

Luke's Gospel cont'd **The unjust steward Luke 16:1-13**

[The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Hello! First, I'll read Luke 16:1-13 from NKJV:

"[The Lord Jesus] 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. 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.' 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. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his master's debtors to *him*, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 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.' 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. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when [it fails], they may receive you into an everlasting home. 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. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches*? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? 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."

Switching the lights on.

Many years ago, I heard last week's speaker preach on this parable. That occasion was memorable for two reasons. First, for what happened that winter's evening in a small church in an obscure village in mid-Northumberland. Second, for what I learned for the first time about parables; and about this one in particular. Let me describe the setting. The service took place in a plain, early twentieth century church building, nicknamed "The Tin Hut." That's what it looked like from the outside. During the service there was a severe rainstorm, which made listening to the preaching quite difficult. The thunder and lightning disrupted the electricity supply and blew the main fuse in the building! In those days, a qualified employee of the Electricity Company was required to reinstate the electricity supply. Thankfully for the congregation the speaker was, in fact, a qualified electrical engineer who worked for that company. He was able to replace the main fuse and switch the lights back on. He then resumed his preaching.

But, second, he also "switched my lights on" as to how to interpret the Lord's Parables. His exposition of Luke 16 was most helpful to me, a young believer at that time. He said that we should always look for the overall message that the Lord was conveying in any parable; and that we should avoid trying to interpret every detail of the story. This especially is true of "The Parable of the unjust Steward" and many Christians do have difficulties over this parable because they do

not appreciate these facts. So, let me state upfront the main message of this parable. It's that Christian disciples must faithfully serve their Master with the long-term in mind, which will ensure they receive heavenly rewards and blessings rather than any present temporary material gain.

The context.

Now, I need to set this parable in its context in Luke's Gospel. First, it's the last in a trilogy of parables found in chs.14, 15 & 16. They are: "The Parable of the Great Supper or Feast"(14:12-24); "The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son" (ch.15) and this parable, "*The Parable of the unjust Steward.*" Here then is another clue to interpreting this parable. As last week's speaker pointed out, "The Parable of the Great Supper" is a picture of God, who has prepared great blessing which results in great joy for anyone who is willing to receive the Gospel; "The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son" tells what God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and God the Father have done, and are doing, to provide these Gospel blessings for all who respond to the invitation:

"Come, for all things are now ready" (14:17).

"The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son" clearly indicates that everyone must repent to receive God's forgiveness and blessing. Twice, the Lord stated that there'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine self-righteous persons who reckon they don't need to (15:7 & 10). Christian discipleship, which should flow out of repentance and belief, is taught in "The Parable of the unjust Steward" (16:1-13). God expects every believer to serve Him faithfully in appreciation of all that He's done for him/her. It's the only proper response to His mercy and His love. But the Master, also commands:

"Do [my] business till I come" (19:13).

Second, we need to consider the clause, "There was a certain rich man", in 16:1. It appeals to me that many, if not all, of these parables, or stories, were actually true – they really happened! Whilst this is not ultra-important for today's scripture, **it is** for next week's talk on the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus. They were real people and what happened to them when they died is absolutely true, even if the Lord used figurative language! And I notice that Luke doesn't even mention that today's scripture is a parable. It may be that those who heard the Lord knew the unjust steward to whom He was referring? That would have made the message even more poignant for His listeners!

Third, we must always understand who were the targeted audience. Note this contrast: He told the Pharisees and the scribes "The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son" (see 15:1-3); but then He turned to His disciples, in 16:1, to deliver His teaching on "The Parable of the unjust Steward" (vv.1-13).

The Parable itself

The parable itself divides into two parts:

1. vv.1-8 the actual event.
2. vv.9-13 its application to Christian disciples.

The actual story

The actual story is about a dishonest steward, who was fiddling his master's accounts. In modern-day parlance, he was diverting his master's income into his own bank account. It was fraud. He was found out and the matter was reported to his master, who immediately called him into his office and demanded that he present a full set of accounts of his management of his master's affairs. (I've just been watching a TV documentary about the Duchy of Cornwall, Prince Charles' estate. The people he employs to run his affairs on his behalf are his stewards, or managers. They refer to him as "the boss" because he takes such an active interest in everything that goes on. There's a yearly review meeting with him at which they must account for what they are going. His

nickname, the boss, signifies that he always requires his strategies to be actioned. He demands that because the huge Duchy estate belongs entirely to him as the Prince of Wales and not to either the Crown or the UK government! The Prince is a good present-day example of the master in the parable.)

The correct interpretation

Some people puzzle over the fact that when the unjust steward was carpentered, his master actually commended him for his swift corrective actions. Why should he have any pluses on his appraisal, as it were, when he'd diddled his master of lots of money and further compounded matters by instructing the debtors to pay back either 50% or 80% of their debts? The master **did not** commend him for his mismanagement but rather for his reaction, when the fraud came to light. The clue is found in the words used in v.8: the adjective "unjust" described the character of the steward; and the adverb "shrewdly", or "wisely", described his actions when he found himself in the predicament of being sacked. As a steward, he was a thoroughly corrupt, dishonest person. His master **did not** commend him for his immorality, but for the prudent way he swiftly acted in order to secure his future well-being. He reasoned that, because he was physically incapable of manual labour and to be reduced to begging was below him, he would win the approval of his master's debtors by reducing their debts. They would then feel obliged to provide food and accommodation for him. He astutely considered how he should act for his on-going self-preservation. That's what the master commended him for. The Lord Jesus said that people of the world always act in this way – they ensure they have a pension-pot, so to speak, so that their future on earth is securely funded. Interestingly, I was reminded of this fact recently by a friend who has just turned 60. He's finding proper employment difficult to obtain. He told me that he was glad that he'd been wise enough to pay into his personal pension immediately he started work in his teens. Therefore, he has enough to live on, with or without employment, until he can draw his old age pension.

The application of the parable by the Lord to His disciples

I hope by this point in my talk that your light has been switched on! The main lesson of this parable is that the Lord Jesus wants his disciples to have the same attitude to their Christian lives as the dishonest steward adopted when he was forced to critically assess his future. That is, we've made the decision to live lives of faithful service to our Master now thus ensuring our future rewards and blessings.

What is Christian stewardship?

But before I talk about what the Lord said in vv.9-13, I need first to explain Christian stewardship. Christian stewardship is the way we use the gifts that the Lord has bestowed upon us to fully serve Him in our lives. 1 Peter 4:10 (ESV) exhorts believers:

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

There are two points to make about this verse: one, every Christian has been given a gift by God; two, every Christian also has been given the ability, or the grace, to be able to use his/her gift. This grace comes directly from the Lord himself. Ephesians 4:7 & 12 (ESV) explains:

"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." ...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

For example, the apostle Paul was given the responsibility of pioneering the Gospel to the Gentile nations:

“For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Corinthians 9:16-17, ESV).

Unlike the unjust steward, Paul’s desires were at the other extreme. He took his stewardship so seriously that he continued in 18-19:

“What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.”

What is required of Christian stewards?

Paul makes it clear from this scripture that Christian stewards are obliged to use their gifts. In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (ESV), he put it this way:

“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”

In Luke 12:42-47 (ESV), the Lord outlined the basic operating principles of stewardship:

“Who then is the faithful and wise [steward], whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating.”

Furthermore, our lifestyle must back-up our service. Consider church elders for example. According to Titus 1:7-9, overseers are God’s stewards of the Flock of God. They must live in ways which are beyond reproach - as well as being sound Bible teachers. Each one of us then must be faithful to our Master in whatever service He has committed to us.

Why must we be faithful stewards?

The Lord himself referred to faithfulness in Luke 16:10-13. First and foremost, He holds us responsible for doing His work during His absence. As we have seen from 19:13, He expects us to be engaged in His business until He comes again. Second, His love should motivate us:

“For the love of Christ [constrains] us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised [from the dead]” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, ESV).

But, as vv.9-10 state, we should aim to please Him because we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to give an account of our stewardship (see also Luke 19:15-26 & Romans 14:10-12).

The big issue

The real issue is that we must always give the Lord the first place in our lives. His service must be of first priority to us. Daily we must:

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

This crucial issue is brought out by the Lord in v.13 of our parable:

“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.”

Mammon is a transliteration of an Aramaic word for riches, that is, money and possessions - what nowadays we call wealth. The prevailing Jewish culture in the Lord's time was that mammon was a sign of God's blessing. That's why when the Pharisees heard Him say this, v.14 records that they sneered at him. But v.14 also reveals their hearts, “they were lovers of money”! Twice, in vv.9 & 13, the Lord personified mammon. Strong's Dictionary suggests that it was deified by those Jews, which brings into focus the Lord's warning in v.13 that it's either God or mammon that we serve as slaves! It's impossible for His disciples to do both! And this is a huge issue for believers in today's western world, where materialism abounds – it can so easily become our god and displace the true God!

The puzzle of v.9

Why is it then that in verse 9 the Lord encourages His disciples to make friends by means of unrighteous mammon or wealth? It's because wealth itself isn't intrinsically evil. After all, the whole earth is the Lord's (Ps.24:1). The Lord called mammon unrighteous because through its corrupt use, the sinfulness of mankind is so often manifested:

“Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:9-10, ESV).

However, if you use this resource properly and generously as a gift from God, then you gain eternal rewards. In vv.17-19, Paul follows with this advice:

“As for [rich believers] in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”

Faithfulness

In Luke 16:10-13, the Lord emphasised that everyone of us has received material blessings from God, whether little or much. Each must be good stewards of whatever has been entrusted to us. Faithfulness in our use of material wealth means our Master can confidently add “the true riches” to our stewardship. These are the spiritual truths of Christianity, especially the Gospel. And notice that it's faithfulness, not necessarily success, in service that He wants from us as we strive to maintain “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (see Jude 3).

Conclusion

In conclusion, if we act as faithful stewards of the material and spiritual blessings, which the Lord has graciously committed to us, we'll receive those eternal rewards He's promised. At His judgement seat, He'll be able to say to us:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk, number T1144 on Luke 16:1-13 about The Unjust Steward.

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