

The Unrighteous Steward

In the beginning of the 16th chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus spoke a parable that has confounded me for decades. (The passage is provided below.¹ It might be helpful to read the passage before proceeding with the rest of the article.) If it has confounded me, it may have been confounding to you as well. In this parable, a rich man initially is displeased with the performance of his steward and tells him that he will no longer be steward. Then, the steward, in order to make friends with the rich man's debtors, allows them to pay less than they owe and be free from their debt. Even though this shrewd behavior caused financial loss to the rich man, he commended his steward for his shrewdness.

After conveying this story, Jesus instructs His followers to learn from the story. As the unrighteous steward took action in order to be "received" into the debtor's houses, we too should make friends with the "unrighteous mammon." Since Jesus is righteous, I knew that Jesus was not teaching us to do something unrighteous. But why did He use the unrighteous behavior of this steward as an example? What about this behavior are we supposed to follow while avoiding unrighteousness?

I have always taught my students to refrain from running to commentaries for answers to questions like this.² I have been tempted often to violate my own principles and see what others have said about this perplexing parable. But I have resisted that temptation. On those occasions when I taught from Luke, I simply confessed that I did not understand this passage fully. But each time I read it, I asked God to clarify it for me. After all these years, I believe that He finally answered this prayer. I am now comfortable with my understanding of this passage. I still have not consulted any commentaries to see what they might say about this passage but I suspect there are probably some that share my understanding of it.

A steward's job is to protect and work to increase the wealth of his boss. A good steward is extremely exacting in all matters concerning this work. By nature, he is a "penny pincher" when it comes to his master's money. He makes it his business to watch over every last penny to maximize the wealth of his boss. If you have wealth, this is the type of person you want to manage your wealth.

In the parable Jesus spoke, the "unrighteous steward" knowingly failed to mind the interest of his master in order to benefit himself. His aim was to make friends with his master's debtors so that after he is terminated from his position as steward, they would accept him into their homes. This is the opposite way a steward is supposed to do his job. Yet, this is precisely how Jesus instructs us to steward the Lord's money. He wants us to "make friends for ourselves" with unrighteous mammon (money), so that when we "fail,"³ they may receive us into an everlasting home. Isn't this way of stewarding self-serving and unrighteous? While it might seem this way on the surface, we must take into account Who it is that gave us these instructions and also, the nature of His riches.

Since it is our Master who tells us to steward His money this way, it is completely righteous to follow His instructions. It is always right to obey our Master. So, when it comes to how we steward His money, we can abandon the "penny pincher" model completely and be very free with His money.

¹ **Luke 16:1-13** "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. 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. ⁴ 'I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' ⁵ "So he called every one of his master's debtors to *him*, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 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.' 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. 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. 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. 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? 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."

² See my article ["Burn Your Commentaries."](#)

³ It is unfortunate that instead of saying "when you fail/cease," many English versions wrongly say, "when it fails (or "when the money is used up"). They render it this way because certain Greek versions like the NU have the Greek verb κλίπη (which is third person singular). The Greek verb κλίπητε or κλείπητε is the one found in all of the more reliable manuscripts. This verb is second person plural- "you all." The inferior Greek versions opted to use the third person singular spelling even though only 2.5% of the manuscripts contain it and these manuscripts are demonstrably inferior manuscripts full of variances.

Let us now consider what comprises His money. Every last cent that we possess is HIS money, not ours. We are merely stewards of it. Jesus redeemed us with His own blood. He purchased us for His own possession and we are no longer our own. We don't operate as the Israelites did by giving a tenth of all they own. No, Jesus already owns us completely so we do not own anything at all. We are His slaves. But He has graciously given us the job of stewarding HIS money. As stewards of HIS money, we are to freely give it away as He instructed. He teaches us to use HIS money this way to "make friends" with those who will accept us into an everlasting home. He does not want us to be penny pinchers with HIS money. He wants us to give it away liberally just like the unrighteous steward gave his master's money away.

He approves of us being self-serving (from an eternal standpoint) with His money as long as we are not going to benefit in this life. He wants us to focus on the age that will come after we die (cease/fail). If we freely give HIS money away now, there will be rich habitation for us among the saints of God. Our eternal dwelling place will include abundant welcome among God's people.

By the use of the term "unrighteous mammon," it is clear that Jesus was specifically talking about how we steward finances or earthly wealth. He is talking about this world's currency in whatever form it takes in our lives. The people of this world value it greatly. Their lives are wrapped up in it to the point that they derive much of their self-worth and identity from it. As a result, the unbeliever is characterized by Jesus as someone who "serves mammon." (See Luke 16:13.)

God's stewards are not to relate to money in the same way that unbelievers relate to it. Unbelievers view financial wealth as something meant to serve them IN THIS LIFE. God's stewards are supposed to relate to it as something that can benefit them in the next life. So, in this life, we are not to "serve mammon." Rather, we are supposed to serve God as stewards using the unrighteous mammon. To the extent we end up serving mammon, we will fail to serve God. We will not be profitable stewards.

In the parable, Jesus instructed us to mimic the pattern of the unrighteous steward, but to do it in somewhat of an opposite way. The unrighteous steward's actions were aimed at pleasing himself in this age. He freely gave away his master's money in order to make his life more comfortable in this age. Like the unrighteous steward, we are to freely give away our master's money. But it is not our aim to do this in order to make our life more comfortable in this age. On the contrary, we are to use it in such a way that will likely make our lives less comfortable in this age. But we happily do so because Jesus is pleased when we give HIS money away. Our motivation is not based upon what money will do for us in this age, but rather, the age to come.

Notice also the contrast in the reward between the unrighteous steward and God's righteous stewards. The reward sought by the unrighteous steward had temporal benefit that was not even guaranteed. The best outcome for him is that his master's debtors might receive him into their homes after he is terminated from his employment. Not only was the hoped-for outcome in question, but the best he could wish for is to be accepted into their earthly, temporal homes. The word homes is plural indicating that they are just typical homes like you would expect to find all over the earth. In contrast, God's righteous stewards are promised to be received into AN everlasting home. The word home here is singular. It is a special home and one that will last forever!

Be forewarned. If you steward God's money the way Jesus instructs, you will likely be criticized. Even some Christians might call you irresponsible and suggest that you are failing to steward your money properly. The New Testament contains an example of a woman who steward's God's money as Jesus was instructing through the parable in Luke chapter 16. At the end of the 12th chapter of Mark, Jesus points to a woman who gave only two cents into the treasury while others put in much more money. Then He said, *"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood"* (Mark 12:43-44). Many people might call this woman irresponsible. How would she be able to eat her next meal? Where is her common sense? But Jesus commends her because she acted like the unrighteous steward in one way, but with a mind set on eternity. She freely gave away her Master's money. But her Master was pleased and promised that she would be received into an eternal home with the rest of God's righteous stewards.

Thomas Bear, July 23, 2019

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)