

The Unjust Steward

The Parable of the Unjust Steward is considered one of the most difficult parables to understand. Let's begin with the first verse of the parable, which introduces the two main characters and sets the stage for what is to come.



There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man [the manager] was wasting his possessions. (Luke 16:1)

The word used for wasting here is the same Greek word used in the parable of the father and two sons, when speaking about the younger son wasting his wealth on personal pleasures. The manager had been accused of squandering the owner's wealth.

And he called him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager." (Luke 16:2)

Managers in first-century Palestine and elsewhere in the ancient world conducted business in the name of property owners. They had full authority to conduct business in the name of the owner, as if they were the owner himself. Any contracts entered into by the manager in the name of the owner were legally binding for the owner. Before appointing someone as the manager of their business, household, and financial affairs, the owner would have to completely trust the person. Apparently the rich man had placed



this level of trust in his manager, only to have that trust betrayed. While the rich man explicitly trusted the manager and therefore didn't realize he was being taken advantage of, others in the community let the owner know what the manager was doing.

When confronted by the owner, the manager says nothing. He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't ask who his accusers were. He doesn't deny it. His silence is taken as an admission of his guilt.

The owner fires him on the spot and instructs him to turn over the financial accounting books. From that point on, the man is no longer the manager and no longer has legal authority to do business in the owner's stead. In the next two verses we hear the inner thoughts of the manager as he assesses his future employability while going to gather up the finance books.

And the manager said to himself, "What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." (Luke 16:3)

His prospects don't seem good. We now hear his next inner thought.

"I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses." (Luke 16:4)

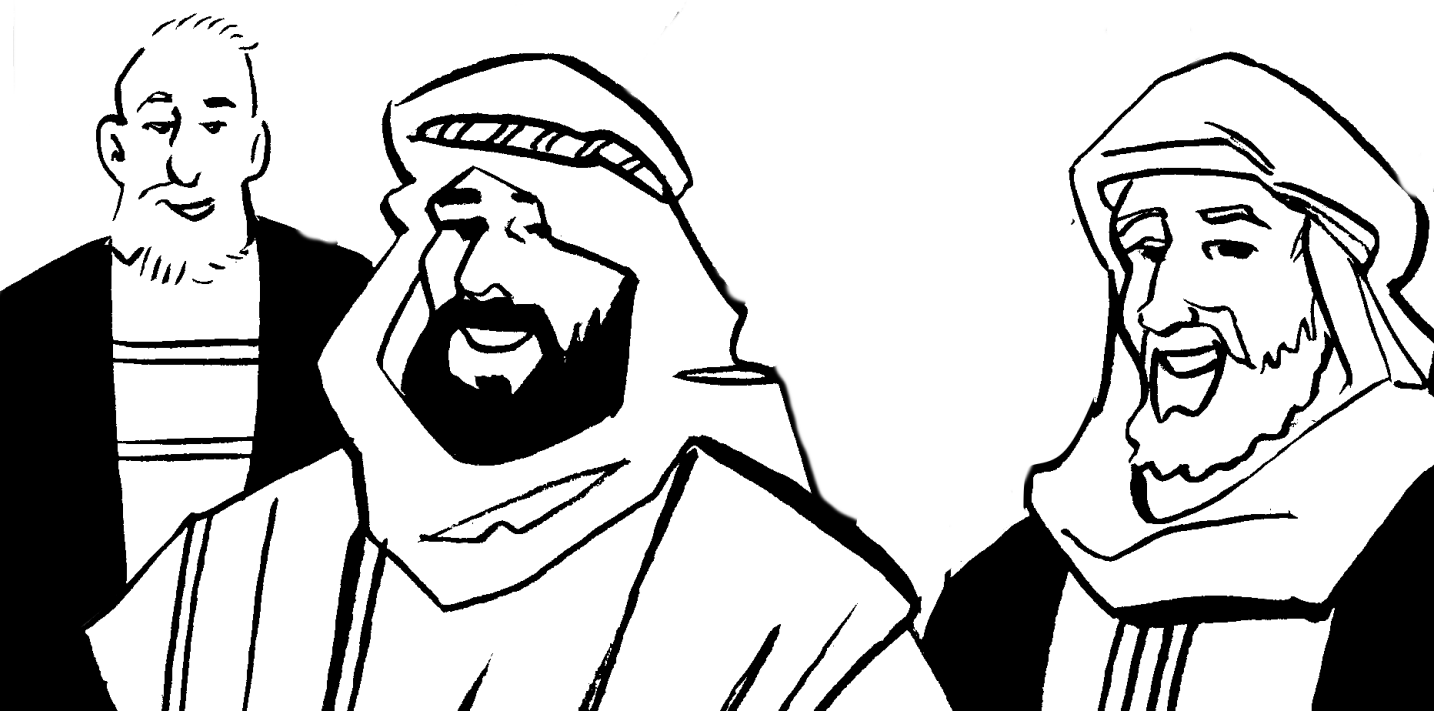


To receive him “into their house” is an idiom that means getting another job from another landowner. His plan will result in the possibility of getting another job, despite people knowing he was dishonest and was fired from his position.

He then begins to put his plan into action.

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He said, “A hundred measures of oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.” Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” He said, “A hundred measures of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and write eighty.” (Luke 16:5-7)

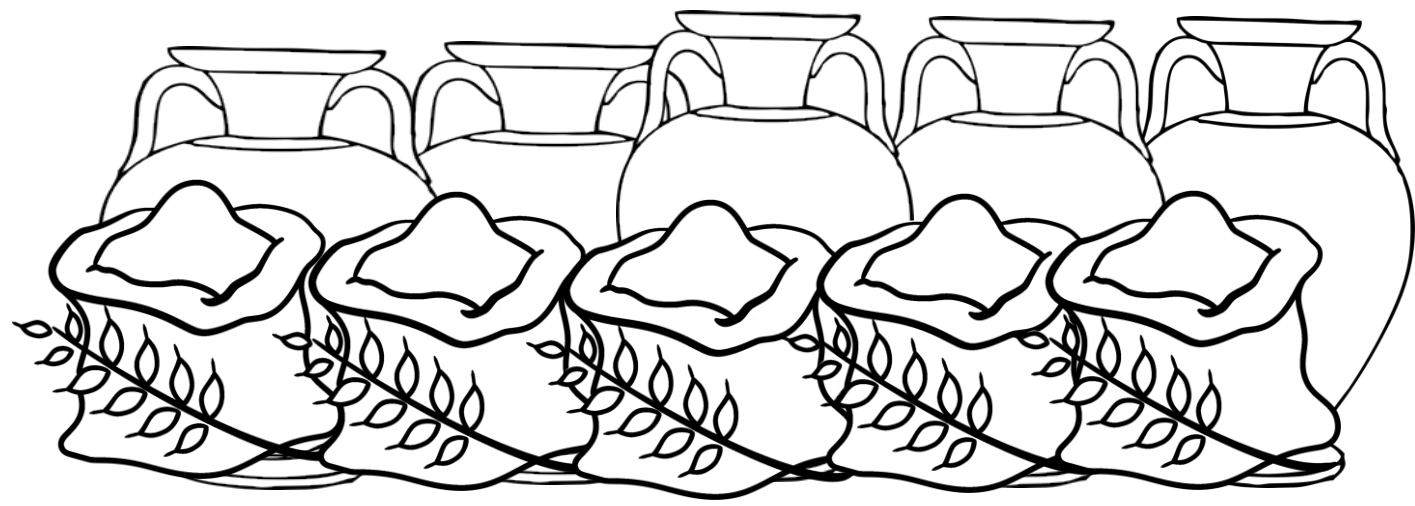
This act informs the listener that at this point the only people who know the manager has been fired are the owner and the manager himself. Apparently the landowner’s servants don’t yet know, as the manager most likely has ordered some of them to go to the master’s debtors to summon them. If they knew he was no longer the manager, they wouldn’t have followed his orders. The debtors don’t know either, as if they did, they probably wouldn’t have answered his summons and come to a private meeting with him.



These debtors were not poor men; they were renting large tracts of the rich man's land. One rented an olive orchard and another a wheat field. In those days people would rent and work farmland, orchards, and vineyards, and would pay the owner an agreed-upon amount of the crop. Therefore the owner didn't have to work the land, but would receive a portion of the produce of the land. One of these men had agreed to give the owner a hundred measures of olive oil from the harvest, another a hundred measures of wheat.

A measure of oil, from the Hebrew word bath, is approximately 39 liters, so one of the debtors had pledged to pay about 3,900 liters, or about 850 gallons of olive oil, which would be the produce of about 150 olive trees and have a value of about 1,000 denarii. One denarius was the equivalent of one day's wage for an unskilled laborer. Another debtor had pledged to pay the master 27 tons of wheat from the harvest, which would mean a yield from a field of 100 acres. The value of the wheat owed was about 2,500 denarii.

The unjust steward lowered the amount of oil owed by 50 percent, or 500 denarii. He lowered the wheat owed by 20 percent, also 500 denarii. So he instructed each of them to rewrite their bill so that it reflected 500 denarii less than was originally owed, which was a significant amount of money. After having cheated the owner for his own financial advantage, he then cheated him again to the tune of 1,000 denarii, only this time not for his financial advantage but so that these men would think well of him and possibly give him a job once they learned that he had been fired.



The debtors went away happy that the landowner had been so generous, and happy with the manager, who they may credit for being the one who convinced the owner to extend such a generous gesture.



In a sense, the manager has painted the owner into a corner. Once the owner finds out that the manager has changed the amount owed him, he has the legal right to not honor the discounted figure, but rather to demand the full amount be paid at the time of harvest. The manager was no longer working for him and had no legal authority to make such a reduction. However, if he revoked the amended bills, he would lose all of the good will he had just gained with his renters. And as the other members of the village heard about it, which they undoubtedly would, he would also lose their good will. The manager was once again stealing from the owner, yet in his shrewdness doing so in a way that worked to his advantage and benefited the owner.

The story ends with the following:

*The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.
(Luke 16:8)*

It's clearly stated here that the manager is dishonest, so there is no inference that he is being commended for being good or righteous or repentant. He's commended by the master for his shrewdness; in other words, his cleverness and craftiness in dealing with people.

To grasp the point being made by the parable, it helps to understand a few things about the character of the rich man. While a few Bible

commentators suggest that he was unethical in a number of ways, there are some things within the text that seem to indicate otherwise. The first is that someone came and told him that his manager was cheating him. This could indicate that the wealthy man wasn't treating his renters unfairly; they were loyal enough to help him avoid being cheated by his manager.

Another indication of the kind of man the owner was is his treatment of the wayward manager. He was well within his rights to prosecute the manager and even to sell his wife and children into slavery. Instead, he just fired him from his job.

This parable probably brought a smile to the original listeners, like a movie or book about a thief whose plan is extremely clever, intricate, and imaginative does to many viewers or readers nowadays. But they would have also gotten the point that the owner was generous and kind. Instead of making the manager pay the price of his wrongdoings through legal punishment, the owner mercifully saved the manager and his family through his generosity, through his paying a very expensive price so the manager could go free.

When the story itself is finished, Jesus says something further by way of application:

For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. (Luke 16:8-9)

In this difficult-to-understand statement, Jesus makes a comparison between the sons of this world and the sons of light. The sons of this world deal with others in this world more shrewdly than do the sons of light. The sons of the world, like the manager, know how to wisely work within the world's system. They know how to make good deals, to make money, to gain wealth, to be successful in accordance with the ways and principles of the world. They use the world's material

wealth to prepare for their earthly future. Jesus suggests a different way to operate. He tells the sons of light to wisely work according to a different set of principles, the principles of the kingdom of God, based on the loving, generous, and merciful nature of God. The sons of light are to use the ways of the kingdom by operating in accordance with God's will and acting in love and generosity toward others to become rich toward God, to lay up treasures in heaven.



Believers are told to use the money and wealth of this world—called mammon of unrighteousness in some translations, worldly wealth in others—to make friends in this world. In other words, do good things with your money, be generous, share, give to those in need, help those you can. The time will come when money will no longer have any value or importance, and that time will come when you pass on from this world and enter the next world. If you live according to the principles of God's kingdom, when you arrive in heaven you will be welcomed into your eternal dwellings by those you have helped and who have passed on before you.

In this parable, Jesus is once again showing the nature of God, who, like the landowner, is merciful and generous. He points out that believers, disciples, should learn something from the unjust steward. While what the unjust steward did was clearly wrong, he at least understood the nature of the owner and acted on that knowledge. How

much more should we, as believers, understand the loving and generous nature of God, and with that understanding live our lives with great faith in His love, mercy, and generosity. And at the same time emulate His attributes by being generous and forgiving with others.

Credits:

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