

The Unrighteous Steward

Today we are going to take a look at one of the most obscure parables in the New Testament – the parable of the unrighteous steward. This particular parable doesn't get taught very often, but it has a powerful meaning that is very applicable to our lives. Although this chapter is a little more difficult to understand than others, it is well worth our time.

This parable is about a steward who worked for a rich man. One day someone accused the steward of having wasted the property of his employer:

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Luke 16:1: “And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods.”

Since it was the steward's job to faithfully care for the property of his master, this was a very serious accusation. No master wanted to hear that his goods were being wasted. If the steward could not faithfully carry out his job then he was in danger of being fired.

However, there is one additional detail that we must not overlook. This verse says that the steward was *accused* of wasting his employer's goods. It didn't say that he had actually wasted them. It's worth noting that the word translated “accused” is an interesting one. It could also be translated as *slander*. The word carries with it the idea that the accusation itself is false. In other words, the steward hadn't actually been wasteful! Instead he had been a faithful employee. Yet, in spite of his good service, he was falsely accused of wasting his master's property.

Unfortunately for him, his master believed the accusation:

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Luke 16:2: “And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.”

It seems that the master didn't even bother to conduct an investigation, and instead decided to fire his employee on mere hearsay. That one false accusation cost the steward his job. Before the steward left, however, he had to face an audit. The master wanted the steward to give an account of the property he had been managing.

This unexpected turn of events caused a big problem for the steward. Once he lost his job he would have no way to support himself:

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Luke 16:3: “Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.”

In those days there weren't a lot of available career options. Most people were farmers, which was hard, backbreaking work. It seems that this steward couldn't handle the rigors of farm life. It's possible that he was an old man who just wasn't physically capable of it; we don't really know. All the

text says is that farming was not an option. Since he was not rich enough to live without a job, that meant the only other option was begging – and he didn't want to become a beggar. This steward had a problem.

However, the steward was clever. He came up with an idea:

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Luke 16:4: “I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.”

Technically he hadn't been fired yet, which meant he still had power. He decided to use his position in order to win friends for himself. He was going to do people favors so that when he lost his job, those people would owe him and give him a place to live. He would help them, and in return they would help him.

The steward put his plan into action immediately. Since his master wanted an account of his property, the steward called all the people who owed his master money:

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Luke 16:5: “So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?”

It turned out that a number of his master's debtors were in trouble, which gave the steward a chance to act. One person owed a hundred measures of oil:

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Luke 16:6a: “And he said, An hundred measures of oil. . .”

So what is this verse talking about? Well, a “measure of oil” was between eight and nine gallons. This meant that this person owed around 800 gallons of oil (probably olive oil, not petroleum). Now, I couldn't find any information on how much olive oil cost back in Roman times. Today a gallon of olive oil will set you back around \$40. Eight hundred gallons, at today's prices, would cost \$32,000. That is a pretty serious debt!

Now, owing a debt in the ancient world is very different from owing one today. In Biblical times you couldn't simply declare bankruptcy and then move on with life. You didn't walk away from the situation with a bad credit score. No, the consequences were vastly more serious. During the days of the prophet Elisha a woman came to him and told him that she was in debt. Look at what was going to happen to her if she could not pay:

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2 Kings 4:4: “Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.”

If you couldn't pay your debt then the creditor would come and take your family *as slaves*. That is what debt meant: slavery. As you can see, these debtors had a serious problem. They had a debt that they owed to the steward's master, and they could not pay it. Since they could not pay it they were in danger of having the master come to collect on their debt – and he would collect it by taking their children away. These people desperately needed help.

So what did the steward do? He helped them by reducing their debt:

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Luke 16:6b: “. . . And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.”

The steward reduced the debt from something they *couldn't* pay to something they *could* pay. They could now pay down the debt and avoid having their children taken from them. Thanks to the steward, they would no longer lose everything. This placed them in the steward's debt – they owed him a great deal because he had saved them from a terrible disaster. After what he did for them they would *definitely* give the steward a place to stay.

But this also helped the master as well. Since the debt had been reduced to something the people could pay, he would now receive some measure of repayment. It's true that he wouldn't receive the entire amount he was owed, but some payment was better than no payment at all. Everyone benefited from what the steward did.

The steward didn't stop at helping just one person. He helped as many people as he could find:

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Luke 16:7: “Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore.”

The steward wanted to have as many people owing him a favor as possible. Note, however, that the steward was still being careful about his master's property. To some people he gave a large discount, and to others he gave a small discount. The first person had their debt cut in half, while the second one received a smaller discount. But the effect was the same: both people were helped, both people were grateful, and both people would help the steward in the future.

This was a clever move on the steward's part. We don't know how old he was; he might have been young or he could have been an old man. What he wanted was a means of support that would last him for the rest of his life. He knew it would be difficult for one family to support him indefinitely, so he tried to build up favors from as many people as possible. He wanted to have a large network of grateful friends.

Interestingly, when the steward's master found out what was going on, the master was not upset. In fact, he actually praised the steward:

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Luke 16:8a: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: . . .”

Why did the master praise him? Because the steward had “done wisely” for everyone involved. The steward had done wisely for himself, for now he had friends who would help him in his time of need. He had done wisely for these debtors, for they would now be able to repay the debt and would not face financial ruin. And he had done wisely for his master, for now he would actually get something paid on the debt he was owed. Everyone came out ahead.

After telling this parable Jesus did something very unusual. In nearly all other parables Jesus proclaimed the story publicly and then privately explained to His disciples what He actually meant. This time, though, Jesus didn't do that. Instead He explained the parable's meaning *immediately*, so the Pharisees would know exactly what He was telling them:

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Luke 16:8b: “. . .for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”

Jesus said that the ungodly are actually more clever than the righteous, because they know how to use their resources, position, and influence to win friends. They work hard to get other people in their debt so that they would be owed favors. That way when they needed something they would have a network of people they could fall back on. This is very common behavior in the world. In fact, Jesus Himself commented on it:

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Matthew 5:46: “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?”

That is how the world works: people help their friends, and those friends help them in return. People buy friends with favors and then expect those favors to be returned.

Jesus is telling us that we need to start thinking from a heavenly perspective. Christians are going to live forever; we have been given everlasting life. Therefore, *because* we are going to live forever, we should be going out of our way to help as many people as possible. Why? Because when the next life begins and we are in Heaven, the people we helped will remember what we did for them. They will remember that we were there in their great hour of need. Not only will they remember, but they will be grateful – and *they will reward us*.

Verse 9 is very clear about this. Jesus says that we are to make friends. What are we supposed to use to do this? The “mammon of unrighteousness” – in other words, money and our worldly possessions. Why are we supposed to do this? So that the people we help will receive us into “everlasting habitations”. Now, where do we find these everlasting habitations? They're clearly not in *this* life; after all, no homes in this world last forever. Jesus can only be taking about the *next* life. He wants us to use our position, our wealth, and whatever else we have to help those who are in need and to rescue those who are in dire circumstances. If we do this, when we reach Heaven we will have friends who will receive us into their homes.

Now, the steward needed people to receive him into their homes because he was about to be

homeless. We are not going to be in that situation. What Jesus is talking about here is a *reward* for our service – not from God, but from those we helped. When we think about Heaven (if we think about it at all), we tend to think about the things that God will do for us. We don't often think about the things that *other people* will do for us. That is what this parable is telling us to consider.

So let's break this down. How can we be sure that this is what Jesus meant? Well, first of all, the Bible is clear that we will have a home in Heaven. Jesus tells us in this passage that people will receive us into “everlasting habitations”, so we *must* have an “everlasting habitation” that we can receive people into. This is not the only time Jesus mentioned this idea. We also find it here:

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John 14:2: “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

I realize that some modern translations use the word “rooms” instead of “mansions”, but the idea is the same: God has prepared a dwelling place for us in Heaven. This really should not come as a surprise. After all, the Bible tells us that in the next life we will be living in a great city. Revelation 21 and 22 tells us a great deal about this heavenly city that will one day be our home. We don't have the time to quote those chapters in their entirety, so this will have to suffice:

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Revelation 21:23: “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.
24 And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.”

Where will we be living? Not “on a cloud”, as our culture likes to portray, but *in a city*. Do you know what cities have? *Places to live*. We are not going to be wandering around this great city of gold as a bunch of homeless people, looking for some kind of a park bench to sleep on. We are the children of God. The Lord has promised us a home – a place where we can live and receive friends. That is exactly what He is going to do.

So we can see that we *will* have a place to live. But will we remember our life back on Earth? This is an important question. After all, Jesus seems to be saying that the reason people will invite us into their “everlasting habitations” is because they will remember what we did for them. This strongly implies that when people die they do not forget the life that they lived.

This should not come as a surprise, because this is not the only passage in the Bible that teaches this. In fact, later on in this very same chapter Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. During their lives the rich man lived a fabulous life of ease and plenty, while Lazarus the beggar lived on whatever scraps he could find. When they both died, the rich man went to Hell – but Lazarus did not. The rich man was tormented in the fires of Hell and begged for a single drop of water to ease his pain. This is what Abraham told him:

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Luke 16:25: “But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou

art tormented.”

The rich man had not forgotten his life, even though he was in Hell; he could still remember the life of plenty he had before. The beggar Lazarus had not forgotten his life either. Amazingly, even *Abraham* knew the lives that these two men had lived! All three of the men in this story were dead, and yet they all remembered their old lives. Their deaths had not erased the past.

Will we have a place to live in Heaven? Absolutely. Will we remember the past? Certainly. After all, that is what Jesus told us – not once, but twice *in the same chapter*. Jesus wants us to help others who are in need, and told us that in Heaven they will remember what we have done and will repay us.

Now, I realize that it may seem selfish to help others so that we will get repaid later. But note that *Jesus* is the one telling us to do this! In fact, the Lord is actually calling us fools for *not* doing this. We know that we're going to live forever, and yet we don't take advantage of that fact. We have a tremendous opportunity to do good to those who are around us, but we're so caught up in this life that we don't think very much about the life to come.

The Lord wants to change the way that we think. He wants us to think long-term – *very* long-term:

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Matthew 6:19: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

God commands Christians to be *heavenly* focused. We need to remember that this world, and everything it contains, is going to be destroyed. This world is not eternal. It is not going to last – but *we* will live forever. Therefore, it doesn't make any sense to lay up treasures here because we are guaranteed to lose them. It is a foolish investment – it's like taking money and setting it on fire. It is a complete waste of time.

Instead God wants us to be focused on the next world. He wants us to be focused on Heaven, and He wants our heart to be there. The problem is that modern Christians don't really believe in Heaven. We may claim that we believe it, but our actions indicate otherwise. Our lives don't reflect the fact that we are going to have homes there. They don't reflect the fact that we will remember our lives and recognize our friends. And they *certainly* don't reflect the fact that we can amass treasure there. We simply don't take very seriously the things that Jesus told us about the life to come. What Jesus said to Nicodemus has come to pass:

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John 3:12: “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?”

Jesus has told us a great deal about the life to come, but we live as if this life is all that there is and the next life is meaningless. That is why Jesus said the children of this world are wiser than the children of light. The children of light are not living strategically. They are not living in light of the life to come.

The Lord is not impressed with the way the righteous are living their lives. After praising the steward for being wise He warns us against being wasteful:

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Luke 16:10: “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.”

11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”

Jesus tells us that those who are faithful in small things will be faithful in great matters, and those who are wicked in small matters will be wicked in great matters. God is telling us *ahead of time* that He is paying close attention to the way we are living our lives. Verse 11 is a warning: are we wisely handling the temporary goods of this life? Because if we're not, God has no intention of giving us something vastly more important to manage in the world to come.

It's true that all Christians are saved by the sacrifice of Christ and will go to heaven. However, *our life does not end there*. During our time in this world God tests us. He gives us trials to see if we are faithful or faithless – if we are wise or foolish. If we are wise and faithfully serve the Lord during this life, then in the next life God will trust us with much greater matters. However, if we are fools then God is going to trust us with nothing. Yes, we'll be in Heaven, but we will lose out on something that really matters. There is a high price to be paid.

Just in case we missed verse 11, Jesus repeated Himself in the very next verse:

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Luke 16:12: “And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?”

Jesus is reminding us that *we are stewards*. God has given us many blessings in this life and He expects us to use them for His glory. We need to have a completely different attitude and focus. Christians should realize just how worthless and temporary the things of this world truly are. We know that this world is going to be destroyed. We know that we cannot take our prized possessions to Heaven with us. So why do we put so much focus on things we know we are going to lose? The things of this world *shouldn't matter to us*.

What we ought to be doing is living with a Heavenly focus. We should be doing everything possible to advance the kingdom of God. We should spread the gospel far and wide and help those who are in need. We should give aid and comfort to missionaries and to the saints. We should see ourselves as stewards and realize that everything that we have *actually belongs to God*. The question is simple: how does God want us to invest *His* possessions?

Look at verse 12 again. *Nothing that we have belongs to us*. We belong to God, and everything that we have belongs to God as well. Our job is to advance the kingdom of God as much as possible. Is that how we are living our life? Is that our focus? Do we even care? Or are we too caught up amassing worldly goods *that we already know we are going to lose?*

The whole point of this parable is that Jesus wants us to use our goods *in a way that actually matters*. Since we can't keep them, we need to invest them wisely. It's true that we can't bring them with us to Heaven, but we *can* convert them into Heavenly treasure. We can do things in this life that will impact the life that is to come.

Look at what Jesus says next:

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Luke 16:13: “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.”

What did the steward do in the parable? He used his position to help other people. He made a difference in the lives of others and he was rewarded for that. The world understands that principle very well.

The question is, do *Christians* understand it? Jesus has told us that we are going to live forever. He has told us that there is a life to come, and we can do things in this life that will have an eternal impact. Jesus told us that we are stewards, not owners, and that we should view our life from that perspective. He told us repeatedly to use our possessions to serve God instead of ourselves.

In fact, verse 13 is very blunt: you *cannot* serve both God and money. You can either serve God or you can serve yourself. You can either sacrifice your possessions to serve the Lord and advance His kingdom, or you can spend your life building castles for yourself. But remember: if you spend your life seeking your own wealth then you will die and lose *everything*. You cannot take one penny with you. But if you sacrifice your own desires and spend your life serving God, the Lord will reward you – and in Heaven the people that you helped will reward you as well. The only way to keep your wealth is to use it for the kingdom of God.

When the Pharisees heard these things, they mocked Jesus:

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Luke 16:14: “And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him.”

What is *our* response going to be? Jesus told the Pharisees of Heavenly things and they refused to believe him. They rejected Him outright and went right back to living a life of selfishness and pride. But what about you? Are you going to reject Him as well, or will you take heed to what He had to say?

Do you know what Jesus did next? He told them the story of the rich man and Lazarus:

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Luke 16:19: “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

20 And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,

21 And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.”

We have already discussed this passage, so I'm not going to repeat it here. We know how it turned out. The rich man lived a very easy life, but when he died and went to Hell he could not take any of his wealth with him. He lost everything he had and was tormented for the rest of eternity. However,

the beggar Lazarus – who had nothing and who lived a painful life – was saved and found comfort and peace.

The rich man's wealth was utterly useless in the next life. It could not save his soul and it could not save him from torment. Now that we understand the context of this passage, the story is even more powerful, isn't it? The Pharisees derided Christ for telling them not to pursue wealth, and then He graphically illustrated just how useless wealth really is. Yes, it may help you in this life – but you are going to be in the next life *for all of eternity*, and it will not help you there.

That is why we need to be wise. That is why we need to use our temporary and fleeting possessions to serve the Lord with all of our heart. Do not be like the foolish rich man, who lost everything; instead be wise, like the steward. Serve the Lord while you can – because when you reach the next life it will make a *great deal* of difference.

It's true that your works do not save you. Our salvation comes from Christ's sacrifice on the cross, not the good deeds that we do. But our actions do have consequences.