

# The Parable of the “UNJUST STEWARD” —what does it mean?

*This parable, found in Luke 16, has perplexed even the learned commentators. Here is the plain, clear explanation.*

by Herman L. Hoeh

OPEN YOUR Bible to Luke, chapter 16, verse 9. Here is certainly one of the most difficult parables Jesus ever uttered!

These are Jesus' apparent words to his disciples: "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness: that, *when ye fail*, they may receive you into everlasting habitations."

Did Jesus expect His disciples *to fail*? Are Christians to make friends with the world? What could Jesus have meant?

## The Setting of the Parable

To grasp the full meaning of this perplexing parable we need to understand the setting. In Luke 15:1 Jesus is talking in the presence of tax collectors and sinners of ill repute. Hypocritical Pharisees also heard the same words (Verse 2). As recorded in this chapter, Jesus explained to them that He was sent to call the lost, not the self-righteous, to repentance.

In chapter 16 the Master begins to speak to the disciples. The parable of the "unjust steward" is addressed to us. *We are Christ's disciples.* Notice:

"There was a certain rich man, who had a steward"—the manager of his estate—"and the same was accused to him as wasting his goods." Information must have been brought to the rich man against the steward.

The rich man then called him to his office and gave the steward this order: "What is this I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst no longer be steward." He had to deliver up whatever was intrusted to him that it could be given to another. He would lose his job. What was to become of him?

"And the steward said *within himself*"—notice that he admits his misconduct *only* to himself—"What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? To dig I have no strength"—he wasn't brought up for that kind of work—"to beg I am ashamed." Pride was too much for him—he couldn't bring himself to beg.

Then what was he to do to prevent starvation?

"I AM RESOLVED WHAT TO DO, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, *they* may receive me into their own houses."

## Worldly Wisdom

Observe the clever idea that is now running through the steward's mind. He has resolved his problem. He *knows* what to do. He is using his head—using his *worldly wisdom*. He continues to deal deceitfully with the rich man's estate. Here is what he rushes to do: "And calling to him each one of the debtors of his lord, he said to the first, 'How much owest thou my lord?' And he said, 'Hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take thy papers, and sit down and write quickly fifty.'"

The business was urgent. In his clever thinking he knew that he could defraud his lord and that it would not be discovered. The debtor at one stroke of the pen had half of his debt paid. The steward became his friend!

"Then said he to another, 'And how much owest thou?' And he said, 'Hundred measures of grain.' He saith to him, 'Take thy papers, and write eighty.'"

The steward thought himself rather wise. He now had friends upon whom he could rely when put out of his stewardship. They couldn't turn him down because they were accomplices in the act. *They* rewrote the legal papers.

The steward then presented himself to the rich man and rendered the altered accounts. The lord knew well that his steward was not to be trusted. But upon looking over the accounts he found nothing for which he could directly accuse him.

"And the lord commended the steward of unrighteousness for doing wisely."

The "lord" here is the rich man—the lord or master of the steward. He finally had to commend the double-dealing steward for his wisdom—cleverness,

shrewdness, prudence—with which he dealt. The lord certainly did not commend him for wasting his estate—that's why he was released from his office. But the lord had to admit that under the circumstances, the steward surely used his head to solve his problem. He had made friends by buying them. He had *worldly wisdom*.

## Wise Not Called to Salvation in This Age

Now observe Jesus' comment on his own parable: "For the sons of this age are for their own generation wiser than the sons of light" (Verse 8, Panin trans.).

Now we are beginning to understand *why* Jesus uttered his parable. Remember that Jesus addressed the parable to the disciples. He is giving them advice. He says that the sons of this world or age—the unconverted who have their hearts and minds set upon the things of this life—they are wiser by nature than the converted—the sons of light. Paul explains it by saying: "For look at your calling, brethren, that *not many wise after the flesh*"—not many who have natural inherited wisdom—"are chosen; but God chose the foolish things of the world, that he put to shame the wise" (I Cor. 1:26-27).

There is a natural wisdom that many have. But God does not choose many of them. Not many in God's church today are wise by nature—"after the flesh." "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (I Cor. 3:19). Very few worldly wise are being called. They are too proud to surrender to the Almighty. This is not the time when God is trying to save the world. He is calling only a few—especially those who are not very shrewd, who sometimes lack foresight.

If we lack spiritual foresight or wisdom, then we need to ask God for it. "But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith,

nothing doubting" (James 1:5-6). Paul asked God for wisdom: "We speak wisdom . . . yet a wisdom not of this age . . . but we speak God's wisdom . . . which none of the rulers of this age hath known" (1 Cor. 2:6).

### Make Friends Out of Mammon

With these Scriptures in mind, the parable of the unjust steward ought to become plainer. Jesus has already explained that not all are called—that those who are called usually have less wisdom than the unconverted. Now let's notice Jesus' comment: "And I say unto you"—that is to you and me today because we are his disciples—"Make for yourselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness . . ." Here Jesus Himself interprets the parable for us. We ought to use spiritual wisdom as the steward used natural wisdom—we need to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Mat. 10:16).

But what did Jesus mean by "mammon of unrighteousness"? "Mammon" signifies *riches*. Mammon of unrighteousness signify riches or money which is so often gained by unrighteousness—money which becomes a power for evil in the hands of evil men. The phrase was a common expression of the time because riches were so often gained as a result of evil deeds. Jesus' admonition, then, is that *we make friends out of*—by means of—money which the unconverted covet. The King James translation that we make "friends of mammon" is not a correct translation. We are not to make friends of those who are carnal and unconverted. Christians are to dis-fellowship those who do evil. "Whoso therefore intends to be the world's friend makes himself God's enemy" (James 4:4).

We are to use the money which we could so easily covet—we are to use it to create friends. How?

"Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also . . . No one can serve two lords . . . Ye cannot serve God and mammon," said Jesus in Matthew 6:19-24.

There is the answer!

Christians should put their money to use. We should give our treasure toward the kingdom of God—"seek ye first the kingdom of God"—toward the work of the gospel in order that others might be converted. It is those who are con-

verted who are our friends. Abraham was a converted man. He is called a "friend of God" (James 2:23). Those who are converted by our prayers, tithes and offerings become our true friends for all eternity if they remain faithful. This is the WISE thing to do. The steward made carnal friends. We make spiritual friends.

Let us continue reading what Jesus said: "Make for yourselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, WHEN YE SHOULD DIE, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles."

This is what Jesus actually said! The common rendering of the King James Version is not correct. Jesus did *not* say, "They (the disciples) should fail." He is speaking of death and then of the resurrection. This is made plain in Thayer's translation of the original, inspired Greek.

### When Money Fails

When money has lost its value—when we no longer have any use for it in this life—when this civilization is crashing to its doom, then "a man shall be more precious than gold" (Isaiah 13:12). Money—mammon of unrighteousness—will finally fail at the return of Jesus Christ—it will cease to be of any value. But in this life we are to put it to use for the kingdom of God. The world covets money. Therefore we need to pay the world money to use its facilities in order to reach the people through radio and the printing press.

Jesus called this practice of giving our treasure for the kingdom of God a WISE act. It is the only sound way to deal with money. The wise of this world gather money in their human craft, cleverness and wisdom. Perhaps they are able to amass more wealth than you who are in the faith. But they do not have the wisdom to know what life is all about. They are cut off from the wisdom of God. They are not putting their treasure to a good purpose. They are actually wasting it. We are to be wise—like the steward—to put our money to use so that it will yield *eternal dividends*—eternal friendships.

### Eternal Friendship Pays Off

In the resurrection, when money will no longer be of value to us, those whom we have helped to bring into the kingdom of God will receive us into their abodes or tabernacles. Many who have been converted by means of the tithes

and offerings which you send in to this work—many whom you have never seen—will greet you with joy and thanksgiving when they see you in the kingdom of God. Each of us will then be dwelling in our tabernacles (abodes or office rooms) as we minister to and govern the world.

In order that none of us would misunderstand this parable, Jesus concluded: "Who is faithful in very little is faithful also in much: and who is unrighteous in very little is unrighteous also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in another's, who will give you ours?"

Sometimes Jesus' parables are misunderstood because we draw the wrong conclusion. For instance, when God the Father is compared to an unjust judge, that did not mean that God is unjust. See Luke 18:6. So in this parable, Jesus tells us *to be wise in spiritual ways* as the steward was wise in carnal ways. But we are NOT to be unrighteous like the steward. We are to be scrupulously honest. If we have not been faithful in handling the material blessings of this life—if we have wasted them—then God will not commit to us the eternal treasures which He has promised. If we have not been faithful with another's in this life, if we have not dealt justly and fairly with others, then, as Jesus said, "Who will give to you ours?"—who will give to you what belongs to the Father and Jesus?

Notice that in this verse Jesus is pointing out that we are to become heirs of God. We are to *inherit* what belongs to the Father and the Son. We will share it with them and with the millions of others who will be born into the kingdom of God.

This is certainly a remarkable parable. It explains so much about the purpose being worked out on earth. Let's remember, then, that though the few who are called now may not have natural wisdom, we can ask of God and He will give it to us. We are to use wisdom in handling our finances in order that we might further the work of converting people to God. We cannot serve God by setting our affections on material objects. We can serve Him only by letting Him show us how we ought to direct our material possessions. Let's become *just* and *wise* stewards.