

The Unrighteous Steward

In this lesson we're going to take a look at one of the more obscure parables in the New Testament: the parable of the unrighteous steward. This parable doesn't get taught very often but it has a powerful meaning that's very applicable to our lives. Although this chapter is a little more difficult to understand than others, it's 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:

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 his master's property, this was a serious accusation. No master wanted to hear that his goods were being wasted! If the steward couldn't faithfully carry out his job then he was in danger of being fired.

However, there's one additional detail that we must not overlook. This verse says that the steward was *accused* of wasting his employer's goods. It doesn't say he had actually wasted them! The word that's translated as “accused” is interesting because it could also be translated as *slander*. The word carries with it the idea that the accusation itself is false. This means it's quite possible that the steward hadn't been wasteful at all! Yet in spite of this he was accused of wasting his master's property.

Unfortunately for him, his master believed the accusation:

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 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'd 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:

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 career options available. Most people were farmers, which was hard and backbreaking work. It seems this steward couldn't handle the rigors of farm life. It's possible that he was an old man who wasn't physically capable of it; we don't really know. All the text says is that farming wasn't an option for him. Since he wasn't rich enough to live without a job, that meant the only other option was begging – and he didn't want to do that. This steward had a problem.

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

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 to win friends for himself. He was going to do people favors, so when he lost his

job those people would be in his debt and give him a place to live. He would help them now, and in return they would help him later.

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

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 put his plan into action. One person owed a hundred measures of oil:

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

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

Owing a debt in the ancient world was very different from owing one today. In Biblical times you couldn't declare bankruptcy and move on with life. You didn't just walk away from the situation with a bad credit score. No, the consequences were much more serious. We can see a great example of this in the Old Testament. 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 couldn't pay it:

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 people couldn't pay their debt then the creditor could come and sell their family *as slaves!* That's what debt meant in those days – and that's why these debtors had a serious problem. They had a debt that they owed to the steward's master, and it's quite possible they couldn't pay it. If they couldn't pay it then they were in danger of having the master try to collect on that debt – and that meant they were potentially facing slavery for themselves and their children. These people desperately needed help.

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

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

It seems that the steward reduced the debt from something they *couldn't* pay to something they *could* pay. That means they could now pay off 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 it's easy to see why they might be willing to give the steward a place to stay.

But this also helped the master as well. Since the debt had been reduced to something that 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 a partial 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:

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. However, notice 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 one. The first person had their debt cut in half, while the second one received a smaller cut. But the effect was the same: both people were helped, both people were grateful, and both people would most likely be willing to 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 old. What he wanted was a way to support himself that would last for the rest of his life. He knew it would be hard for one family to support him indefinitely so he tried to earn favors from as many people as possible. He wanted to build a large network of grateful friends.

Interestingly, when the steward's master found out what was going on he wasn't upset. Instead he praised the steward:

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 helped himself because now he had friends who would help him in his time of need. He had helped these debtors because they would now be able to repay the debt and wouldn't face financial ruin. He had also done wisely for his master because now he would get something paid on the debt he was owed. Everyone came out ahead.

After telling this parable Jesus did something unusual. In most other parables Jesus publicly taught the story and then

privately explained to His disciples what it meant. This time, though, Jesus didn't do that. Instead He explained the parable's meaning *immediately* so the Pharisees would know what He was telling them:

Luke 16:8b-9: “. . .for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. 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 were more clever than the righteous because they knew how to use their resources, position, and influence to win friends. The wicked work hard to get other people in their debt so that when they needed something they would have a network of people they could rely on. This is common behavior in the world. In fact, Jesus Himself commented on it:

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

That's 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.

In this parable Jesus is telling us that we need to start thinking about life from a Heavenly perspective. All Christians have been given everlasting life, which means we're going to live forever. Since we're 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're in Heaven, the people who we helped will remember what we did for them! They'll remember that we were there for them in their great hour of need. Not only will they remember, but they'll be grateful – and *they will reward*

us for what we did.

Luke 16:9 is very clear about this. Jesus said that the saints are to make friends. How are we supposed to do this? With the “mammon of unrighteousness” – in other words, with money and our worldly possessions. Why are we supposed to do this? So that the people who we help will receive us into “everlasting habitations”. Where do we find these everlasting habitations? They're clearly not in *this* life! After all, no homes in this world last forever. Therefore Jesus can only be talking about the *next* life. He is commanding us to use our position, our wealth, and whatever else we have to help those who are in need and rescue those who are in dire circumstances. If we do this then when we reach Heaven we'll 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 become homeless. I don't think we're going to be in that same situation in Heaven! Jesus is talking about a *reward* for our service – not from God, but from those we helped. When some people think about Heaven they tend to think about the things that God is going to do for us. People don't often think about the things that *other people* will do for us! That's what this parable is telling us to consider.

How can we be sure this is what Jesus meant? First of all, the Bible teaches that we will have a home in Heaven. In this passage Jesus tells us that people will receive us into “everlasting habitations”, so therefore we must have an “everlasting habitation” that we can receive people into! This isn't the only time Jesus mentioned that idea. We can also find it taught here:

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 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 shouldn't come as a

surprise. After all, the Bible tells us that in the next life we'll be living in a great city. Revelation 21 and 22 tells us a lot about the heavenly city that will one day be our home! For example:

Revelation 21:23-24: “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. 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 aren't going to be wandering around this great city of gold as a bunch of homeless people who are looking for a park bench to sleep on. We're the children of God! The Lord has promised us a *home* – a place where we can live and receive friends – and He always keeps His promises.

We can see that we *will* have a place to live in Heaven. But will we remember our life back on Earth? This is an important question. 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 don't forget the life that they lived.

This isn't the only passage in the Bible which teaches this. Later in this 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 died the rich man went to Hell – but Lazarus didn't. The rich man was tormented in the fires of Hell and begged him for a single drop of water to ease his pain. This is what Abraham told him:

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.”

Even though the rich man was in Hell he hadn't forgotten his life! He could still remember the life of plenty he had before. The beggar Lazarus hadn't 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 they remembered their old lives. Their deaths hadn't erased their past.

Will we have a place to live in Heaven? Absolutely. Will we remember the past? Certainly. Jesus told that not once, but twice *in the same chapter!* Jesus commands us to help others who are in need, and told us that in Heaven they'll remember what we did for them and will repay us for it.

I realize it may seem selfish to help others so that we'll get repaid for it in Heaven. However, the person who is telling us to do this is *Jesus!* In fact, He 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 sometimes 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 we think. He wants us to think long-term – *very* long-term:

Matthew 6:19-21: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: 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 isn't eternal! It's not going to last – but *we* will live forever. It doesn't make any sense for us to lay up treasures here because we're guaranteed to lose them. It's a foolish investment! It's like taking money and setting it on fire.

Instead God wants us to be focused on the next world. He wants us to focus on Heaven, and He wants our heart to be fixed on the life to come. The problem is that some Christians don't really believe what the Bible has to say about Heaven. They may claim to believe it but their actions indicate otherwise. Their lives don't reflect the fact that they're going to have homes there, or that they'll remember their lives and recognize their friends. They *certainly* don't reflect the fact that they can amass treasure there! We need to seriously consider what Jesus has told us about the life to come:

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 indeed told us a great deal about the life to come! Yet some people live as if this life is all there is and the next life is meaningless. That's why Jesus said the children of this world are wiser than the children of light. The children of light aren't living strategically! They're not living in light of the life to come.

The Lord isn't impressed with the way the righteous are living their lives. After praising the steward for being wise He warned us against being wasteful:

Luke 16:10-11: “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. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”

Jesus told us that those who are faithful in small things will also be faithful in great matters, and those who are wicked in small matters will be wicked in great matters as well. God was telling us *ahead of time* that He's paying close attention to the way we're living our lives. Verse 11 is a warning. Are we wisely handling the temporary goods of this life? If we're not then it seems 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 doesn't end there!* During our time in this world God tests us. He gives us trials to see if we're faithful or faithless, and are wise or foolish. If we're wise and faithfully serve Him during this life then in the life to come He will trust us with much greater matters. However, if we're fools then God will trust us with nothing. It's true that we'll be in Heaven but we'll lose out on something that really matters. There's a high price to be paid for being so caught up in the things of this world that we forget about the world to come!

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

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 was 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. That means we need to have a completely different focus than those who aren't saved. Christians should realize just how temporary the things of this world truly are. We know that this world is going to be destroyed. We know that we can't take our prized possessions to Heaven with us. So why do we put so much focus on things we know we're going to lose? The things of this world *shouldn't matter to us*.

What we should 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 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 Luke 16:12 again. *Nothing that we have belongs to us!* We belong to God, and everything that we have belongs to Him as well. Our job is to advance His kingdom as much as possible. Is that how we're living our life? Is that our focus – or are we too caught up amassing worldly goods *that we already know we're going to lose?*

The 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 to come.

Look at what Jesus said next:

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 this parable? He used his position to help 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're going to live forever. He's told us that there's a life to come, and we can do things in this life that will have an eternal impact. Jesus told us that we're stewards, not owners, and 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 something for yourself. But remember: if you spend your life seeking your own wealth then one day you'll die and lose *everything*. You can't take a single penny with you! However, if you sacrifice your own desires and spend your life serving God, the Lord will reward you – and in Heaven the people 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:

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 about Heavenly things and they refused to believe Him. They rejected Him and went right back to living a selfish and proud life. 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:

Luke 16:19-21: “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.”

Since we've already discussed this passage I'm not going to repeat it here. We know how it turned out. The rich man lived an easy life, but when he died and went to Hell he couldn't 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 lived a painful life – was saved and found comfort and peace.

The rich man's wealth was useless in the next life. It couldn't save his soul and or ease his everlasting torment. Now that we understand the context of this passage that story is even more powerful, isn't it? After the Pharisees derided Christ for telling them to pursue Heavenly treasure instead of worldly wealth, He then graphically illustrated just how useless the wealth of this world really is in the life to come. Yes, it may help you in this life – but you're going to be in the next life *for all of eternity* and it won't help you there!

That's why we need to be wise and our temporary and fleeting possessions to serve the Lord with all of our heart. Don't 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 life to come it will make a *great deal* of difference.

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