

**Text:** Luke 16:1-13

**Title:** Parable of the Unjust Steward

**Truth:** We must be faithful stewards for God.

**Date/Location:** 7/16/2017 and revised 11/16/2024 at FBC

## Introduction

Do remember the grace of God from chapter 15. He is like the father looking for his son, the woman looking for her coin, or the shepherd looking for his sheep. He invites you, calls you, urges you to “be found.” Our Savior traversed mountain and valley to find you; He searched the world over to find you; He waited and watched and readied the fattened calf to receive you. Are you still lost? Christianity teaches not that man seeks God, but that God seeks man.

The lesson we learn from Jesus in this passage about the wasteful steward has some parallels to what we learned in the parable of the rich fool from Luke 12:13-21. There, we were reminded about the proper stewardship of resources in light of our earthly departure and warned against covetousness.

### I. You're Fired, v. 1-2

- A. In another of Jesus' teachings to the disciples, he told the story of a rich man who had a steward.
  1. A steward is a man who manages the master's property, money, and related affairs. He may even be charged with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the children of the household (Galatians 4:2).
  2. As with many jobs, there is opportunity for stealing—whether you call it fraud or embezzling or skimming or whatever. And, there can be opportunities to be lazy when the boss is not watching. And, there is opportunity, as here, for the employee to waste the goods of the owner. The word *waste* occurs in Luke 15:13 with much the same meaning: the prodigal son wasted all his possessions with a licentious lifestyle. It is used metaphorically; it comes from the non-metaphorical meaning of the word "to scatter" in Mark 14:27 and Luke 1:51.

B. Perhaps he spends unwisely or makes poor decisions about allocating resources. Doing that as a habit is a good way to get fired from your job. However, the owner did not know it for a while, until someone brought an accusation against him—perhaps another employee or an outside observer. Then the rich man took action.

We might suspect that the steward was wasting his master's goods without the master knowing about it. This sort of embezzlement would allow him to continue doing so over a period of time. This is quite different than the prodigal son, who was bold about his wastefulness. The end result was the same no matter the privacy of the waste.

On the other hand, the fact that the owner did not immediately fire him may mean that the steward was not so much a thief as an incompetent or given to selfish extravagance. Undoubtedly you can remember politicians or corporate employees who have been guilty of these sorts of things. Regardless, the steward knew precisely what the master was talking about.

C. He interviewed the steward, told him of the report he heard, and demanded an accounting of his stewardship. He wanted some hard numbers from the guy to see what has happened to his property and get things straightened out for the next steward. It appears that he was giving the steward a little more time to prove that he was honest, rather than cutting him off immediately. That seems very gracious. An immediate suspension and review would be more my style, but I'm not telling the parable; I'm just retelling it!

D. The bottom line was that the steward could no longer enjoy that privileged job post. He was fired.

## **II. The Steward's Sneaky Solution, v. 3-7**

A. The steward was a thinking man, but not a moral one. He had good reason to believe that the master was not going back on his word to fire him, so he had to figure a way out to pad his landing on the job market. We might surmise that he did not want to take a job requiring physical labor because he was lazy (and that he might

have been), but when push comes to shove, some job is better than no job. However, the text indicates that he was not physically strong enough to do hard manual labor (“I *cannot* dig”). He was ashamed to beg (and so should modern people, but alas, we wonder where shame has gone). He may have felt it was dishonorable to do that. Furthermore, he had lived a certain “higher” lifestyle; to be reduced from that to a lower class was not tolerable to him.

- B. He figured out a more sly approach (v. 4-7). What he would do is something that would encourage certain people to take him into their homes after he was fired. He would take the account balance of debtors and reduce it a significant amount. A creditor can agree to take a certain, even lesser, payment as the "paid in full" amount, and the steward had the power to do that too.
1. For one guy, he took 50% off his bill immediately. This was a huge reduction—because 100 measures of oil is equal to about 875 gallons. That is 16 55-gallon drums worth of oil! It may be that the steward had the man “take” the bill, meaning to take it and modify it so that the original record is destroyed.
  2. For the second guy, he dropped the debt 20%. 100 measures of wheat is equal to about 1000 bushels. A modern farmer's combine can harvest that in an hour. But to put it into perspective, a modern commercial bushel is 60 pounds, so this would be equivalent to 60,000 pounds or 30 tons. This has been said to be the yield of 100 acres of wheat back then. That is a big field! Even at modern wheat yields, it takes about 18 acres to get this much.
  3. He repeated this process for each of the debtors, one by one. Apparently there were quite a few such people. This shows that his master was a very wealthy businessman in the community. This makes me wonder why the steward was so dumb as to lose his prominent job...but sin does that to us. It blinds us to the blessings we have as it drives us toward other things. It can cause us to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.
- C. Notice that the steward was, once again, not obeying the owner's desire. The rich man had told him to “given account of your

stewardship.” He had not said, “And do whatever else you want while you are at it.” The steward was now robbing the owner blind.

### III. The Master's Response, v. 8a

A. What the steward did was *wrong*. Now his master was even worse off. Even worse, the steward had essentially paid himself out of the debts owed to his master. He wanted some payback on his "investment" of the master's money. You can call this by whatever euphemism you want, but God calls it stealing!

B. In the story, the rich owner knew all of this, and would agree with us, no doubt, that the steward was morally bankrupt. That was why he was about to be fired. But the owner did give a good word about the steward because he had been *shrewd*. He used his head and acted quickly and decisively to achieve a goal—and that is the point of what the owner is saying. He is not commenting on the morality of the steward, which is obviously bad. He should have been shrewd as a manager on behalf of the owner to provide a profitable return instead of wasting his possession.

1. The word for *shrewd* is the word for acting with thoughtful prudence, or insight and wisdom.
2. The combination of moral degradation and shrewdness is very dangerous, like a very competent computer hacker who uses his skills to produce viruses and malware. We would much rather have someone who is morally upright and shrewd, like a person who is a skilled programmer who defends against viruses.

I picked up this quote from a congregant: “Warren Buffet is a firm believer in hiring the right people. He famously stated, ‘Somebody once said that in looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don’t have the first, the other two will kill you. You think about it, it’s true. If you hire someone without [integrity], you really want them to be dumb and lazy.’”

C. Speculation: Perhaps the steward destroyed the old documents. This would prevent the owner from making a legal claim. The steward's cleverness may have gone even farther. Perhaps his master had added interest to the loans he had made. Thus he was

acting outside the law, which forbade usury and even interest in loans to fellow Jews (Deut. 23:20). Then, perhaps, the steward was knocking off the interest to get a benefit for himself. This was more clever because the owner could hardly accuse the steward of being bad when he himself had initially been bad in charging the interest! In this case, the steward would have been benefiting himself *and* bringing his master's practices into line with the law. In that case, he really would not have been stealing. Still, he was wasteful and not saintly in his own conduct. On the other hand, perhaps the steward was the one who created the usurious contracts!

#### **IV. Lessons Drawn out By Jesus, v. 8b-13**

- A. I believe the Lord's comments on this parable start in at 8b—for this text does not seem to fit as part of the story.
- B. Principle #1: "The sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light." The Lord's words apply just as much today as they did then. But what does He mean?
  - 1. It definitely is criticism. It refers to a level of simple-mindedness that "sons of light" = believers exhibit in their behavior. Worldly people take their situation and make the best of it for their (unrighteous) purposes. In a similar way, believers should use their heads to make the best use of their situations for their RIGHTEOUS purposes. We act naively, stupidly, unwisely.
  - 2. As such, it is a call for believers to be more astute—to be insightful and wise when it comes to their stewardship of money and the things and opportunities God gives us. We must use it to accomplish godly things—and in that way store treasure in heaven. We should work to get our lives in order and to make the most of every opportunity.
  - 3. If worldly people deals with others in a professional manner—to achieve their goals—we should do the same. Indeed in this case it was to get a benefit for the steward; but if he can do that, cannot we who have the Spirit of God do at least as well in a manner that achieves God's goals?

C. Principle #2: In particular, verse 9 records that the Lord teaches us to "make friends" using "unrighteous money."

1. What is unrighteous mammon? In the NKJV, this is a bad translation, because it is not a translation at all. The term "mamona" is basically written in English letters and the meaning is left to the reader to figure out. It would have been much better for the translators to render it as "wealth" or "property." This wealth is "unrighteous" in that it is very often used for unrighteous purposes.

Material things in themselves are not sinful; the people are the problem when they want things and misuse them and hoard them. God's people, who are not in this majority, are ones who use money and things for truly righteous purposes—and, unfortunately, not always do even they do so. But it is possible to use money righteously, even though it is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10).

2. What does it mean to "make friends"? You use money and things to win people to the Lord and help them in appropriate ways. In this dispensation, that means supporting the work of the church, its missionaries, and benevolent causes that explicitly bring Christ to the lost, etc. to make disciples of Jesus who will go into heaven before you (and after). Use every cleverness you can do that—like the steward but righteously and for a much bigger prize.
3. If we do this, then these friends will "receive [us] into an everlasting home." Recall that in 16:4 the steward was figuring out a way for these debtors to "receive me into their houses." It is the same idea here, only now not in parable form. The everlasting home is heaven. People receiving you there must refer to people who greet and welcome you there as you yourself enter, because no one can prevent you from entering except the Lord Himself. Contrast this situation to the steward who was only "winning" for himself a temporary home.

D. Principle #3: Faithfulness in small things means faithfulness in much. Ditto for the reverse: if you are unjust in small things, you will be unjust in big things. What's the difference? Only the size of

the issue—your character will drive you to do what your character wants, no matter how many zeroes are at the end of the check.

1. (Verse 11) As a result, if you have not been a faithful steward in the little material stuff that unrighteous money can buy and that God has entrusted to you, how can you expect to be steward over His big and important things? You cannot—because no rich man (or God) will entrust them to you.
2. (Verse 12) If you have not been faithful over the things that belong to another (God), how can you expect God to entrust you with management of your own things? You cannot.
3. In fact, the point is not so much “if you are faithful over a few possessions that God will bless you with more possessions.” He *may* do that. But the point is that you would be faithful and just in the small things (in this life), and then God will entrust to you the *true* riches, those eternal treasures that really matter (Matt. 25:34, Luke 19:17), nor any of the “previews” of these spiritual treasures in this life.

E. Principle #4: You cannot serve God and money. This steward was pretending to serve the master, but he was really serving himself by wasting the master’s goods, presumably on himself.

Two bosses in any business is a difficult tightrope, but when one boss is righteous and the other is unrighteous, then it is an impossible tightrope. It simply cannot be done. Greed for money is idolatry (Colossians 3:5), which is directly in opposition to service to God. You are either going to serve God and be a good, honest, faithful person; or you are going to serve money and be wasteful, immoral, and unfaithful.

## Conclusion

We have to be very wise about how we use the resources God provides; we have to focus on making disciples; we have to be faithful with little, even if it belongs to someone else; and we have to decide we are going to master money by the grace of God, so that we can serve Him and Him alone. He deserves all of our praise and service. Let's give it to Him!

This principle applies to more than money. I am increasingly convinced that it applies to our time as well. How can you serve two masters with your time? If you are not faithful in the small chunks of time that you have, how could we expect you to be faithful in the large chunks? And if you are not faithful in the small, how do you expect God to entrust you with more?

MAP