

The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Gospel Reading - “He also said to the disciples, There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’ 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, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors on by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (Luke 16:1-9).

The story of the dishonest steward is a mystery, begging questions that must be answered in order to get to the truth behind the character. Wise in worldly terms, spiritually he is a forgerer, thief, and embezzler.

Question One: What did the steward do to cause the problem?

He altered bills in which he reduced the debts of the clients by writing lower rates. Then when the owner of the goods fired him, the clients who reduced for themselves the rates would be indebted to him. So he would share with them the difference once he was thrown out.

Question Two: What is Christ’s aim in telling this parable?

Clearly, the aim is to say that the sons of light should have the same wisdom as the steward, but without theft and pilfering. Because this world is unrighteous, all its money is unrighteous. Man, therefore, must squander this money on the poor and needy so that all he has squandered may be deposited into a heavenly account. When he goes to heaven, he will find his account waiting for him; mercy and love from God, just as he has loved and had mercy on God’s poor on earth.

Question Three: What is Saint Luke's purpose in recording this parable?

The evangelist is telling the Pharisees and those like them who love and treasure money in this world that they will pay for it in the next. Soaking it up for themselves, they did not have mercy on the poor and needy. In hoarding it, they strove to become great so that the world would serve and fear them. There is here an evangelical lesson. All money unnecessary for basic needs should not be hoarded for this age, but rather, sent upwards, for a personal surplus in heaven.

After the end of the parable comes the ironic commentary of the master. He is the owner of this world, who is also called the rich land owner and by the steward, my master.

The Parable Verse by Verse:

1. "He also said to the disciples, There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward."

Christ here is still speaking amidst the multitude, and the scribes and Pharisees are listening, but Christ is especially directing these words to his disciples.

The rich man had a steward who used to deal with merchants. He sold them olive oil produced by his oil press and wheat from his fields. A truly rich man, his steward was legally certified and specialized in selling and collecting the profits. He had special rights in demanding debts, suing, and even shutting down businesses in the case of delinquency. Such a working relationship was usually in the form of a brokerage, but sometimes it was by salary. It appears that the steward favored the traders at the expense of the master, because he squandered the master's goods, and it was for this reason that the master dismissed him. The master summoned him immediately and ordered him to deliver the accounts of the stewardship along with all of the bills.

This will also happen to us when the Prince of this World, who is the devil, finds us unfaithful to him, because we waste the riches of his "unrighteous mammon." The riches of this world, whether few or many, belong to the unrighteous, regardless of whether they are gathered honestly or dishonestly. So when the Prince of this World finds us squandering his money over the children of the Heavenly King, he goes mad. In this world, he takes

out his wrath on the saintly children of God when they are generous toward the poor and helpless, and waste the money of “unrighteous mammon” on the works of which Christ has need on earth. Employees, traders or otherwise, they become extremely hateful to the Prince of this World. Whatever length of time they live, when they die, he will bid them good riddance with insults and perhaps persecution and illness. This is what “Turn in the account of your stewardship” means to the Prince of this World. We turn in the account of his rotten stewardship and, God willing, approach heaven. There, we discover all the funds accumulated from our conversion of the “unrighteous mammon” of the Prince of this World to pure and holy savings, which are the gifts of God’s graces in heaven. It is a bold move, converting the impure money of this world into heavenly accounts.

When we are received in heaven we will be asked whether we have been dismissed by the Prince of this World. The one who has not been given a dismissal will not be received in heaven. The Prince of this World gives a notice of termination along with a certificate signifying lack of effectiveness in the world along with many other poor qualities to those who do not do his bidding on earth. Among them, he might list wasting time in prayer, going to church, throwing away the precious money of this world on people who are strangers in this world, such as beggars and the downtrodden, and maintaining strong relations with his number one enemy and master, the Owner of heaven and his Son.

2. “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, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.” So, summoning his master’s debtors on by one, he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He said “A hundred measures of oil.” And he said to him, Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty. Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” He said, “A hundred measures of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and write eighty.””

The steward was told that he was losing his position and was ordered to put the books and bills in order. He wondered how he would survive, since work was already so hard to find. He said to himself, “I cannot dig or steal (though he was, in fact, a thief), nor can I beg,” so his thought led him to embezzlement. The first merchant owned one hundred measures of oil (8.6 gallons or 39 liters according to the historian Josephus, but archaeological discoveries have shown it to be about 20 liters.) So they sat together and

forged the bills, making them 50 measures, which in that time was 500 dinari after the discount, no small amount.

He called the wheat merchant and did the same thing with him. He owed one hundred measures of wheat, but he told him, “Take your bill and write eighty.” As opposed to the measure of the oil, this was a sack that carried about 48 gallons of wheat. According to Josephus, one sack sold for 25-30 dinari, meaning that one hundred measures sold for about 2,500 dinari. In the end, his discount resulted in him stealing 500 dinari from the original bill, also a significant sum.

The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

Since Christ is the one speaking here, clearly by “master”, he means the rich land owner. There is here a bit of obscurity. One man he ironically described as the “master.” In the other man, the dishonest steward, he found wisdom, albeit unrighteous and not in the interests of the masters. He managed to live by moving the unrighteous money, which he, along with the master’s clients, had embezzled. Thus, he made a living when he was welcomed by those same clients when his master dismissed him.

Christ was asking whether it is possible for the children of the light to have the wisdom of this man, funneling upward the unrighteous money of this world. “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.”

Summary

It is evident from the story and from the behavior of the dishonest steward that this way of dealing with unrighteous money was wise according to the children of this world. Christ is asking us to act in the same fashion, not as a dishonest steward, but as wise children of the light.

The plain interpretation is this:

The unjust and evil world is the master. We, whether we like it or not, have been forced to be stewards for this master. We work, buying and selling, working in his governmental offices and in his private companies in agriculture, construction, commerce, banks, manufacturing, exploring space, setting down on the moon, etc..., all the while gathering money in order to

give him what we have collected. For him, we accumulate knowledge, data, and inventions to hand over to him. The best we can do is sneak what we can from him - from this unrighteous money - yet doing so with complete honesty, in order to give it to the poor, downtrodden, sick, and disfigured, that when he finally dismisses us (i.e., death) and we ascend to heaven, he finds nothing left for himself.

In heaven, we will find that our fund have been transferred from the hands of the poor and needy into the hands of the angels above. The entire lot is deposited into funds of grace, wisdom, and spiritual awareness for unveiling the secrets of the kingdom of the great King of heaven.

So we are qualified to work with God who is rich in mercy. This is better by far.