

PARABLES: Luke 16 The Shrewd Steward

This is one of the more difficult parables to understand. Is only found in Luke 16
It leaves us scratching our heads as we ask, "Did Jesus really say that?"

We like parables and bible stories that have a clear moral lesson, but this parable seems sketchy at worst and simply confusing at best. There are numerous interpretations or spins on all or parts of this passage. It is quite easy to raise objections to most of the views that are offered.

That said, this passage did find its way into the NT and Luke thought it important enough to write it up (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit), so it is profitable for us.

Let's dig in...NOTE v. 1 the immediate audience is the 'disciples'. That term does not only refer to the 12, but to a wide range of followers, some of whom would be the less wise among the 'children of light.'

v. 14 – the over-hearing audience is the Pharisees.

The Unrighteous Steward

1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

3 The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.' 5 And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And 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?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He *said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

8 And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

10 "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. 11 Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 12 And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 13 No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

Like other parables, It leaves us scratching our heads. That shouldn't surprise us because we often see that Jesus speaks this way to get our attention. He makes a memorable point by saying the unexpected.

The LEAD: The contrast made here is between the sons of this age and the sons of light.

This is a "how much more" parable that makes its point by contrasting the children of this age with the children of light.

Those who are all in for this age as being all there is, are all in for making the most of this world by hook or by crook.

By contrast, the disciples, the sons of light, are not as intent on making the most of the eternal age for which they are waiting. HOW MUCH MORE should the disciples live according to the eternal kingdom?

Dishonesty is not endorsed. Jesus commends action born of wisdom in view of the crisis moment of the kingdom of God being in their midst. – Snodgrass p. 659 ff

Those who are the sons of this age are more serious about an age that is terminal than the sons of light are about an age that is eternal.

Life looks different when viewed from eternity, and with an eternal mindset we will handle money, time, and abilities in a different way.

Let's look at the plot of the parable:

The manager or steward of a wealthy 'lord' is accused of mismanagement. (crooked or incompetent?) He squandered a bunch of money, i.e. the same word used in reference to the younger brother of the Prodigal Sons parable.

We don't know who ratted him out, but the role of a manager was important for the wealthy merchants. The manager could represent the owner and set prices, often with a cut for himself or interest hidden in the total.

He is called in and is told that he is or will be fired. He panics because he'll have no job. He doesn't want to dig ditches and he's too proud to beg. And then, "Voila, he has an idea".

He had a plan to gain favor from the debtors so they would favor him when he is unemployed. With an eye to his future, he calls in some debtors and makes them an offer they can't refuse. He reduces their outstanding debt by 50 and 20% respectively. Since he's still the manager, he can do this legally, and those reductions represented typical 'interest' or additional charges common for those items in that day. In both cases, the amounts totaled large sums of money.

The steward determines that the current master may not give him a good reference, but perhaps one of the debtors will look kindly toward him.

Now comes the troubling verse of the text, v. 8. He is praised by his master for being shrewd/ wise or prudent. This is not the normal word for "wise". This is a term that relates to practical wisdom, or what we might call 'savvy'.

EX: street savvy or street smart.

The first part of v. 8 seems to be story, while the last part with v.9 seems to be a commentary from Jesus.

8 And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. 9 And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Dr. Rayburn and others point out that there seem to be three ways of understanding how this played out:

1.. The steward just rewrote the bills at a lower rate, cheating his master out of the money he might have earned. In such a case the Lord would be saying that the owner was able to appreciate the fact that he had been had by a clever rogue, that no matter the fact that the man was a charlatan, one had to admire his craftiness and his hutzpah. Or,

2. The steward had removed his own cut or percentage from the bill, so that the master still got his share. In this case the master's reference to his dishonest steward would then refer not to what he had just done in rewriting the bills — that was not dishonest — but to the behavior that was getting him fired in the first place. That's why we said that we didn't know whether the steward was actually dishonest or just incompetent.

The third alternative and one favored in a number of commentaries, but not in others, is that:

3. The manager was taking clever advantage of a then current Pharisaical legal fiction invented to get round the fact that the Law of Moses forbade Israelites from charging interest to other Israelites. There should have been no interest charged, so what the steward did, therefore, was to rewrite the bills without interest attached. As a result, the creditors were delighted. One author points out that the manager is counting on an ethic of reciprocity, i.e. his help would be repaid in the future. So, the creditors were happy, and the master was stuck. He couldn't complain without admitting that he had been charging interest to his fellow countrymen. [Caird, The

Language and Imagery of the Bible, 142]

And even if the master did NOT know about the hidden interest charges, he couldn't now demand that they be added in to what is owed.

i.e. this is a sort of shrewd 'extortion'??

If the third option is correct, then cancelling the debt of hidden interest he escapes from his own problem, he gains the favor of the debtors, and he actually ends up being faithful to God's commands against usury (lending at interest). – Stephen Wright – The Challenge of Jesus' Parables

The text doesn't explain how or why the steward did what he did. It moves on to the main point. – He acted in a shrewd way to insure his own future. He was a quick thinker. He didn't dilly dally about his future.

Jesus wants us to be 'shrewd or prudent' – but not in an immoral way, but in an enterprising way i.e. be alert, make the most of your time, be watchful against the schemes of the devil, keep eternity on the front burner of your heart, etc..

As 'disciples' we are to live in a way that shows that we are intentional, prudent, or shrewd about the age to come, that we really do believe that this life is NOT ALL THERE IS.

EX: "you only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get." That is the spirit of this age, but it is NOT the spirit of Jesus.

EX: "A generational divide" we know what that means, right? Well, Jesus is talking about two generations that are divided – the generation of this age and the generation of 'light' i.e. the kingdom of God, which is already present, but not yet fulfilled.

With this contrast, Jesus is pointing out that the children of light don't know how to live in keeping with the kingdom that is already present.

NOTE: IN DEFENSE of the children of light, it was hard for them to grasp that the kingdom was 'among them.' They heard Jesus say it because it was unexpected and not evident according to what they had in mind. The idea that the kingdom was 'in their midst' was new to them and they were learning how to be shrewd / prudent in relation to the kingdom and this age.

Being a 'disciple' means that we don't just drift along in this life, but we intentionally follow Christ. There are sermon series and books written on the teachings of Jesus about being his disciple. Following Him entails how we use our gifts, times, and resources.

Snodgrass – Stories with Intent: By way of summary then, v. 9 may be paraphrased "Put yourself in a good position through your use of money, which so easily leads you astray, so that when this age is over God will receive you into his eternal dwelling."

In an odd and uncomfortable way, Jesus speaks here about the use of money. He makes the point that in some way it will fail us. As we learn in the parable of Luke 12, Jesus warns about "every form of greed for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

*** Apply - Is there a crazy idea that keeps coming to mind that might open a door of ministry to others, and you keep thinking, "Somebody ought to do something about this."

THAT SOMEBODY might be YOU.

Is there an area of ministry or service that could benefit from your investment of time, talent, or treasure? There may be a new initiative that is waiting for the disciple who can make a 'shrewd' investment for the kingdom.

GRACE CHANGES THE PRICE TAGS so that we value what is eternal over what is temporal.

Or, it may be as simple as becoming a new investor of time, talent, or treasure in the current ongoing work of Highlands.

The prudent/shrewd approach impacts our lives in a day to day manner.

Are there things that you do because you are living in light of eternity, and you want to make the biggest investment in the eternal kingdom?

Are there things to which you say “no” because they don’t fit into your eternal investment portfolio? Things that drain your time, talent, and treasure in pursuit of that which is ‘vain and temporal’

REMEMBER THE LEAD- The children of this age/generation are more prudent/shrewd about succeeding in this world than the children of light are about the eternal kingdom.

They take this world more seriously than we take the age to come. This parable is another way in which Jesus says, “Be serious about what is eternally important.”

Friends, it is all too easy to get sucked into the rip tide of this age and its focus on self and temporal values. Our enemy, the Devil, the ruler of darkness of this world, is playing for keeps. He is seeking those he might devour. Are we prudent and shrewd in guarding our own hearts by investing our lives for what is eternal.

We might ponder these questions: (Dr. Rayburn)

“Where would the kingdom of God be if every Christian were as determined to seize every opportunity to lay up treasure in heaven, to make friends for the gospel, and to live their lives in that way the Lord will approve?”

What if every Christian worked as hard at godliness, at the destruction of his or her sins, and at ministry to others; what if every Christian sacrificed as much ease, as much time, as much energy for the sake of the kingdom as so many do for the sake of the fleeting pleasures of this age?

If people will go to such great lengths to acquire money – which will eventually fail us – how much more should we go to great lengths to acquire what will never fail us and will always be ours to enjoy!

“Only one life, will soon be past; only that done for Christ will last” C.T.Studd

Sometimes parables seem like a riddle and are hard to understand, but in v. 10-14 it seems all TOO EASY to understand.

V. 10-12

THIS principle is brought in though it may seem oddly placed. It is in line with the topic of worldly goods and wealth. Once again, this is ‘in your face’ Jesus.

Ex; Babe Ruth wanted to be a manager but couldn’t manage himself.

Basic biblical principles of handling money come into view.

Give generously – It all belongs to God.

Save wisely

Live off the rest – don’t live beyond your means.

Jesus seems to be saying that faithfulness in finances is a ‘little thing.’ IT IS NOT UNIMPORTANT, but it should be a no-brainer. The basic principles of stewardship aren’t riddles or brain teasers. They may push us out of our comfort zone, and we may not like them because they are so clear.

Jesus is telling us that Money is a terrible master, a terrible lover, and it totally fails as a savior. Money as Master is a problem that goes way back, and Paul speaks to it in 1 Tim 6

17 Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. 18 Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

Those words always seem to apply to someone else, i.e. the person who has more wealth than I do. ALL OF US in the US are richer than 90% of the people in the world.

We can't buy our way into heaven, but our stewardship of our treasure, time, and talents will indicate where we are in terms of our commitment to eternal values. Jesus explains that we can use 'unrighteous mammon' on earth to build up a foundation in the kingdom of Heaven.

i.e. Don't build the foundation of your life on the riches of this world. Don't let the presence or absence of "mammon"/ property/ money determine your view of yourself or of others. Don't put your trust and security in that which will eventually fail. Trust in God and be a steward of your treasure, time, and talents according to biblical principles.

If we can't be faithful in a little thing, such as money, then it will spill over into the other areas of our lives. If the little things are in chaos, then most likely the bigger things will also be in chaos.

Faithfulness in the little things that are clear builds faithfulness in bigger things that are not always so clear.

EX: a SECULAR version of this is J. Peterson - "make your bed" it is one of those smaller things that add up to big things.

These are challenging words from Jesus. We might even ask, "Is this Good News?" It sounds like Jesus is putting us on a performance standard.

Jesus was never shy about the demands of following him, but the Good News is that HE ALREADY MET THE STANDARD.

Jesus is the righteous Master who owns it all and uses it for our benefit and for the kingdom. He is also THE righteous Steward who acted shrewdly as the firstborn Son of light. Through His death He defeated sin and death so that we might have life.

This parable reminds us WHY we ought to live prudently as children of light.

v. 14-15 THE PHARISEES RESPONSE

14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

They weren't the main audience, but they were listening and scoffing = to ridicule or mock

Do we hear these words of Jesus and take them to heart or do we dismiss them as ridiculous?

AMEN

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