

## The Parable of the Unjust Steward

*Lk 16:1-9 [10-13]*

“This parable is arguably the most perplexing of all that Jesus told and is an exegetical hornets’ nest.”<sup>1</sup>

### BACKGROUND

- “The objectionable clause ‘make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon’ has received important clarification from discoveries at Qumran which reinforced the view that ‘unrighteous mammon’ was simply a stock idiom for all money, much as one might today use the expression ‘filthy lucre’. It is not a command to use ill-gotten gain for one’s own interest. This explanation also does away with the need to interpret verse 9 in some ironic or sarcastic fashion, or as a rhetorical question.”<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus was addressing the disciples (v. 1), yet the tax collectors, “sinners” (15:1) and Pharisees (15:2) may not have been absent; the Pharisees show up again in 16:14.
- Leon Morris points out that usury was contrary to the law (Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36; Deut 23:19), but was practiced nevertheless. “Understood this way, the parable presents us with a steward who, faced with the loss of his employment, protected his future by calling in the bonds and getting the debtors to rewrite them so that they no longer carried interest... His action put the owner in a difficult position. He would have the greatest difficulty in establishing his claim to the original amounts now that the first bonds were destroyed. In any case he could not repudiate the steward’s action without convicting himself of acting impiously. So he put the best face possible on the situation and ‘commended’ the man.”<sup>3</sup>
- “An important line of interpretation argues that what the servant did in reducing the debtors’ accounts was perfectly legal; he was merely removing the surcharge or commission he would have received for himself... All of this is quite plausible and attractive but depends on reading into the parable historical circumstances which are not spelled out and which may or may not have been self-evident...” (Blomberg, 1990, p. 244-245). Blomberg adds that it’s perfectly conceivable that the servant was unscrupulous, but still clever, and his master grudgingly admired him for escaping a narrow spot.

### QUESTIONS

1. Some see in this parable a warning: like the unjust steward, we are living on borrowed time. Thomas Long writes

All the money we have—the money in our wallets and purses, in our checking accounts, that money that fuels the stock market—all money—is like Confederate money in 1863; it is still negotiable, but it is the currency of a doomed sovereignty. If we continue to invest in the doomed sovereignty, woe are we. But money still has a little shelf life, still has a little time left; so invest it, but this time invest it in God’s future, the world that, even now, is emerging by the grace and power of God.<sup>4</sup>

Dennis McCallum similarly asks, “Why do we find Christians who know what the future holds, yet seem to be unwilling to act accordingly? They seem to put more stock in their old boss.”

How do we understand Jesus’ warning as Reformed Christians?

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, IVP, 1999, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, IVP, 1990, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Eerdmans, 1982, p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal for Preachers*, 30, p. 52-57, Pentecost 2007.

2. Jesus concludes in v. 9, “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” This raises some questions: What does worldly wealth have to do with friends? How does the attainment of these friends related to being welcomed into eternal dwellings? Is this welcome related to salvation? Below are three theories. (See also [6] below.)

Michael Wilcock’s is minimal:

Although these things—your property, ability, time—belong to this life only, says Jesus, yet what will happen to you then, when you pass into that life, will depend on what you are doing with them here and now. Make sure that your use of them brings you into a fellowship of friends which will survive beyond death.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Long seems to see the poor as the new bosses in heaven:

And who are these friends that we are supposed to make for ourselves? The Lukan Jesus has already made that plain. ‘When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed...’ (14:13-14). And notice that this is not about charity; this is about making friends. In this world, the poor and the powerless may be the ones who receive money and hospitality, but in the light of the world to come, we see that they are also the ones who dispense it, the ones with power who issue the word of welcome. ‘Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.’<sup>6</sup>

F. F. Bruce ties this parable to the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31):

[The rich man] had plenty of the ‘unrighteous mammon’ and used it all to secure comfort and good cheer for himself in this life, giving no thought to the life to come. The time came when he would have been very glad to have even one friend to welcome him into the ‘eternal habitations’, but he found none. Yet he had every opportunity of securing such a friend... If the rich man had used a little of his wealth to help Lazarus, he would have had a friend to speak up for him on the other side. ‘This man’, Lazarus might have said to Abraham, ‘showed me the kindness of God on earth.’ But Lazarus had been given no ground to say any such thing. The rich man in Hades found himself without a friend when he needed one most—and he had no one to blame but himself.<sup>7</sup>

3. The *New Jerome* commentary says, “The scholarly [interpretation when this is seen as an example story] maintains that what is to be imitated is the steward’s shrewdness in the use of possessions (even though these possessions were not his own).” Craig Blomberg (1999) shares some unconventional ideas:

The possibilities for church budget realignments could be radical but are seldom explored. One mountain community congregation not far from his [in Colorado] employs no paid clergy but utilizes two seminary-trained laymen as their primary preacher-teachers, organizes itself as a collection of house churches, and has at times given up to 90% of its annual offers to missions. Tom Sine tells the story of a church in Seattle that decided to raise funds so that young first-time home buyers could pay cash outright for their property. These Christians then contracted to pay

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, IVP, 1979, p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Long, *Ibid.*, p. 54-55. Not everyone agrees with this perhaps simplistic reading of Luke’s view of the poor. Carson & Moo, e.g., see the poor in Luke as the *righteous* poor. Contrast Calvin’s comment, “*One who possesses extensive influence or wealth, if he procure friends during his prosperity, has persons who will support him when he is visited by adversity. In like manner, our kindness to the poor will be a seasonable relief to us; for whatever any man may have generously bestowed on his neighbors the Lord acknowledges as if it had been done to himself*”.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, IVP, 1983, p. 187.

back to the church what their mortgage payments would have been to fund further ministry and create more home-buying opportunities for other church members. When one considers that the average Westerner spends more on repaying a home mortgage (principal plus interest) than on any other lifetime expenditure, it is tragic that more Christians are not seeking to replicate this model.

How can we more shrewd with our resources?



*Fun Quotation:* “Though the parable appears to be harsh and far-fetched, yet the conclusion makes it evident, that the design of Christ was nothing else than what I have stated. And hence we see, that to inquire with great exactness into every minute part of a parable is an absurd mode of philosophizing” (Calvin).