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Parables 08 The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Luke 16: 1-13

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- 1.) The Parable- (Luke 16:1-9) The parable of the unjust steward is generally considered to be one of the more difficult parables in the bible to understand. One reason for the difficulty is that it seems like Jesus is telling his disciples to emulate the unjust steward's example. Jesus did however use unrighteous illustrations to make a specific point on several occasions. He contrasted the unjust judge with God in the parable of the persistent widow to illustrate the need for persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1-8). He also likened his second coming to a thief in the night. Just as a thief comes suddenly and unannounced, He will return in like manner (Matthew 24:42-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:2). Jesus told his disciples to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. He wasn't commending everything about thieves and snakes but was telling his disciples that they needed to be prepared for his return and shrewd when dealing with unbelievers.

Another difficulty lies in the commendation of the master after the steward lowered the amount that the debtors owed to his master. Although the steward is called unjust by Jesus in vs. 8, this may be referring to his wastefulness of his master's goods rather than the deals he made to win friends for himself in the future. Jesus did not commend the steward's dishonesty. He used this story to illustrate his shrewdness.

- 2.) The Details of the Parable.

- a.) **The Steward-** It's important to try to understand the cultural differences between us and Jesus original audience some 2000 years ago. An ancient steward was responsible for taking care of everybody in his master's household including the household servants, as well as all of his master's business affairs (Luke 12:42-47). A good example of this type of arrangement is when Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's house (Genesis 39:1-6). In some cases an absentee landlord would give the steward the general guidelines that he needed to follow and then allow him the complete control and authority to manage the master's affairs as he saw fit. The Steward would make his own deals and all of his own decisions within the guidelines that the master established. In most cases the steward would be something like a salaried executive in a company. Some commentators think that because the steward was able to freely give the discounts that he was simply returning the cut that he was making under the table and not giving up his master's rightful share.
- b.) **The Debtors-** These debtors more than likely represented tenant farmers who were renting the master's land in exchange for a portion of the produce. These debtors were not paying back loans because the Jews were not allowed to charge interest on personal loans (Exodus 22:25). Some commentators see the debtors as being complicit in the scheme to defraud the master. Others see the debtor's response as their gratefully receiving the discount from the steward who had full authority to make whatever deal he wanted.
- c.) **The Master-** It seems fairly certain that the master was charging the steward with laziness or incompetence when he heard the report that the steward was wasting his goods. If the problem with the steward was that he was stealing from the master, the steward would have simply been arrested and beaten or jailed and forced to repay. Because of the complete authority and trust that was given to a steward, the master would receive either the benefits or consequences of any decisions his steward made.

- 3.) Interpretation #1- Some commentators think that Jesus used the master in the story to

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represent God. The Greek word in the text that is translated as “master” is the word “Kurios”. This is the same word that is translated as “Lord” in all but one place in Luke’s gospel. Knowing that the master is an honorable man, the steward makes some deals with the master’s debtors in the hopes of making them obligated to him later. The debtors were not aware of the steward’s scheme because they would not want to risk their own relationship with the master. After receiving the reductions in their bills the debtors would have no doubt begun celebrating what they think is the generosity of the landowner. Soon the whole community would be aware of the kind heartedness of the landowner. This would leave the master with two alternatives;

- **First**, the master could simply tell the debtors that the reductions were unauthorized and risk the disappointment of the debtors and the ridicule in the community for his stinginess.
- **Second**, the master could just keep quiet and let the steward get away with his scheme while accepting the praise that was being showered on him by the townspeople.

Since the steward knew his master’s character he was sure that he could count on his scheme to work. The response of the master in verse 8 was not praising the steward’s dishonesty, but his ability to recognize his master’s generosity and knowing him well enough to know that the master wouldn’t rescind the discounts. He was able to count on his master’s character to plan for his future. If the unjust steward was praised for trusting his master, how much more will the true sons of light be rewarded because they are trusting their heavenly master. The focus of this interpretation is that God is merciful, he knows our predicament, and we should know him well enough to be able to trust his character. Each of us has mishandled the resources that God has entrusted us with but we can still count on God’s merciful character. Even though we can sometimes be dishonest with God, he is still willing to forgive us and we can trust him as a result. [1]

If this interpretation is correct then the following statements that Jesus made, and the Pharisees response would seem to be completely unconnected (vs. 10-14).

4.) The Previous Parables- The context of the events preceding this parable is the key to what Jesus was trying to communicate with the parable of the unjust steward. This day began with Jesus being invited to a meal at a Pharisees house (Luke 14:1). Jesus had several opportunities to challenge the thinking of the Pharisees that he was eating with. Then in Luke 14:25 Jesus addressed the large crowds that had accompanied him by explaining to them that they needed to consider the cost of being a disciple of his. As tax collectors and other undesirables began gathering around to hear him (15:1-2), the Pharisees began to criticize Jesus for his association with these sinners. So Jesus told them three parables about how God views repentant sinners.

a.) The Lost Sheep- (Luke 15:1-7) The shepherd left the 99 sheep that were not in need of saving to search for one that was lost. As the shepherd rejoices over the one lost sheep that is found he called all of his neighbors to rejoice with him. Jesus then said that there would be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. This one sheep represents just how valuable in the sight of God that each of these repentant sinners were, that Jesus was accused of eating with.

b.) The Lost Coin- (Luke 15:8-10) The woman who lost one of her ten silver coins is not satisfied that she still has nine others left. All of her efforts and emotions are directed at finding that one lost coin. This is the same message of seeking and finding the one that was lost just like in the parable of the lost sheep but with the emphasis now on the thoroughness of the search. She also called all of her friends and neighbors together to rejoice with her when she recovered the lost coin.

c.) The Lost Son- (Luke 15:11-31) This parable shows the extent of the love that the father (God) has for the person who willfully rejects his love and then later decides that he wants to return to him. The father let the younger son have his unjust demand for his portion of the inheritance and then let him exercise his decision (which was not the will of the father). But the father never stopped loving him. The younger son then squandered the resources that he

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received from the father. Afterwards the son regretted the life he had chosen and wanted to be united with his father again. The father welcomes such a one with open arms and is even willing to give him things that he doesn't deserve like the new robe, new shoes, and a ring for his finger (vs.22). The sinners who were following Jesus were also considered by the religious leaders as people who were far away from God and had squandered their lives in riotous living. Jesus used the reaction of the older brother to illustrate the attitudes of the Pharisees and teachers of the law as they looked down their noses at people who, in their opinion, were undeserving of the forgiveness of God. But it was these sinners that were receiving the forgiveness and acceptance by God that they were seeking in contrast to the Pharisees and Scribes who were not.

The three parables in the 15th chapter of Luke can be better understood as being a single parable in three different phases. In chapter 15:3, Luke uses the singular form "this parable" to show that the three pictures form one thought and that this was a single message that Jesus was communicating. There is no break between the different phases of this one single truth

- 5.) Interpretation #2- It is important that we not lose sight of the context when we parable interpret this parable. Jesus told the parable of the unjust steward as a response to the things that had just happened and in a logical flow with his previous statements. It is critical in our ability to correctly interpret any parable to keep in mind what the events were that prompted Jesus to give the parable in the first place. Before we work with the details of a parable we should try to see if we can identify the one single point that Jesus was trying to make and then determine which details are significant to this one point and which ones are only there to complete the story.

This steward had the foresight to see that he would not be able to use the wealth that he controlled for very much longer so he used his position to provide for himself in the future. Although he was in complete control of everything that had been entrusted to him at the time, he knew that he would not be able to control it forever. The main point of this parable is that we should make the best use of the positions of influence, as well as the possessions that we have been entrusted with, while we can, knowing that it is inevitable that we will not be able to keep them forever. Since God has a heart for lost individuals (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) we should be ready and willing to use the resources that have been entrusted to each of us to reach as many people as we can, while we can. In doing so we will lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

6.) The Application- (Luke 16:10-13)

- a.) We can win friends that will welcome us into eternal habitations in one of two ways. **First**, by investing in the ministry of someone who can reach others that I'm not able to reach personally (Philippians 4:15-17). **Secondly**, we can personally use our resources and positions to reach the people that we meet every day.
- b.) Stewards are accountable for the way that they used their master's resources (1 Corinthians 4:2). Every Christian will give an account for the kind of steward they have been and will receive rewards for faithful service (2 Corinthians 5:10).
- c.) Everything that we have is for us to use. We will not be able to take anything we have accumulated on earth with us into eternity.
- d.) At times the people of this world display a greater degree of seriousness and dedication in their pursuit of wealth and financial security than Christians do for things that are of a more enduring nature. People in business will study their potential market and learn everything that they can about their product in order to be able to present it in a way that will interest as many people as possible. They will invest their resources in reaching people to accomplish their future objectives.
- e.) How we handle our material possessions says a great deal about where our affections lie. Jesus said that where your treasure is, there your affections will be also (Matthew 6:21).

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We either can see our possessions as things that belong to us, or as things that have been entrusted to us from God.

[1] Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry. www.carm.org/parablesteward.htm