

### **Money, Mercy, and Eternal Life**

(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

So, the point of the parable is that it is ok to manipulate the boss's spreadsheet. The steward, the "unrighteous" steward, messes with his master's wealth ... and Jesus blesses him for doing so. Right? Jesus even says that His followers could learn a thing or two from the way the "unrighteous" steward acts! "*The children of this age [an unrighteous age] are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the children of light*" (16:8). Compromise with unrighteousness if you need to in order to get out of a jam. Right?

In our series of studies in the parables of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Luke, we have been saying that Jesus' parables are about the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom. So, in His Parable of the Unrighteous Steward, as it is usually called, Jesus is saying that in the Kingdom of God there is room for tricky self-interest. Jesus is saying that the God of the Kingdom blesses unscrupulous dealing. Right?

Every commentator I have read on the parable in first half of Luke 16, says it is one of the most difficult of all of Jesus' parables to interpret. Some say, it is *the* most difficult. Nearly every commentator uses the phrase, "bristles with problems." Some even going so far as to say the problems are unsolvable!

As I said in the introduction to this series, Jesus teaches in parables for a number of reasons. Clearly one of the reasons is to make us think. I quoted French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who argues that parables are designed, "to increase perplexity and to call into question the reader's understanding" [*A Ricoeur Reader*, 460, 298]. Boy, you can say that again! ☺ Especially about the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward!

I have never had to work as hard to understand a Biblical text as I have had to work on this parable! But I can tell you that all the work has been worth it! For this parable turns out to be one of the most practical stories Jesus ever taught. For through this story Jesus is helping us prepare for a crisis. The unrighteous steward was facing a crisis. And he, rightly, did not want to be homeless. We too are facing a crisis. And we, rightly, do not want to be homeless. Through His parable Jesus is teaching us how to prepare for the coming crisis so that we will be taken into our eternal home.

The text we read has two parts. In the first part – verses 1-8a – we have the parable. In the second part – verses 8b-16 – we have sayings of Jesus about money and wealth. Not only do most scholars call the parable "one of most difficult," they also say that it is difficult to see how the sayings relate to the parable! In His sayings is Jesus counterpointing the parable? Or in His sayings is Jesus elaborating on the parable?

Luke tells us – verse 1 – that Jesus “also” spoke the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward to “the disciples.” The “also” connects this parable with the parable Luke records in chapter 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or Prodigal Sons, or Prodigal Father (!). In that “greatest story ever told,” Jesus reveals the scandalous love of God. “This man welcomes sinners and tax-collectors,” the scribes and Pharisees say in disgust and anger (15:1-2). Jesus responds to this accusation with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Sons, Father. And then in Luke 16 Jesus “also” speaks the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward. The “also” is telling us that the two parables are related.

How are they related?

Luke 15 – the scandalous love of God.

Luke 16 – here is how you live the scandalous love of God.

Luke 15 –the gospel of unexpected and undeserved love.

Luke 16 – this is how you act when you experience unexpected and undeserved love.

Now, before we work our way through the text, through both the sayings and the parable, let us step back from the text and see and hear it in the larger context of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Have you ever noticed just how much of Jesus’ teaching deals with our finances? Have you ever noticed just how many times Jesus refers to wealth and all the issues involved with money? One-third of His parables involve the use of money (16 of the 47 parables). Jesus has more to say about money than about prayer and love; indeed, more about money than prayer and love combined!

Now, why? Because that’s life! We encounter issues around money all the time. To be human in this present world is to have a relationship with money. It simply is the way it is. Money is part of the warp and woof of our existence. And what Jesus emphasizes again and again is that money is not a benign reality. Money is a power, a spiritual power. This is why Jesus gives it a name: Mammon. A real power. A spiritual power. Not neutral. Requiring much spiritual alertness.

So, if Jesus is going to lead us into a new life, into the Kingdom of God, He has to speak about money; He has to teach us into a new relationship with money. He would not be our Saviour if He did not teach us about money.

The good news is that Jesus knows all about money. Jesus knows all the issues around money. Jesus knows how to live with money. Why? Because He was a man who had money. In His earthly life, Jesus had money.

It has been traditionally assumed that Jesus did not have money, that He was a poor carpenter, coming from a poor family, living in a poor village. And that He began His public ministry gathering around Him poor fisherman and poor farmers and poor artisans. And that Jesus therefore is quite naïve about the power of money.

But is this assumption correct? Rodney Stark, the Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences at Baylor University, along with other historians of the first century, is challenging that assumption. In his *“The Triumph of Christianity”* – which I commend to you as “must read” for discipleship in our time – Dr. Stark argues that Jesus of Nazareth more likely came from a world of wealth; or, at minimum, from a life of reasonable financial comfort.

In the book Dr. Stark is dealing with what he calls “the deprivation theory.” It is the theory about the emergence of world religions, “which proposes that people adopt supernatural solutions to their material misery when direct action fails or is obviously impossible” (88). It is the theory of people like Friedrich Engels (friend of Karl Marx), Erwin Goodenough, Ernst Troeltsch, and H. Richard Niebuhr.

Stark argues that the theory simply is not true. New religious movements do not emerge from the poor. They emerge from “privileged classes” (88), from people who have the luxury of time and resources to study and write. New religions emerge from people with money, like Buddhism and New Age Movements – think Scientology.

And according to Stark, Christianity is no exception. It does not emerge from the poor. It is a religion for the poor, and it is informed by the poor. But it does not emerge from the poor. According to Stark, it appears that Jesus’ parents “occupied a prominent place in the community” (90). They were sufficiently well-off to own property in both Nazareth and Capernaum. They were able to travel to Jerusalem every year for Passover (Luke 2:41), “something most families could not afford” (90).

Stark points out that Jesus constantly used examples involving wealth: “land ownership, investment, borrowing, having servants and tenants, inheritance, and the like” (90). Jesus was familiar with banking practices and employment contracts. Now, this may not necessarily mean Jesus Himself was privileged. But, says Stark, it does suggest a “privileged audience” (90). George Wesley Buchanan observes that Jesus’ parables “would have been pointless if told to people who had not enough wealth to entertain guests, hire servants, be generous with contributions, etc.” (90).

This is why Luke mentions those who supported Jesus in His ministry (8:1-4). Wealthy women drawn to Jesus, who under-wrote His and His disciple’s travel expenses, likely from the wealth of their husbands and families.

And Jesus’ disciples were clearly people who knew their way around money. Fishing, for example, was big business, profitable business, requiring many employees. When Jesus called James and John, Mark tells us they “left their father in the boat with their hired servants” (1:20). Mark tells us that Peter owned two homes, one in Bethsaida, the other in Capernaum. Mark’s mother owned a home in Jerusalem, large enough to house the emerging church (Acts 12:12). We could go on.

All this has made me re-think that powerful line in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: “For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). I have preached the text at Christmas many times, announcing the good news that Jesus Christ the Lord of Glory, rich beyond measure, leaves the comfort of heaven and comes down for us that we might have what He has. And that is true! But it is not what the text is saying. Paul makes the great declaration in the context of raising funds for the hunger relief efforts in Jerusalem. He points to the case of Jesus as what should motivate the Corinthians to give generously. Jesus – Who was rich in *this life!* – laid aside His privileged status and resources, so that He might live freely for others, in order that we might have Life in its fullness.

So, writes Rodney Stark, Jesus’ call to use the wealth entrusted to us for others, is not “a ‘poor man’s’ complaint against the rich,” which is how it is often taken, but “the statement of someone in a position to say, ‘Do as I have done’.” (92) Jesus knows money. Jesus knows His way around wealth, and chose to use it for others. So, back to the text.

As I said there are two parts. The first – verses 1-8a – the parable. The second – verses 8b-16 – the sayings on money. How are the sayings related to the parable? Has Jesus spoken the sayings to counterpoint what appears to be an endorsement of playing games with money? Or has Jesus spoken them to explain the parable?

I think it is the latter. Jesus is elaborating on the parable. He is drawing out more fully the movements of the human heart at work in the parable. So let us first listen to the sayings and then go back through the parable.

Begin with the saying in verses 10-11: *“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. If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you?”*

“Unrighteous mammon.” Jesus is not saying that all mammon is inherently unrighteous. Jesus is saying that like everything in this unrighteous world, in “this age” as He puts it (verse 8), all forms of mammon are compromised. Like everything else in this world, all money is tainted by sin. There is no “pure money.” But that it not because mammon is inherently evil, just that we live in a fallen world.

“Faithful with unrighteous mammon.” Jesus wants to give us the true riches, the fullness life in the Kingdom of God. But if we do not know how to deal with the riches right in front of us, how will we deal with the riches He wants to give us? If we do not know how to live as righteous stewards of worldly wealth, how will we live as righteous stewards of heavenly wealth?

But look and listen more carefully. Verse 10 again: *“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much.”* Is. Not “will be.” Most of us tend to read this verse as “He who is faithful in a very little thing will be faithful also in much.” That might be true. But it is not what Jesus is saying in the text. He is saying that those who are faithful in the little are faithful in the little because they are first faithful in the much. Faithfulness in the ‘much’ precedes the faithfulness in the ‘little.’

Jesus is saying that in order to operate rightly in this world with the ‘little,’ we have to be operating rightly in the other world, in the kingdom of God, with the ‘much.’ That is, we will not know how to relate to money in this world unless we have the perspective of the Kingdom of God. This is how G. Campbell Morgan put it: “The man who is faithful in his relationship with the spiritual world will be faithful in his dealings with money... I must be right with the much in order to be right with the little.” [*Studies in the Four Gospels*, 187].

This is what is going on in the parable. The steward ends up being faithful with the little because he becomes faithful with much. At the beginning of the story he is unfaithful, unrighteous. He has “squandered” his master’s wealth. How, we are not told. But after he is caught, he acts differently. Being caught introduced him to the kingdom of God, in particular to the mercy of the God of the kingdom. His master does not throw him in jail! A great surprise, and unexpected mercy. And in light of that mercy, that grace, he gains a new perspective, the kingdom perspective, and acts in mercy and grace. His relationship to money is changed. We will come back to this in a moment.

Thus the saying in verse 13: *“No servant can serve two masters; for he will love the one, and despise the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”*

It is not often that Jesus speaks so absolutely. It is not often Jesus speaks of impossibility. “You cannot.” Not just “you must not.” Not just, “it is not a good idea to try.” “You cannot.” It is not possible. It cannot be both-and: both God and money. It has to be either-or: either God or money. There can be only one God of our lives. Either the Living God or mammon. We either use money to serve God, or we try to use God to serve money.

And this is what the steward in the parable discovers. And why he then does what he does. When he was squandering his master’s wealth he was serving mammon. But then the Kingdom of God broke through. And he began to use mammon to serve God.

So, to the parable. Verse 1: “A certain rich man.” Although up to this point in Luke’s gospel the rich are not held in good light, I do not think we are to assume that this rich man is a dishonest, money-hungry man. That is, he is not complicit in the unrighteous deeds of the steward. He is a land owner. He rents out his land for a just fee to others, who then have the privilege of working the land.

Verse 1: “who had a steward,” a manager, an agent, authorized to act on the landowner’s behalf. Hired by the landowner to negotiate contracts with the renters. He is paid for his work. He either gets a salary from the owner, or he earns a “handling fee” for his negotiations. It is also likely that he “gets a little something under the table,” but this is not a factor in the story.

Verse 5: “the master’s debtors.” Renters, their rental fee being a portion of the harvest. Fair enough. The payment is due only after the harvest. In that day renters did not pay a percentage of the produce, but a fixed amount. This, of course, is a risk! For the crops could fail, the renters still stuck with a bill.

One renter has agreed to pay 100 measure of oil. The word translated ‘measure’ is *batos*. A *batos* is roughly 8¾ gallons of oil. 100 *batos* is 875 gallons, which is the yield from 146 olive trees. [Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 127). That is just the rent. The implication being that the renter is working with many more trees! We are talking high finance here!

The other renter has agreed to pay 100 measures of wheat. This time the word translated ‘measure’ is *koras*. A *koras* equals 10 bushels. This renter will owe 1,000 bushels, which is the yield from 100 acres. That is for the rent, with the implication that the renter is working many more acres! Again, we are talking high finance, very wealthy renters.

The landowner learns that his steward has been squandering his possessions. It is the same word used in Luke 15 of the younger prodigal son squandering his father’s wealth in the far country (15:13). We are not told how the steward squandered. We do know the charge is true for he does not argue. He knows himself to be “unrighteous.” The owner then, rightfully, dismisses the steward: “Give me an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be my steward” (15:2).

Then the surprise we already noted. The steward is fired ... but he is not thrown in jail! I owe this insight to Kenneth Bailey. The first century hearers of the parable would expect jail. And they would have been surprised by the landowner not demanding jail. This means the steward experiences mercy. Mercy is not being given what I deserve. Justice is being given what I deserve. The steward deserves justice – jail. He gets mercy.

Like the younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – surprised by mercy. And like the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Sons – surprised by mercy.

The steward then faces a crisis. He is out of work. He is not strong enough to dig. And he is too ashamed to beg. So he talks to himself. Not a bad first move in a crisis. Verse 4: "I know what I will do." Literally, "I have come to the knowledge of what I will do." Because of mercy, I think. He came to the knowledge of what to do because he has experienced mercy.

He summons the renters, the debtors. They do not know that he has been fired. Which explains the "quickly" in verse 6: "Sit down and write quickly." The steward has to act before the renters find out he is fired.

The renters, therefore, assume the steward is still acting on landowner's behalf, that he is acting with the landowner's authority. The renters, therefore, assume that what the steward is doing has the landowner's approval and blessing. If the renters thought the steward was acting on his own, they would not deal with him.

So the steward changes the rental agreements. He reduces the amount due after the harvest. 100 measures of oil is reduced to 50. 875 gallons reduced to 437½. 100 measures of wheat is reduced to 80. 1,000 bushels reduced to 800. I am told that when these harvests are turned into cash they represent the same dollar amount of reduction in rent.

When the master discovers what the steward has done ... another surprise! The master praises the steward!

Take careful note of the steward's motive. Verse 4: "*so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.*" Notice that Jesus calls us to the same motive in His summary of the parable. Verse 9: "*Make friends for yourselves by the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*" "Receive." "Welcome." Same word group as that used in Luke 15:1 – "This man receives, welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The steward is facing a crisis. He has lost his job. Who will hire him with the stigma of having squandering the landowner's possessions? He has to prepare for his future. So he acts in a way that "makes friends." Friends, who because of the unexpected mercy they received from the steward, will receive, welcome him into their homes.

And the landowner ... who is going to now lose rental income ... praises the steward for being so shrewd. The word translated 'shrewd' is a wisdom word, a Proverbs word. For it also means to act prudently, wisely. The landowner praises the steward for acting in a wise, prudent way, to prepare for his future. The landowner is praising the steward's "far-sighted realism" and "resourceful acumen." [George Caird, *St. Luke*, 186]

But is not the steward also acting wrongly? Does he have the right to reduce the rental agreements on his own? He is causing the landowner to lose income. Is this righteous?

Commentators wrestle with this, as do we. Some argue that the steward had simply changed the rental contracts by forgoing his "handling fee." He has taken out his own profit. A hefty one! But a possible interpretation.

Others argue that the steward had simply taken the interest out of the contracts. It was against Jewish law to charge interest. God had spoken clearly about usury [Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Dt. 23:19-20]. So the steward takes out what should not have been there in the first place. A hefty interest! If this is the case, it calls into question the integrity of the landowner.

I do not think the issue is whether the steward acts justly or not. The issue is how to deal with the crisis of possible homelessness. The steward is praised because he acts wisely in face of the crisis; he acts prudently to prepare for the future. And Jesus then exhorts us to do the same. We too need to act with similar “far-sighted realism” and “resourceful acumen.”

So, the point of the parable in light of the sayings is .... two points.

One, the steward does mercy out of mercy. He has experienced mercy. And so he extends mercy. It is the way it works with mercy. When you experience mercy you cannot but extend mercy. The steward has been given unexpected mercy. And so he gives much unexpected mercy. That is, in the face of the crisis he banks his future on mercy.

I use the word “bank” intentionally. He has no other hope for the future but mercy. So he banks on mercy by pouring mercy on others. And Jesus is calling us to do the same. We have received mercy. Immense mercy. And because we have, we bank on the mercy by extending mercy to others.

Thus, the second point of the parable. And why I said at the beginning that this parable is one of the most “practical” parables Jesus ever spoke. Mercy is expressed through what we do with money.

Verse 9 again: *“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the unrighteousness of mammon, that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”* The “they” is likely a Jewish way of saying God and God’s heavenly entourage. Make friends by means of mammon, like the steward did, that God may receive you into eternal life.

Do not serve mammon. Mammon will eat us up if we serve it. It is a real power that wants to take hold of us... to make us its slave. Do not serve mammon. Rather, use mammon. Use mammon in face of the crisis. Use mammon to prepare for the future.

For “it will fail,” says Jesus. That is the crisis. Mammon will fail. All forms of mammon will fail in all kinds of ways. As we painfully see in the Philippines right now. Gone. Overnight. Everything. “It will fail.” Definitely so when we die. It simply will not count for anything in that moment.

The only thing about mammon that will count in that moment is what we did with mammon. Whatever mammon you and I have, we have because of mercy. And we live out mercy by using mammon to extend mercy.

This is why the Pharisees scoffed at Jesus. Their disgust, “This man receives sinners and eats with them,” turns into outright ridicule. They think Jesus is stupid to tie one’s future to the way one uses mammon. That’s because, as Jesus charged, “they were lovers of money” (16:14). For all their piety their real god was mammon. They were banking it all on mammon. And they could, therefore, not handle Jesus saying we are to bank it all on mercy by using mammon to extend mercy.

Is the parable saying we buy our way into heaven? Of course not! What it is saying that what we do with money reveals whether or not we are on the road to heaven. Better, it is saying that what we do with money reveals whether or not heaven has broken into our lives, whether or not the Kingdom of God has taken hold of us.

There is only one way into eternal life: Mercy, the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. He does not send us to jail! He sets us free! And now one of the clearest signs that mercy has gotten hold of us is that we use money to extend mercy.

As I've been working on this parable over the last weeks, I've had this sense, that there are words plastered on everything in our home, and all my books, and clothes. I see these words: "Because of mercy. Therefore, extend mercy."

I invite you now to be still before the Master. And tell Him what you are now going to do about what He has been saying to you today.