

# The Unjust Steward, Luke 16:1-8

by Matt Slick

Many commentators agree that this parable is the most difficult of all the parables to interpret. In fact, it is interesting to note that there are other "unsavory" characters in Jesus' parables: The unjust judge, the neighbor who does not want to be bothered in the night, and the man who pockets someone else's treasure by buying his field.

The seeming incongruity of a story that praises a scoundrel has been an embarrassment to the Church at least since Julian the Apostate used the parable to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith and its founder. We need a more precise understanding of the culture that affects this text. The disciples are the primary audience, but the Pharisees are also included (v. 14).

Questions to ask:

- 1 Is the master assumed to be an honorable man, or is he a partner-in-crime with his steward?
- 2 Has the steward obliged the renters to sign bills for amounts greater than the actual debts?
- 3 Is his reduction of the debts merely a surrender of his dishonest cut?
- 4 Is the steward an estate manager dealing with land rentals or is he an authorized agent for a moneylender?

The most probable cultural setting for the parable is that of a large estate consisting of land divided into portions, where the steward is entrusted with carrying the business of that estate. The debtors are most likely renters who had agreed to pay a fixed amount of produce for the yearly rent. The steward was no doubt making extras "under the table," but these amounts were not reflected in the signed bills. He was a salaried official who, in addition, was paid a specific fee by the renter for each contract. The master was a man of noble character respected in the community who cared enough about his own wealth to fire a wasteful manager, and this is the key to understanding this parable.

Mishnah, a Hebrew term meaning "repetition" or "study," is the name given to the oldest postbiblical codification of Jewish Oral Law. Together with the Gemara (later commentaries on the Mishnah itself), it forms the TALMUD. Between 400 BC and the beginning of the Christian Era, the biblical laws (see TORAH) were intensively studied, applied to new situations, and supplemented by traditions of popular observance and by precedents established by prominent leaders. This material, long transmitted by word of mouth and known as the Oral Torah, defined the meaning of biblical laws. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the

Jewish scholars and teachers called tannaim continued to elaborate and systematize the Oral Torah. About AD 200, Rabbi JUDAH HA-NASI promulgated a collection of the most reliable traditions. This work, the Mishnah, became the official text out of which further Jewish legal development occurred.

1. Now He was also saying to the disciples, 'There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions.

Someone apparently cared enough about the master to tell him something was wrong.

Often tenants disliked the landowners and would not voluntarily help him.

2. And 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."

The servant does not know how much the master knows and may be frightened into divulging information the master does not have. So, he remains silent.

3. and the steward said to himself, "What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.

The steward remained silent. He does not defend himself. In the culture of the time, this is almost an admission of guilt. He thinks of a way to cover himself after he has been let go.

It is not known if the steward is fired now or later? Is he asked to get the books now or get them ready to be examined?

4. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes."

The steward acts as though he is not yet fired: he says, "when I am removed..."; yet, earlier, the landowner had said, "you can no longer be steward," present tense. So, it is most likely that he was fired on the spot. But, the word apparently isn't out yet.

5. And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, "How much more do you owe my master?"

The steward does not say "Hello" or "Friend." He is in a hurry.

6. And he said, "A hundred measures of oil." And he said to him, "Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty."

If the renters know that the steward has been fired and they agree to the deal they would risk being thrown off the land by the landowner, not to mention sinning in their dishonesty. The relationship between the owner of the land and his renters is a significant personal and economic relationship. "Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty" is an attempt by the steward to finish before the master finds out what is going on.

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."

If the renters did not think that the steward was acting with the approval of the landowner they would not have agreed; the risk would be too great.

In this account, the steward receives credit for having arranged such a good deal between the landowner and the renters.

The renters, would be very appreciative and indebted to the steward.

Generally, reductions of rent were expected if the conditions warranted it: a dried spring, fruit trees drying, drought, etc. But the renters would have to ask for the reduction and then proceed to haggle. Here, though, the reduction is unsolicited.

8. And his master praised the unrighteous steward 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.

Why does the landowner praise the unjust steward?

It would be quite safe to assume that there is some sort of celebrating occurring in the homes of the renters as they rejoice in, what they think is, the generosity of the landowner.

Soon the whole community would be aware of the kind heartedness of the landowner and would be happy with the renters as well as thinking honorably of the generous landowner.

He has two alternatives: First, he could gather the renters and tell them that the reductions were unauthorized and thereby showing his stinginess and risking ridicule from them and the community. Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise that is even now being showered on him, and allow the clever steward to get away with the scheme.

Obviously, the steward knew the master was a generous person, otherwise he would not have taken such a risk; after all, he wasn't jailed to begin with.

In verse 9 Jesus is not praising the dishonesty, but the ability of the steward to recognize the generosity of his master, see what was coming, and use

what he had at the time to obtain something far greater: self preservation.

This is significant. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. God can condemn you to eternal damnation. It is wise to seek a way out of that. In fact, the judgment of damnation is so terrible, that praise is offered to the one who, in desperation, seeks a way out of it.

If the unrighteous steward was praised for trusting the master, how much more will you be rewarded if you trust the true and holy Master, the Lord Himself.

Jesus uses the rabbinic principle of showing "how much more." That is, if the widow got what she wanted from the judge (18:1-9), how much more you and God? If the man got bread in the night from his neighbor (11:5-7), how much more you from God?

What, then, does the parable typify?

- 1 God (the master) is a God of judgment and mercy.
- 2 Because of his evil, man (the steward) is caught in the crisis of the coming of the kingdom.
- 3 Excuses will avail the steward nothing.
- 4 Man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master who, he can be confident, will accept to pay the price for man's salvation.

The steward was vindicated because he completely trusted the master to be generous, to be good. He was right in doing so!!!

This parable is an appeal to people to understand the nature of God.

- 1 The nature of God: He is merciful
- 2 The predicament of man: he is sinful
- 3 The ground for salvation: complete trust in God.
- 4 How much more dishonest to God are we?
- 5 How much more deceitful are we?
- 6 How much more do we owe to God?
- 7 How much more merciful is God than the rich man?

God (the master) is a God of judgment and mercy. Because of the steward's evil behavior, he is found out. This is representative of the coming kingdom of God and its associated judgment. Excuses will avail the steward nothing. Man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master who, he can be confident, will accept to pay the price for man's salvation. This clever scoundrel was wise enough to place his total trust in the quality of mercy experienced at the beginning of the story. That trust was vindicated. Christians need the same kind of wisdom.