

Luke 16:1-13 The Parable of the Unjust Steward

INTRODUCTION-

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT-

It is important to remember that Jesus, in His humanity, was born to a Jewish mother and a Jewish stepfather (Mt.1:1-17; Lk.3:23-28). Jesus was raised to believe and experience what was normal for every young Jewish person. He lived in what we call the middle-eastern part of the world and was surrounded by a culture that is completely foreign to most western Christians today. When Jesus speaks He uses teaching methods, stories and unique Hebrew phrases, called idioms, to express Himself and convey His message. He embraces the Jewish storyline, beginning with Abraham, and often speaks from the scriptures referencing the prophetic implications regarding the redemption of the world, eternal judgement for sin, the afterlife and the necessity of hearing and obeying God in the present-tense.

JESUS' AUDIENCE-

In our story Jesus is speaking to His disciples primarily. Jesus was recognized as a Jewish Rabbi, or teacher. To be called rabbi was a prestigious honor. It meant that Jesus was recognized by His peers as an expert in Jewish law, scriptures and traditions. Jesus would have had to undergo years of intense training and with great success to be deemed a rabbi. It was customary that a rabbi would have a band of disciples, often living with him, in order to teach and train them according to his manner and customs. It was a great honor to be invited by a rabbi to be a disciple.

CHRISTIAN MISCONCEPTIONS AND MISINTERPRETATIONS-

Because of Jesus' Jewish background, and the Jewish background of the scriptures themselves, the farther that the church is removed from them the more room there is for misunderstanding and error in our interpretation and application of scripture. As early as 58 AD anti-Semitism was creeping into the church as Jewish persecution arose in the Roman Empire. By the second century AD, Greek philosophy was being introduced by gentile leaders in the church as its early Jewish fathers died out. Because of wrong assumptions about the Jews themselves and including their persecutions within the Roman empire, a brand of theology, often called replacement theology, has developed within mainstream Christianity, teaching us that God is finished with the Jews because of their willful and persistent sin. Consequently, trying to apply a gentile philosophy to understand a Hebrew story has proved quite chaotic and confusing for students of the Bible generation after generation.

OUR STORY-

Lk.16:1 ¹*“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.”*

- Verses 1-2 presents us with the situation and the setting for our story. As was common in Jesus’ day, a wealthy businessman had placed a servant in charge of his business affairs. This is not uncommon in today’s corporate business world where an individual or a firm manages the wealth of a large and prosperous corporation.
- The servant in our story is no low-level employee who’s clawing and scratching his way through the first term of his employment. He is probably an estate manager who oversees all of the financial and business affairs of his master. He is capable and trusted with great authority to speak on his master’s behalf, to interact with all of the corporate partners and investors and to navigate the relationship with the small business owners that are providing goods and services. He is required to work together with small business owners understanding and sympathizing the challenges that they face and effectively navigate the complexities of the financial world at large while satisfying the demand of super-rich clientele who have business dealings and contracts with his master. The servant is portrayed as a self-absorbed scoundrel who misuses his authority at the expense of his own integrity.
- The master of the estate is in fact quite a wealthy man and not a part-time investor. As such, he has chosen the most competent man he can find as his Chief Executive Officer. It has been suggested that, in keeping with what would have been common in first century Palestine, the master of the estate was a landowner working with tenant-farmers who provided agricultural goods in return for the fair-use lease of his land. The estate owner, after having arranged the terms of the land-lease with local farmers, would begin to broker with other wealthy businessmen in order to bring these good to market or export them for sale elsewhere. This was a lucrative practice and quite a common one indeed (cf. Mt.21:33-34). The master of the story is intimated to be quite a kind and reasonable man (cf.Mt.25:24).

Lk.16:2-3 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.”*

- The master has apparently received irrefutable evidence that his CFO has been both wasteful and dishonest in his dealings. Because of the vast sums of money involved in these transactions (vv.6-7) the master stands to have lost significant amounts of money,

now largely unrecoverable, at the hand of his steward. More than that, though, is the matter of the master salvaging his reputation. His honor, a main-stay of the ancient near eastern value system, is at stake. In representing his master, the steward was proven not only wasteful and overall ineffective in bringing the highest rate of return, he was downright dishonest. How? We are not told in detail, but it is reasonable to assume that, at very least, he received a commission from each deal that he arranged. Commissions, possible kickbacks and overall trickery with his master's goods were probably all part and parcel of the stewards daily practice. After all, the master did not even have a copy of the financial dealings on hand. All had been entrusted to a steward who was motivated only by his own interest. Basking in the glow of possessing great authority in the community on behalf of his employer, this trickster waltzed about the financial district, company card in-hand, cutting deals, formulating transactions, mergers and partnerships all the while his only concern being the increase of his personal financial and social portfolio.

I think it is also important to recognize that this man was considered wasteful not because he lacked ability and resourcefulness (which he clearly did not) but because he did not prioritize his masters concern over his own.

*Consider the accusations of "*Wasteful!*" that were lodged against Mary of Bethany (Mk.14:3-5; Jn.12:2-5) by those who had nothing more than their own selfish interests in mind. In this instance it is possible that Judas showed an unusual ability and creativity in handling the financial assets of Jesus (consider Mt.26:15)⁰⁶ but in the end it was his lack of integrity to his master that cost him.

- As one prominent scholar has noted, Jesus' audience would have been expecting the steward to make a vociferous objection to his masters troubling claims. However, he made none. With his own honor at stake and the certainty of an impoverished and shame-filled existence just a stone's throw away, he quietly leaves the boardroom and considers the matter within himself. Such a display was tantamount to a public admittance of guilt. Apparently, the evidence against him was so undeniable that any type of protest at this point was simply a matter of show. It is interesting to note though, that the steward had not given up on the matter, only that he had to find some other way to rescue himself. Also, worth noting is the absence of any apology whatsoever, or even any attempt to try and resolve the matter directly with his boss. He has displayed absolutely no change of heart in the wake of his sudden dismissal. We are reminded again that even in disgrace the stewards only motive is that of self-preservation and self-promotion. How interesting, then, that in just 5 short verses Jesus will commend this man's actions.

Lk.16:4⁴ *'I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.'*

- The steward, having declined to speak in his own defense, has instead chosen to embark on a sophisticated scheme designed to extend the viability of his future employment all the while minimizing his overall loss and ensuring his future financial security. One must note the illegal actions of this man in this particular scene. He has by all rights been terminated from his employment with all that remains the command to turn in the financial records. His legal authority to act on the master's behalf has in fact been terminated (v.2). He then, under a cloak of secrecy, entices his master's clientele into partnership with his schemes at the risk of their own potential detriment. Schemes which, had they known about upfront, they would have never agreed to. For to sour their relationship with the landowner would have been to jeopardize their very livelihoods. In this verse the steward tips his hat so to speak and reveals his end-game. He is not out for revenge or vindication or even to maximize his profits on the way out, rather he is looking to make an impression on future employers whoever they may be. Stepping into this man's shoes for a moment will help us later as we look to understand Jesus' words of affirmation.

Lk.16:5⁵ *"So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'*

- Much has been written about the motivations and ethics both of the master and the steward in this story. Scholars have remarked on the dubious business practices of many ancient near-eastern landholders, presumably like the one in our story, while also being quick to include their chief stewards among the ranks of those who routinely abused their power to exploit others for their own gain.¹ Some have even associated them with the tax collectors of first-century Palestine. I tend to think that this particular association is one that Jesus had in mind and hope to develop that later on in this lesson.
- While we cannot know for certain how Jesus viewed his creation of the wealthy businessman, I believe that it is at the very least reasonable to conclude that to Him the intent of the steward's motives, were, in fact, deplorable. If this is true, then we may be able to shed some light on the nature of the steward's plan to rescue himself. Scholars and period historians mention the usual practice of what I will call *free-reign stewardship*. A steward endowed with nearly absolute authority on behalf of his master, often with little oversight (note the master's comments in v.2b) possessed the freedom to essentially do as he pleased with his master's clientele. As an example, it would not have been unusual for a steward like this one to charge a tenant-farmer double the price of what was owed to the master while he himself pocketed the difference. If this were the case

then, the steward would not have been guilty of defrauding his master in this particular instance although his overall motives were far from altruistic.

¹ See article, on-line ed., p.125-126;

<http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/UnjustSteward-Gaecher.pdf>

Lk.16:6-7 *“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.’*

- It should be mentioned once again that the steward realizes in order for his plan to succeed he must act with haste. In v.5 he is posing as one who is still employed by “my master” and here in v.6 he is urging great haste in drawing up new contracts knowing full well the potential for these contracts to be cancelled straightaway once the master realizes what has happened.
- We have mentioned in our discussions that the master was in fact a very rich man and in light of what could be expected in the ancient oriental business practice the steward also did quite well for himself. Here we are given examples, in modern day equivalencies, of the sizeable sums of money in view within our parable. Borrowing from *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*; Brad H. Young, citing the work of Joachim Jeremias; (*Parables of Jesus*), estimates the value of the discounted oil to be approximately 500 denarii, (a denarii equaling a day’s wage) and the wheat about the same, 500 denarii. In today’s economy that is the equivalent of roughly \$170,000.00. Jeremias also notes that although the discount is different in terms of weight, or measure, between the oil and the wheat, the monetary value is the same. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that this may well represent the steward’s [inflated] commission and if so that he was taking 50% of the [master’s] profit of the oil and 20% that of the wheat. Other scholars have noted the possibility of the master charging usury on the debt which was forbidden by Jewish law (Le.25:36,37).

Lk.16:8 *“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.”*

- Here we begin the essential task of mining for what exactly Jesus was affirming about the steward. First, it should be noted that the steward has been labelled as unjust, or unrighteous, by Jesus (88.21 ἀδικία, ας; [adikia] f: an activity which is unjust—‘unjust

deed, unrighteousness, doing what is unjust.¹). This is a stinging allegation to be sure. Consider Lk.13:27 where this same Greek word is used to describe the wicked. ²⁷ *But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity [adikia].'* Lk.13:27. **32.31 φρόνιμος, ον; φρονίμως [phronimos]**: pertaining to understanding resulting from insight and wisdom—‘wise, wisely, with understanding, with insight.’ φρόνιμος² We must understand that although the master is praising the wisdom of the steward, he is by no means justifying the ethics of the steward. As we have mentioned earlier. Consider Phil.1:9-10, ⁹ *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent...*

- Scholars have pointed out that Jesus is using the language of the religious sect of the Essenes here when He says, *“the sons of light”*. This was the name by which they referred to their members. The Essenes were a Jewish religious community who were largely isolated from the common life of Israel. They lived a life of ardent religious strictness and taught new converts to do the same. They saw themselves as the true followers of Israel’s God and even went so far as to consider themselves the *children of light* and all those outside of their community as the *children of darkness* with whom they were at war. Jesus seems to be alluding to the economic policy of the Essenes here with which He seems to strongly disagree. Renowned Hebraic scholar Dr. David Flusser in his work, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, in a section entitled, *Jesus’ Opinion About the Essenes*, records the words of the Essenes themselves. *“And the wealth belonging to the men of holiness who walk in perfection -their wealth shall not be mingled with the wealth belonging to the men of deceit who have not cleansed their way to be separated from iniquity and to walk in perfection of ways.”* (see 1 QS 9:8-10; G. Vermes). The Essenes held stringent views regarding money central to which involved keeping all moneys in house. They even went so far as to require converts to turn in all of their finances to the community to be used at the discretion of its leaders for the common good of the sect. In contrast, Jesus and the Pharisees, in keeping with the oriental custom of the day, encouraged generosity, in particular, to the poor, the widow and the orphan (Mt.19:21; Lk.4:13; Jn.13:29; Js.1:20)
- It is certainly possible that Jesus, in keeping with the terminology of the Essenes, is referring to other Jews outside of that group or even any other groups outside of the Essene community when He uses the term *“sons of this world”*. Jesus compliments the sons of this world because of the way that they make their money work for them (Mt.6:24) rather than by hoarding (see Lk.25:14-29) it because of religious sectarianism

¹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 744). New York: United Bible Societies.

² Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 383). New York: United Bible Societies.

which as we noted was rooted in elitism and hatred for others. *“Everyone who wishes to join the community must pledge...to love all the children of light...and to hate all the children of darkness.”* (1 QS 1:1-11). Obviously, we wouldn’t imagine Jesus necessarily condoning the unrighteous use of money, which is here not His point, but rather He is rejecting the idea of an isolational elitism reflected in the financial protocol of the Essenes. Compare Jesus’ own words in Matt.6:19-21; 10:44 and Lk.6:31.

Lk.16:9 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.”*

- Not to be missed here is Jesus’ definitive statement, hinging of course on the previous verse, regarding the Essene policy of hatred for outsiders as referenced earlier. Multiple times in the gospels Jesus is recorded as saying *“and I say to you”*, or *“but I say to you”*. The rabbis of Jesus’ day taught in the name of their predecessors. One might say for instance, *“Rabbi Gamaliel said...”*. This is one reason why the crowds were amazed when Jesus taught, because He spoke as one who had authority that was all His own (Mk.1:22; cf. Mk.11:27-33). So again here, Jesus is rendering a verdict regarding a particular interpretation of the law of Moses by the Essenes (see Lev.19:17-18).
- Jesus exhorts His hearers to make friends for themselves. This is the second act that he commends the steward for and it corresponds to the rejection of an isolational elitism built on a misinterpretation of God’s emotions toward sinful man (see Is.1:18). I would sum this ideology up under the heading of a spirit of religion. Religion tries to placate God and earn His favor by walking in so-called perfection. This is exactly what the Essene community did. They formed a system of separation from what they deemed as impure and gradually built an entire way of life around their views. But in their zeal for perfection they slowly navigated away from the command to love their neighbor, which Jesus recognized as second only to the command to love God and in which is summed up the message contained in the Law and the prophets (Mt.22:36-40). Instead, they professed hatred for their neighbor and for anyone outside of their religious community. Unfortunately, this same mentality is pervasive in the church today. Many sincere believers in Christ have walked away from the organizational church because of abuses and compromise by those in leadership and have sought to form their own communities or foster their own brand of godliness somewhere else. While it is not wrong to separate oneself from pervasive error and outright abuse in a congregation or ministry it is not just to impose such a label on every church, ministry or leader. Jesus commends the steward for reaching outside of his sphere, namely that of himself, and involving himself in the lives of others even if his motives were impure. Again, Jesus is not condoning his motives only that he began to think of the plight of others.
- To digress, let’s take a brief moment and examine what potentially the steward did to earn the acclaim of his master in v.8. Firstly, he was praised for acting with understanding,

the likes of which Jesus himself also praises in Matt.7:24 (cf. Mt.10:16, 24:45, 25:4). He understood that although his actions technically lacked authority, he had placed the ball, so to speak, in His master's court. There are a few variations to what could have been happening in vv.5-7, but in the big picture he has caused the master's reputation in the community to swell. His honor, prestige and acclaim for generosity would have become household news overnight. No wealthy man in his position would have done anything to damage that sort of repute even if it cost him money. As we have noted, the steward may well have been cutting out his own exorbitant commission and costing the master no loss at all. This of course, coupled with the growing popularity of the landowner would have made it very difficult to prosecute such a scoundrel for past offenses, which of course saves this man's reputation. We must understand that in the same way a wealthy businessman would praise the wisdom of such an unfaithful employee, by way of analogy, God will approve of those who likewise use even their wealth in such a way as to be rewarded by Him in the age to come. Consider the parallel use of such an analogy in Lk.18:1-8.

- ⁹ *"Now what I say to you is this: use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves, so that when it gives out, you may be welcomed into the eternal home."*³ -CJB I believe that this translation gives a truer sense of what Jesus intended by the phrase. *"that when you fail..."*. He was not prophesying the imminent financial failure of His followers, rather He was eluding to the brevity of life and the surety that money cannot save. *"So, in that case,"* I picture Him as saying, *"you too ought to make sure that your future is secure."* Just to recap for a moment, Jesus approves of the fact that the selfish steward changed His approach and began to think about the condition of others, though he was still using them, and this of course is in direct opposition to the financial practice of the Essene community.
- Jesus saw the management of money as a corollary to the heart's true condition and taking occasion, saw an obvious parallel to the influential Essene's in the former practice of the unjust steward. For Jesus, money was to be used as an expression of God's generosity and mercy toward others, whether that was in taking care of one's family (Lk.11:13), one's neighbor (Lk.10:29-37) or the poor in the community (Mt.19:21). And He assured His listeners that God took notice of such things and was a sure and generous rewarder (Mt.6:1,4;19; Mk.9:41).
- Jesus taught that when one became obedient to the command of God, especially His interpretation of such commands, that one had entered into the kingdom of God

³ Stern, D. H. (1998). *Complete Jewish Bible: an English version of the Tanakh (Old Testament) and B'rit Hadashah (New Testament)* (1st ed., Lk 16:9). Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications.

(Mt.7:21-23) and therefore what one did with one's money was indicative of such an entry (consider Mt.3:8 and Mt.19:21,23).

- Jesus was conscious of another age on the distant horizon, one in which the righteous would be rewarded (Mt.10:42) and honored for their choices and service (Mt.22:29-30; 25:46).

Lk.16:10 ¹⁰ *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.*"

- Now Jesus shifts His focus from praising the steward to contrasting his behavior with that which the Lord truly desires in His servants. The definitive judgment that Jesus makes about the unjust steward is that he was unfaithful even though Jesus affirms the man's use of wisdom and the fact that he eventually used his position and money to help those around him, albeit for the wrong reasons. In addition to this, Jesus now reveals the primary goal of his story, that is, to teach on faithfulness.
- To be faithful means to be one that is worthy of trust [**31.87 πιστός^b, ή, όν:** (derivative of πιστεύω^b 'to trust,' 31.85) pertaining to being trusted—"faithful, trustworthy, dependable, reliable."⁴]. The unjust steward was not worthy of the trust that was placed in him by his master because he did not have his master's best interest in mind. Consider this statement by Jesus, ²¹ *His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'* -Mt.25:21. In this Parable of the Talents the first servant was praised for what he did because he did it diligently and with his masters interest in mind (Jn.15:8; Col.1:9-10).
- Unjust [**88.20 άδικος, ον; άδίκως:** pertaining to not being right or just—"unjust, unjustly, unrighteous." Cf. 1 Pe 2:19.⁵]
- Apparently, Jesus considers money as "what is least" (Lk.18:22). Our use of money is an expression of what takes place in our hearts. Jesus emphatically makes the case that money is to be used to aid and assist others. When He evaluates our life (1 Cor.3:10-15;

⁴ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 376). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁵ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 744). New York: United Bible Societies

2 Cor.5:10), He takes into consideration what we have done with what He has put into our care. Money is just one example of what God considers the arena of our strength (Dt.6:5; Mk.12:30).

Lk.16:11-12 ¹¹ *Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?* ¹² *And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"*

- Jesus poses two identical questions to His audience concerning the nature of faithfulness and reward from God's perspective, which of course is in stark contrast to man's perspective.
- First of all, in human terms, the obvious answer to the question is, *"No one!"* Just as in the case of our story, a life defined by unfaithfulness is not rewarded by promotion. If in terms of something tangible and easy to quantify, such as money, one cannot be faithful, then, according to Jesus, we are to understand this as a measuring rod for faithfulness altogether (v.10). **As a footnote, when defining faithfulness, Jesus is not referring to momentary lapses in judgement, He is referring to willful and unrepentant laziness, carelessness and selfishness.*
- We are people living for another age. We are eternal beings created in the image of God and our lives here on earth are nothing more in terms of longevity than a vapor of smoke that's here today and gone tomorrow (Ps.39:11). We are stewards of all that we possess regardless of how little or how much (Ps.49:16-17; Ecc.2:18).
- The word *"therefore"* hinges together Jesus' statement in v.10 and His Father's desire for faithfulness on earth (Lk.18:8). God describes Himself as a rewarder looking to honor diligence (Heb.11:6). Jesus is interested in His people sharing the responsibility of leadership with Him in the age to come (Rev.5:10, 20:6,22:5).

Luke 16:13 ¹³ *"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."*

- Here again, Jesus reminds us that we are stewards, or servants. All that we possess, including our time, belongs to God. A steward is weighed and rewarded according to what he or she has done with what has been entrusted to them (1 Cor.3:12-13 [2 Cor.5:9-10]; 1 Pt.1:7).
- When Jesus uses the phrase translated, *"He will hate the one and love the other,"* He is speaking idiomatically. In Jesus Hebrew culture that phrase would have been understood

to mean that one would ultimately favor one thing over another (*Consider Lk.14:26) as is seen in His comment about loyalty at the end of the verse.

- Jesus warns us not to serve money for money is not our master. Instead, use your money, and everything else entrusted to you, to ultimately serve God and His purposes. When we embrace the love of money (1 Tim.6:10) and the deceitfulness of riches we give our Adversary a foothold within our hearts from which to wage war against the establishment of the love and purposes of god in and through our lives (Mt.13:15).

The Fully Repentant Heart and the Evidential Impact of Money: Introducing the Antithesis of the Unjust Steward

- *¹⁹Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ²Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. ³And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. ⁵And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." ⁶So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. ⁷But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner."
⁸Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold."
⁹And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; ¹⁰for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."
Lk.19:1-9*