

The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Luke 16:1-9

Luke 16:1-9: 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.

Background Notes

In the first half of Luke 16, the Lord had some important things to teach His disciples about the proper use of money. If you consider yourself a disciple of the Lord Jesus today, then hear and practice what the Lord taught here. His teaching about handling money begins with what's been called the Parable of the Unjust Steward."

A rich man had a steward – a financial planner, or manager, to care for the estate finances. It was reported to the estate owner that his financial manager was squandering the estate's property. The manager was told to present his accounts along with a letter of resignation, because he was being terminated as an employee. The shrewd manager quickly called his master's creditors and reduced their bills so that these folks would provide for him when he lost his job (v5).

The shocking part of this story is that the estate owner praised this wheeling-and-dealing manager! This, of course, has led to a lot of misunderstanding about the interpretation of this story.

- a. It seems that dishonesty is being commended.
- b. It seems that the master, who is praising unrighteousness, represents the Lord.
- c. It seems that the Lord Jesus was teaching, "The end justifies the means."

A closer look shows that these apparent conclusions are not the correct interpretation.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are not commended for dishonesty.

In order to save some time, I'm reading from an essay I wrote on this passage some years ago, entitled *Smart Money*. (The entire essay can be found on the GCM website under **Devotions for Growing Christians**.)

"The so-called 'Parable of the Unjust Steward' has been disconcerting to many Christians because of its apparent approval of dishonesty. Before we look at the Lord's application in verses 9-13, let's try to clear up some of the misunderstandings that have surrounded the story itself.

"First of all, it is important to notice in verse 8 it was the *master in the story*, **not the Lord Jesus**, who praised the unrighteous manager. The King James Version uses the word "lord" which can be confusing, but notice that the "l" of the word "lord" is not capitalized. It refers to the "lord of the estate," not the Lord Jesus. Furthermore the unrighteous manager was not praised for his shady accounting procedures or squandering his boss's money. He was commended only for his *prudent foresight* in looking out for his own future. Further possible misunderstanding is eliminated when we realize that this account is not necessarily a parable, but possibly was a contemporary true story that Jesus related to His disciples to illustrate His teaching on money.

"If we view the account as a parable, we might see the rich master as representing God or the Lord Jesus Christ. Obviously, such a view tends to raise questions about God's righteous standards. Even when we realize that the unrighteous manager was only commended for his foresight, the unbiblical idea that "the ends justify the means" seems to be applied, if the rich man represents God. The fact that rich men do not appear in a favorable light in the rest of our Lord's dialogue in Luke 16 maybe a contextual indication that the rich man here does not represent God. Specifically, verse 8 seems to indicate that Jesus was *not* drawing a parallel between the rich master and God, because He concluded that the people of this world, masters and managers alike, are very shrewd in their dealings and maneuverings with one another, especially when it comes to money.

"A preacher today might use a contemporary story about the shrewd dealings between a used car lot owner and his manager and their customers to illustrate how people of this world deal with one another when it comes to money. So the Lord probably used a true story of a rich man and his steward to illustrate how the people of this world are very sharp and calculating in financial matters. The Lord Jesus said that the "sons of light" need to be wiser in their investments. A preacher today would press home the point that believers need to be more wise - shrewd *in a good sense* - in the use of money."

So the Lord was not commending dishonesty in this passage of Scripture. In fact, a better title for this passage might be “The Story of the Shrewd Steward” rather than “The Parable of the Unjust Steward.” The Lord was commending the wise and shrewd use of money, in view of the future, and in view of the fact that “you can’t take it with you”! Let’s face it: believers - who are the sons of light - do some stupid things with their money. Wouldn’t you agree? And that brings us to our second doctrinal point.

2. Believers are commended for prudence.

To be prudent means to think ahead and use good judgment and common sense in handling practical matters. That is what’s being commended here in this portion of Luke 16. Once again I’m reading from **Devotions for Growing Christians, *Smart Money***.

“Historically speaking, all kinds of shrewd dealings may have been going on here between the master, the manager and even the creditors. The master may have been involved in overcharging, or charging interest. (Charging interest was illegal in Israel, according to Deuteronomy 23.) The squandering manager, who was probably in charge of running the master’s entire estate, could have been carrying out the master’s unscrupulous policies, or he may have been overcharging the creditors himself to line his own pockets. The steward may have manipulated the books to reduce the debts of the creditors to create a fair price for the creditors (who were probably share cropper-type tenants on the estate), perhaps free of interest or free from his own profit. By doing this, the steward ensured friends for himself, if he should ever need their help in the future.

‘The creditors, of course, were more than willing to be involved in the “justified cover-up,” but by doing so they put themselves in a vulnerable position of being blackmailed by the unscrupulous manager. The rich master, to save face and reputation, commended the unrighteous manager (probably reluctantly) in spite of his wheeling and dealing, because of his clever forethought.

‘It is not possible to know the exact historical scenario, but our Lord’s overall application about money in verse 9 cannot be missed. In these verses, Jesus Christ teaches us the truly smart and wise view of money. If we learn and practice these basic financial principles, we will be well on the road to spiritual maturity.

‘In verse 9, we are told to exchange our money for converts. We cannot buy salvation for ourselves or anyone else, but we can use money, “the mammon of unrighteousness,” to help pave the way for people to meet Christ. Money can buy Bibles and radio time in order to reach the lost in faraway places. Money can send food and medicine to people who need to see Christ’s love in action. Money can support local churches and ministries that faithfully proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and that disciple and mentor new believers. “You can’t take it with you!” - but you **can** exchange your money for souls who will greet you when you reach Heaven! When it – money - fails, they - the converts - will receive you into the eternal dwellings, or Heaven. Would you like to experience the eternal joy of having people from all over the world thank you for helping them come to Christ? Then stop hoarding your money! Exchange it for souls!”

You can read the rest of this essay, *Smart Money*, on the **Growing Christians Ministries** website, www.growingchristians.org.

Here's an important question: Are you prudent in the use of your money? Not in view of retirement in this life, but in view of retirement and reward in eternity? Believers are commended for prudence!

Practical Application

Don't be a financial failure!

What's a sure way to be a financial failure? According to our Lord, you're a financial failure if you become a financial success by this world's standards! Verse 9: "...*make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon [money], that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.*" If you end up with a large bank account and large material and financial holdings in this life, you are a financial failure as far as God is concerned, because you did not transfer those funds to your *heavenly* bank account. And when the money fails - and it will "fail" when you leave this life - you will be a pauper because you did not "*lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven*" (*Matthew 6:20*).

How do you transfer money to your heavenly bank account, where it's safe and the perfect investment, as well as the only way that you *can* "take it with you"? Give it to the Lord now! Not to everyone who is asking for a handout, using glossy fund-raisers or emotional appeals, but **where you see souls being truly saved, disciplined, and blessed**. That's a wise transfer of funds! And you will be welcomed in Heaven by many folks you've never met before, but they will be there because you gave to the Lord! You will never regret it!

Don't be a financial failure!