. We cannot serve both, “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” (v. 13). The word, *douleuo*, simply means slave. It is our nature to be a slave. We will be a slave to our own flesh, or to God. “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

That we cannot serve two masters seems too obvious to be disputed, yet we live our lives as if it were not true. We must remember that there are always conflicting demands on our money, time, and talents. We will never have enough. There is no such thing as having *some* religion. Some people have too much religion to enjoy this life and too little to enjoy the one hereafter. They are happy neither in this world nor in their religion. We want “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7), but that only comes with total commitment.

Takeaways

May we prayerfully consider how we can use all of what we have been given to further the kingdom of God.