

The Unrighteous Steward

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Introduction.

- A. All of us here have been blessed by being able to live in the richest country that has ever existed. Even if we aren't particularly "well off" by American standards, we probably have a standard of living that most people alive in the world today would consider unimaginably high. Sadly, despite our great riches, many Americans have become materialistic. Millions of our friends and neighbors devote their lives only to getting "stuff."
- B. This materialistic problem, despite the frequency with which it appears around us, is not a new one. Our greater access to material goods does not make us more materialistic; in fact, materialism and greed pose an equal spiritual threat to men whether they are rich or poor. Many of the excesses that we see today, from credit-card debt to interest-only mortgages, are only new expressions of the same old problem.
- C. About a week ago, I finished reading a historical novel about Russia, and one of the things that struck me about its description of medieval Russian life was the familiarity of the financial plights it described. Just like us, the Russians of long ago lived beyond their means. Just like us, they borrowed to support their lifestyle and slowly got eaten alive by the interest. These things are not new. They are universal.
- D. To this universal problem, the word of God offers a universal solution. This solution, however, isn't what many people think it is. Just the other day, Lauren and I were watching a pledge drive on Trinity Broadcasting Network, and the guy who was trying to convince people to phone in described what he called "God's multiplication." He said that if someone pledged sixty dollars a month to TBN, that would open a direct link to God, and God would give them six times as much right back. Sadly, such teaching is completely foreign to the Bible. It only uses the greed of the ignorant to deceive them into sending money to tricksters and charlatans.
- E. By contrast, the Bible's solution to our money problem doesn't occur outside of us. It occurs within us. The Scriptures tell us that as long as we try to satisfy our souls with material things, we cannot succeed, because money, no matter how much, can never bring contentment. Instead, we make the best use of our material blessings when we use them to serve God. There are many passages in the Bible that illustrate this idea, but one of the most interesting comes from the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the unrighteous steward.

I. The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward.

- A. We find this parable in Luke 16:1-13. Here is the way the story plays out: First, we are presented with a main character, the steward, in Luke 16:1. From this passage, we learn that the steward is behaving wastefully. He is squandering his master's possessions. It may be that the steward was just incompetent and a bad money manager. If we consider his later conduct, we may well conclude that he was stealing. It doesn't really matter. All we need to know is that he is a bad steward and that his master has found out about it.
- B. In Luke 16:2, the master calls the steward to him, demands an accounting, and tells him he will no longer be steward. The steward is certainly fired, but not right then. In our modern speech, the steward has been given two weeks' notice. He has time to get all of his accounts in order, but after that, he's out the door.
- C. Luke 16:3 tells us about the problem this causes the steward. Certainly, no one else is going to want him as a steward after he's been fired. That leaves him with two options for supporting himself, but both of those options are bad. On the one hand, he can dig ditches to support himself, but he's not strong enough. On the other, he can beg and rely on the charity of others, but he's ashamed to do that.
- D. In Luke 16:4-7, we see the steward's solution to his problem. He comes up with something that honestly I would never have thought of. He realizes that in two weeks or whatever, he's going to be out the door, but until that time comes, he's still steward! He still has control over his master's possessions. Until the day comes when he has to clean out his desk, he's going to take advantage of that control, not to help his master, but to help himself. He calls in all the people who owe his master money, asks them how much they owe, and tells them to rewrite their bills for a lower amount. It's like if we went to a grocery store, got a hundred dollars worth of groceries, and took it up to the cashier, but the cashier said to us, "Ahhh, don't worry about it. Just give me fifty bucks for it, and the company will never have to know." Basically, the steward is stealing from his master so that in days to come, when he is in need, all of those debtors will help HIM out.
- E. Now the steward is going to get found out and nailed for doing bad things, right? Wrong. In Luke 16:8, we learn that the master does find out about what the steward has done, but instead of stringing the guy up, he praises him for his shrewdness. Apparently, the unrighteous steward's plan for helping himself out works.

II. The Meaning of the Parable.

- A. By the end of Luke 16:8, we're really not happy with the parable we've just finished, are we? This is not one of the more familiar parables in the Bible, and I think this is the reason why. We're confronted with two ideas that make us uncomfortable.

- B. First, it's obvious from the story that the unrighteous steward is a Really Bad Guy. The first thing he does is behave so incompetently or evilly that he gets fired, and then he compounds his offense by stealing from his master to his own advantage. Is there anyone who would want to hire the unrighteous steward? Of course not! In fact, probably all of us think that he should be in prison somewhere.
- C. The problem is, despite all of the steward's evil ways, Jesus tells us to be like him. This is REALLY hard to swallow. Everything within us revolts at the thought of being like this bad guy who steals from his employer. My own mother, although she is an excellent Bible student, is so unhappy with the steward that she basically rewrites the parable so we AREN'T supposed to be like him. What in the world is going on?
- D. To begin with, this is a place where we really need to remember the number one rule for reading parables, which is, "Don't make an application from a parable that Jesus didn't make." Jesus used each of His parables to teach a specific point, and when we stray from that point, we're likely to conclude something that isn't true. In this case, the point that Jesus is making isn't that we're supposed to be bad people like the steward or embezzle from our employers. It's that we're in the same situation as he was.
- E. This is true in three main ways:
 1. First, we learn from Luke 16:9 that like the steward, our time is limited. His stewardship was soon coming to an end, but in our case, our days on earth are numbered. For now, we have a measure of control over material things—what Jesus calls "unrighteous mammon," but soon, that control is going to fail. The time is coming when even the richest man on earth will be on the same footing as the poorest.
 2. Second, Luke 16:9 also tells us that like the steward, our future is in doubt. Soon, we're going to be homeless. Indeed, we're going to be homeless eternally. That's the status quo. If we want to avoid that fate, we need to take steps so that someone else will receive us into His eternal dwelling.
 3. Third, Luke 16:12 informs us that our money is not our own. This can be hard to swallow. In the US, we naturally think that our money belongs to us. However, all earthly ownership of money is illusory. There is nothing we can do to keep it because the true owner of everything is God. Consider Psalm 50:9-10. I like this verse both because I think it's funny and because it makes a point we need to remember. It's funny because it seems to me that when Asaph wrote this, he looked into the future and saw Texas. Just think of it: hill after hill in the Lone Star State, covered with dozens of herds of cattle, but every cow in Texas really just belongs to God—and so does everything else. We're not owners; we're all just stewards.
- F. There's one logical conclusion that we can draw from all of this, and it's the conclusion Jesus wants us to draw: like the steward did, we should use "another's" money now to make friends for later. We need to consider the physical resources we have some control over, but that really belong to God, and ask ourselves what we can do with those resources to seek a place in heaven.

III. Three Ways to Make Friends.

- A. Along these lines, the Bible describes three main paths we can follow to use our money for spiritual benefit, three ways to make friends. First, God's word tells us that He intends for each of us to contribute to the Lord's work. 1 Corinthians 16:1 establishes a regular weekly collection in which all Christians are to participate. This is a freewill offering. God doesn't tell us how much we have to give, but we need to think of our contributions not as an expense, but as an investment. When we take part of our paychecks and put it toward our retirement account, we don't do that simply for the joy of having a lowered standard of living. We do it because we want to provide for ourselves in the future, when we can no longer work. The same is true of the money we give to God. We're making an investment in our future by laying up treasure in heaven.
- B. As a subsection of this, we also make friends with our money when we use it to help the Lord's people. We see an example of this in Acts 2:45. Some people claim that this proves that the first century Christians didn't believe in private property, but that's not what it says. The last phrase of the verse "as anyone might have need," tells us what's going on. Some lazy first-century Christian who didn't want to work had a need for a swift kick, not money to support his laziness. However, when brethren did have needs, the early church was quick to respond with everything it had. We need to be the same way today, while recognizing that the same rules apply. We do not need to support so-called Christians in what is actually sin, but when our brethren have a true need, our generosity ought to be unlimited. We need to help each other.
- C. Finally, we can make friends with our money by being generous to everyone. Look at what Jesus says in Luke 6:35. When we give, without expecting any return, we are imitating the generosity of our Father and becoming like God. Of course, God expects us to use wisdom in this. It's foolish to give a man money when we can tell he's just going to take the money and buy drugs or booze. That doesn't help us, and it doesn't help him. However, when we do have opportunity to help someone, we should cheerfully take advantage of it.
- D. Although it is important to God that we do these things, what is most important to Him is what our actions say about our hearts. Look at Jesus' concluding thought in Luke 6:13. Whom do we serve? God or our money? If we truly serve God, we will also serve Him with our money. If we refuse to do so, if we find excuse after excuse about why we don't, it only shows that our true master is somewhere else.

Conclusion. If you have not been serving God in your life, He will gladly let you begin your service today.