

The Parable of the Unjust Servant

A Bible Study on Stewardship and Surrender

Study Bible Studies Christ Church, Noida

Luke 16:14

Genesis 1:28

Luke 12:42-48

Luke 16:10

Luke 16:13

John 15:5

Joshua 24:15

Preamble

Here we are, back again with yet another parable of our Lord Jesus Christ — the parable of the unjust steward. This parable is narrated in Luke, chapter 16, verses 1 to 8; we shall also look at verses 9 to 13, so as to understand it in its right perspective. A first reading of this parable is likely to leave the reader a little confused, and it has puzzled many people through the ages, as several commentators note. How is it that an unfaithful steward, about to be relieved of his position, gains praise from his employer, when he goes on to end his career by stealing still more from him? Jesus could not, by any stretch of the imagination, have been commending such conduct; indeed, there is not a word spoken by our Lord that justifies dishonesty. What, then, was He telling us by narrating this parable?

The Wider Context

This parable is one of fifty-two parables narrated by Jesus in all; He could not have told fifty-two parables in a haphazard fashion, for we know Him to be a God of order. Many of His parables show a definite pattern of connection, one to another, and so, to understand this parable rightly, we need to consider the context in which it was given. The parable of the unjust steward is the fourth in a series of stories that begins in Luke, chapter 15.

The Pharisees and scribes knew that they stood no chance of winning an argument with Jesus over the knowledge of God, or the concept of redemption and salvation as He taught it. The best they could do was either to malign Him, or to try to provoke Him, at every opportunity afforded by their frequent and pointed exchanges with Him. Since His own reputation was beyond reproach, they attacked Him by association: if a man keeps company with sinners, they reasoned, he must surely have something in common with them — he, too, must be a sinner. Jesus answered them with four parables.

The first is the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). It tells us that every soul is precious to God, and worth every effort to save. The Pharisees and scribes saw only sinners; Jesus saw people waiting to be found.

The second is the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). Here Jesus reminds us that we will spend great effort on a thing we count valuable. The coin the woman had lost was a small sum, perhaps a day's wage; yet, though she had nine coins remaining, she searched thoroughly for the lost one, and rejoiced with her neighbours when she found it. If people value a small piece of silver so highly, how much more is a human being worth to God? If we grow so excited over the recovery of a lost coin, how much more excited is God over the recovery of one who was lost?

The third is the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Here we learn that God wants us back, even when we have turned against Him, and that He is able to forgive and forget every past wrong when a sinner returns to Him. The sinners who sought out Jesus are represented by the younger son; the Pharisees and scribes, by the elder son, too caught up in his own righteousness to see the worth of another's repentance.

Finally, we come to the fourth story, the parable of the unjust servant (Luke 16:1-13). Though we ourselves may find the story puzzling, the Pharisees and scribes understood its point perfectly well: they knew that Jesus was speaking of them. "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him" (Luke 16:14). As we work through this parable, we shall see that Jesus is also telling us that whatever little we possess, we should treasure as a gift from God — and that whatever we set our hand to, we ought to see through fully, rather than leaving it half done.

This is not the only occasion on which Jesus used the story of an unrighteous person to illustrate a point about righteousness; the parable of the unrighteous judge, in Luke 18:1-8, is another such case. To grasp Jesus' meaning here, though, we need to unpack the symbolism, so as to see clearly the principle He is illustrating.

The Characters

The master in this story is readily recognised as the Lord God; the stewards, as you and I; and the riches, as the blessings God has given us. When God created the world, He gave mankind dominion over all things: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). A steward, or manager, is thus a fitting description of our own role on this earth. A manager does not own what he manages; in the same way, God entrusts our lives to us to manage, but our lives, and all that we have, belong to Him.

Who, then, is a wise and faithful manager? The answer is found in Luke

12:42-48: "And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath. But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken; The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more." This gives us a clear understanding of the parable before us.

The Interpretation

Jesus gives us this striking parable of the relationship between a rich master and his steward. The steward, it appears, has not been handling his master's goods well, and the master threatens to remove him from his stewardship. The steward then devises a scheme to gain the goodwill of some of his master's debtors, so that they might receive him once he is dismissed. He makes unauthorised and dishonest reductions to their debts, and, remarkably, the master commends him for what he has done — praising him, in effect, for his shrewdness, though his conduct was entirely dishonest. The debtors, too, who went along with his scheme, were no less dishonest in what they did. Master, steward, and debtors were all, in a sense, cut from the same cloth — dishonest to a man, yet thinking nothing of it, so long as everyone came away the richer.

This lines up well enough with the business world as we know it today. Businessmen are known for their shrewdness in making money, devising deals by every means at their disposal — unfair trade practices, bribery, and worse. Some do it within the letter of the law; many others do not. Such people, given to malpractice and dishonest dealing, would not think it odd to see their own executives, or other stakeholders, do exactly the same, so long as all are profiting.

Jesus labels this whole situation the practice of "unrighteous mammon." Mammon denotes those who pursue riches — the greedy, interested only in worldly gain. This rich master, his unjust steward, and their debtors were all, it seems, of one mind in the way they conducted their business. Jesus then remarks that the children of this world are, in their generation, wiser than the children of light. He goes on to compare them with His own children of light — all who are born again in Christ.

Christians are bound by higher principles, and ought therefore to hold themselves to more exacting moral standards than many of their unbelieving business associates. A good Christian businessman can still turn a fair profit, without running over, or unjustly harming, others in the process; it is a question of how the game is played.

Reflecting on this, two key lessons emerge — one concerning stewardship, and the other concerning whom we are to serve in this life. Let us look at each in turn.

Stewardship

We see Jesus using a parable involving unrighteousness between a rich master and his steward; His calling their transaction "unrighteous mammon," and the steward "unjust," proves the point. Yet even within this unjust transaction, there are lessons for us to learn.

God gives each of us the opportunity to be good stewards. We are stewards over every blessing He has given us — a good position, a place in society, a house, a car, and all the rest of our earthly possessions are things entrusted to our care. By the same token, parents are stewards over their children; teachers, over their pupils; employers, over their employees; employees, over their own responsibilities — and so the list goes on. God watches to see how well we manage our possessions and our relationships, just as the rich master watched his unjust steward; and just as that master threatened to take away his steward's position, so God may withdraw the blessings He has given us, in various forms, if we do not handle faithfully what has been entrusted to us.

How does God reward a faithful steward? To be entrusted with more, we must first prove faithful with what we already have. If God has placed us in a particular calling for a season, He expects us to do our very best in it; if we fail to do so, we risk missing whatever He had prepared for us next. The same holds true of every possession He has given us. I believe that many Christians miss out on God's best for their lives simply because they fail to make the most of what they already hold; we grumble about our own smallness, envy others, and go about our present tasks half-heartedly, all the while longing to be something greater.

If God has given us a house, a car, or other material blessings, He expects us to be thankful for them, and to look after them well. If we do not, we should not be surprised if further blessing is withheld. We often hear people describe themselves as "self-made"; this is a fallacy — can any of us achieve anything at all without God's own hand upon it? All that we have is, in the end, His gift to us, and He therefore has every right to withdraw His blessing where we fail to manage what He has entrusted to us according to His will.

Jesus makes a telling remark about stewardship in general: "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10). In other words, the one who does well, and makes the most of the little he has been given at the start, will go on doing well, and making the most, when given still more — the same principle we see in the parable of the mustard seed. And the reverse holds equally true: one who is unfaithful in small matters cannot be trusted with anything greater.

A study of the lives of many great men and women of God bears this out amply. God has begun most of them at the bottom, giving them just enough to get by, and then watching how they handle that small beginning — planting, as it were, a mustard seed, and watching to see whether it is tended well. Those who have gone on to flourish in their walk with the Lord, and in their calling, are almost always those who first made the most of a small beginning; having proved themselves faithful at one stage, they were then entrusted with the next, and the whole process began again. This is how we advance in the things of God — not by demanding more, but by being faithful with what we already have. Many Christians fail to grasp this; instead of being diligent and honest with what little they hold, they grumble, and in their grumbling deprive themselves even of that.

This principle holds true in both the spiritual and the secular realms. There are many who never grasp it; they imagine the world owes them a living, and cannot understand why they make no progress, and so they spend their lives in a poverty both material and spiritual, and are miserable throughout.

There is enough in Scripture to show that God does have an abundant side to His nature, and that He can pour out abundant blessing upon us — but He will not do so until we have proved ourselves faithful at the lower levels first; He will not entrust us with abundance until He knows we are ready to handle it rightly.

Whom Will You Serve?

Jesus closes this parable with what I take to be the second great principle we all need to grasp. He says: "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). We have seen that the parable illustrates an unrighteous transaction between several parties — the rich master, his steward, and the debtors. This final sentence draws a clear line: every Christian must decide, for himself, whom he will serve in this life — God, or mammon, that is, riches, possessions, power, and position.

Who is to decide what we shall be in life? As children, do we decide for ourselves what we will become when we grow up, or do we allow God to

make that decision for us? Do we choose whom we will marry, or do we let God choose what is best suited to us? Do we let God lead, direct, and govern our lives through His Holy Spirit, or do we insist on controlling our own destiny and choosing our own direction?

To insist on going our own way is, in effect, to confess a lack of faith in God, a reluctance to surrender fully to His will; we would then grow proud of our own achievements, and try to confine Jesus within the walls of the Church, living the rest of our lives much as the unbelieving world does.

Surrender Completely to Jesus

There is only one way for any Christian to live this life, and that is under a complete and full surrender to our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything must go upon His altar. He wants total control of our lives, so that He may lead us into His perfect will and plan for us. His knowledge of all things is perfect; ours is not. He can prepare the way ahead of us, to help us take the next step upward; we cannot. He can protect us, and give us a life of quality, whether short or long; we cannot. This is why Jesus says, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5); He is the vine, and we are the branches.

The Bible tells us that with whatever measure we use, it will be measured back to us. If we give God fifty per cent, He gives us fifty per cent in return; but if we give Him the whole of ourselves, He gives the whole of Himself back to us. To receive God's fullness flowing into our lives, we must fully surrender every part of our lives to Him.

We must also remember that everything we possess is the benevolent blessing of our Lord. Nothing truly belongs to us, and when we pass from this life, not one rupee of our wealth, not one measure of our standing in society, will go with us. We shall then stand before God for His own personal judgement, and He will reward us according to what we have done for Him while we were here on this earth.

Our time here on this earth is not even the blink of an eye, set against the time we shall spend with Jesus once we cross over into eternity — for our time with Him is for ever. The Bible tells us to lay up treasure in heaven, where moth cannot corrupt it; some of that treasure will be the good works we have done for God while living here below.

Let us ask ourselves this evening some searching questions: whom will we serve — God, and the calling He has set before us, that we might do His perfect will, or our own agenda, following after the ways of this world?

Conclusion

Let me leave you with one classic statement from Scripture that sums

up this last point perfectly. Among the most powerful stories in the Bible is that of Joshua — a story that receives less attention than it deserves, coming as it does directly after that of Moses. Yet it was Joshua who led the Israelites into the promised land. He had wholeheartedly followed God, and was the first to lead Israel in, to defeat and conquer the enemies occupying the land they were to possess. His is one of the most powerful accounts in Scripture of a life lived rightly under God's call.

He made a statement that ought to be burned into the memory of every believer: "...choose you this day whom ye will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15). Jesus has made it as plain as He possibly could, in His own word, that there is only one way to live this life — under a full and complete surrender to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Let us allow the Lord to place us within His perfect will, and His perfect plan for our lives, and we shall never regret the most important decision any of us will ever make.

The parable of the unjust steward is but one more piece of the wonderful revelation given to us by the Lord, concerning what matters most in this life, and what we should each be striving after throughout our days. It is never too late. Let us make a firm resolution this evening that, henceforth, we surrender our lives fully into His hands. Let us take stock of all that we have, and resolve to make the most of it, whether little or much, and our Lord will bring us to the next level of our calling when He is satisfied with our work at the level where we now stand. Amen.