

## **“THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Luke 16:1-13**

### **Introduction.**

If you're thinking this is one of those head-scratching passages in the Bible you aren't alone. Almost every commentary I read on this passage begins the same way.

John Calvin, “The parable seems hard and far-fetched.”

J.C. Ryle, “The passage is a difficult one. There are knots in it which perhaps will never be untied, until the Lord comes again.”

Leon Morris, “This is notoriously one of the most difficult of all the parables to interpret.”

Michael Wilcock, “In the task of detecting Luke's train of thought, many find this section one of the most difficult in the whole Gospel. The majority of commentators give up the attempt.”

It shouldn't surprise us that some passages are hard to understand, after all this is God's Word and God is a good bit smarter than we are. Passages like this are meant to humble us and remind us that our understanding is finite and faulty.

When you come across a passage like this, what do you usually do? Guess at it? Decide it's crazy talk? Just skip over it and go on to something easier? Or do you study and dig for truth? And if you start digging how do you do it, where do you start?

***What's the first rule of interpreting Scripture?*** Pray, pray, pray. These things are spiritual discerned and we need the Holy Spirit to open our minds and help us.

***What's the second rule of interpreting Scripture?*** Context, context, context. A text without a context often becomes a pretext for a proof text. In Luke 15 we read:

**Luke 15:1-2** Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus told three parables to the Pharisees about the lost being found and coming to Jesus. Now Jesus seems to turn His attention to the tax collectors and sinners that have come to Him. Some of these are wealthy people who had made a living off other people's money. This story will speak right to them. Jesus calls them to faithful and fruitful use of their wealth.

Note the contrast between this parable and the one before of the Prodigal Son. That son carelessly squandered all his money and lost all his friends. This man by cunning management made friends. That's part of the context, so is the ending of our text which we will consider in a moment.

***What's the third rule of interpreting Scripture?*** Scripture interprets Scripture. Let the parts we do understand help us with the parts we don't understand.

Is Jesus saying sometimes it's OK to engage in fraud, extortion, or dishonest management? What does the rest of Scripture say? Don't lie, cheat, steal, covet, or use immoral means to your advantage or to take advantage of others. Scripture tells us where we can go with interpreting this passage and where we can't go. God's Word calls us to honesty and integrity.

**Luke 16:1-9.**

What's the point of the words Jesus puts in the master's mouth when he commends the dishonest managers shrewdness?

We know He isn't approving embezzling funds and giving away what belongs to someone else. We know He isn't saying sometimes it's OK to be a lying, thieving, dishonest scoundrel. Notice, the steward is not commended for his dishonesty, he's commended for his shrewdness.

Jesus observes that shrewd pagans and worldly business men are more clever and astute and industrious at advancing themselves and their worldly kingdoms than God's people are at advancing and building His kingdom and pursuing eternal ends.

This man saw trouble coming and didn't just sit idle as he slid into poverty. He came up with a plan and executed it. He saw the future and was pro-active.

Jesus makes a comparison meant to rebuke us for our laziness, our casualness, our unthinking or uncaring manner when it comes to building and advancing the Gospel and the kingdom of God.

When heathens are so shrewd and far sighted and business savvy in building their interests or feathering their own nests or making a name for themselves, it exposes the neglect of some Christians who have the Word of God and the Spirit of God, but no motivation to spread the light of the Gospel wherever they can. Jesus is trying to wake up our dull senses.

Worldly men are accomplishing more in their darkness than we are in the light. They are building on sand, but are we building on rock? Are we as diligent about spiritual matters as this man was about worldly matters?

Worldly people travel far and wide and move heaven and earth in pursuit of earthly treasures. They shame us who are so apathetic about treasures in heaven. "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."

***Verse nine is particularly tricky.***

"I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth (mammon), so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

This steward received a dismissal notice and he knew it was just because he was dishonest. With the dismissal notice came a final accounting.

His dismissal compares to our death. One day very soon our money will fail us. When we die our money will be of no use to us. We all have received advance notice that we will be let go

from this life. And the action is just. The wages of sin is death. And with the action comes a final accounting. We have been fairly warned.

Our opportunities for stewardship on this earth are very short, and when those opportunities are finished, there will be a final audit and then eternal dwellings.

Jesus lived with a daily awareness of heaven and hell and He talked about it all the time. He tries to instill in us that same awareness. He used the realities of heaven and hell as motivation for loving our enemies, sharing the good news of the Gospel, enduring hardship, avoiding sin, giving generously, and bearing good fruit.

And to that end Jesus constantly warned about unrighteous mammon, unrighteous wealth and how money stirs up greed and pride and entitlement to certain luxuries and other unrighteous attitudes and thoughts. Don't trust your riches, they can defile you in so many ways. They are the root of so much evil and temptation. Guard your hearts.

The message to those who are rich in this world is that we will all soon be dismissed from this world and enter into eternity. Think about this and use whatever means or opportunities in your daily life to ensure now that you will have a heavenly home to go to.

Are we providing for that day when we will all be dismissed from our worldly home?

Are you using your time, your talents, your gifts and your money in a way that is building fellowship with God and with God's people? Use all you have for what will survive beyond death and will not just be kindling for the big fire at the end.

When it comes to money, Jesus is saying, Christians need to do much better at being faithful with our finances and to use them for eternal purposes. We need to get a clue on how to be more shrewd or strategic or generous so that when Jesus comes back and God's judgment takes place, we will have something to show for it that matters in eternity.

Everything we have is from God, it's His. So that makes us stewards or managers. One day we will have to give an accounting of what we did with His resources. There's a strategy of generous liberality toward our neighbors that builds the kingdom and comes back to us as blessing from God.

This is a call to use wisdom in providing for your future, but make sure that the future you provide for is an eternal future in heaven and nothing less.

“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul in the world to come.”

But beware also of ever thinking that heaven can be bought, it clearly cannot be bought. Money cannot ever justify us, but it can show that we are indeed already justified; it's evidence of the presence of grace in our lives.

### **Luke 16:10-13.**

Jesus applies His parable with two proverbs or wisdom statements.

*One who is faithful in little will grow into being faithful with much.*

Little things are the test of character. Unfaithfulness in little things exposes the condition of our hearts. If we don't handle a small thing like earthly wealth well, how can we be trusted with the true riches of heaven?

Can we say we are of sound doctrine if we aren't a man of our word? Can we say we follow Jesus if we don't follow His Word? Can we say our beliefs are good, if our business dealings aren't above board? True faith bears good fruit.

Our faithfulness on earth in small things, impacts what God entrusts to us spiritually, whether spiritual gifts or spiritual callings or spiritual rewards.

Has God withheld any good thing from us because we have proved unfaithful with even the smaller things of this world? Jesus wants us to think about these things. His warnings are always grace to us before it's too late. His call to holy living is grace because it's life, and He gives us the grace to live it.

*No one can serve (or be a slave to) two masters.*

We cannot serve the life of the flesh with all its pleasures and God at the same time. Yes, a rich person can serve God as long as God is on the throne of his heart and not his money. We cannot be devoted wholeheartedly to two masters. Money in the wallet is fine, money in the heart is spiritual suicide. Riches and greed and lust for luxury are terrible slave-masters.

### **Application and conclusion.**

Brothers and sisters, what you and I do with our money is fundamentally a spiritual matter. It's a matter of our hearts and it says a host of things about our hearts. Mark this well and think about it today and this week. What you and I do with our money, how we spend it, how we save it, why we do each of those things, how much we give and what we give to, and what we think about money in general, are all fundamentally spiritual questions.

In the words of Billy Graham, "Your checkbook is a theological document, it says who and what you worship."

We are called to be stewards or managers of what God has given to us and to do so in a way that glorifies God. Earn what you earn to the glory of God, spend what you spend to the glory of God. This text is about making our resources work for eternity, for the glory of God.

*Handling money is all about making wise choices.* This steward exercised a certain worldly wisdom and he was commended. We are challenged to be even wiser than the sons of this world. Let me suggest several wise choices in a series of simple statements.

Decide to be faithful with your finances, to have integrity at all levels, whether small or large.

Decide to work, to earn what you need to live. Decide not to live off others, including the government, as much as possible.

Decide not to spend more than you make. Decide to live within your means or downsize until you can. Overspending is never free. Debt costs interest and it takes a toll on our souls.

Decide to delay gratification until you can save or afford the things you want. Decide not to use credit or debt for wants and pleasures.

Decide to live on no more than 90% of your income so that you can honor the Lord with at least a tenth, for His glory. We will do better living on 90% than we will living on 100%, it's a spiritual principle written into the fabric of the universe. Money is a spiritual matter.

Here's a thought to chew on. C.S. Lewis once said, "There ought to be things we want to do but cannot do because our giving expenditures exclude them." Amazing. Giving so much for the glory of God that we have to sacrifice something else for it.

Decide to give strategically and tactically, to go beyond just giving to the kingdom and actually investing in the kingdom. Think and pray about it, study and engage like you would an investment.

This is why we invest in this church first and foremost. The church is the Body of Christ, it alone is redeemed by His blood. It's the only eternal institution on earth and it alone will survive the fire at the end.

Decide to live more free from things and more free for the kingdom.

Decide that being well off in this world is not necessarily being truly well off at all.

Decide to devote yourself wholeheartedly to God and trust Him for what we need. You can't live the way you want and the way God wants you to. You have to make a choice.

I close with a Scripture that interprets this Scripture. Take it to heart and think on these things.

**I Timothy 6:17-19** As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 *thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.*

**Prayer:** Holy Father, give us this vision of living for eternity. Set us free from the bondage of this world and this world's things and priorities, set us free from all the images that tempt us, that lie to us about what success is or what happiness is. Open our eyes to see as your word says that, "what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). Instead help us to fix our eyes on Jesus, our all-satisfying source of joy, and help us to live a life of love and service in this life so that we might have eternal life in the life to come.