

# The Parable of the Unjust Steward

The Parable of the Unjust Steward is a mystery to many. While some are bewildered as to why the parable should, as it were, promote unfaithfulness and outright fraud as a means of hedging oneself against penury, others wonder why Jesus Christ would exhort Christians to make friends with mammon (wealth, riches, or earthly goods) which he himself has described as unrighteous. There are also others who are unable to understand why a dodgy steward should be commended for the “finesse” with which he cheated on his master.

The parable as recorded in Luke chapter 16 says that a certain rich man accused his steward of having wasted his goods. When he called him to give account, he found him wanting and so decided to do away with his services. The steward then said to himself: “What shall I do? For my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed”. (verses 1-3) Knowing that his master would not retain his services because of the extent of his misdeeds, he then decided to meet each of the lord’s debtors and arrange with them to reduce their bills by between 20 to 50 per cent. The Steward stated: “I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord’s debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil, And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore”. – verses 4 -7.

Ironically, instead of joining issues with his servant for what he had done, the lord in the parable “commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely”. Jesus Christ then asserted that “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light”. He then added: “Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.” – verses 8,9

## Interpretation

It had long ago been prophesied in the Scriptures that Jesus Christ will speak to the people in parables and by it utter dark sayings of old. (Psalm 78:2; 49:4) The Parable of the Unjust Steward serves to admonish worshippers of God to serve Him actively and faithfully so as to be blessed in the end.

In unraveling the paradoxical elements in this parable, it is vital to point out that it is not unconnected with the parables in the preceding chapter, such as that of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son. In these parables, Jesus Christ, highlighted the mercies of God in bringing His children who had gone astray back to Himself. Jesus Christ, building on this same theme in the Parable of the Unjust Steward, highlighted a salient quality which those who have received the grace to come back to God should have in order to serve Him acceptably. That quality is that of planning for their future in God’s Kingdom by making full use of the opportunity they now have to do things that are pleasing to Him so that they would on the basis of their stewardship receive honourable places in God’s Kingdom fully established.

A steward is one who is given charge of the affairs of a family or household. A lot of trust is therefore reposed in him. Only servants who have proved themselves over time to be prudent, honest and trustworthy are given the position of stewards. To one who is faithful, the position is a stepping stone to a higher social status. But it is also an office which creates room for dishonesty, waste and embezzlement. The steward in the parable fell victim of these vices. He had charge of the rich man’s goods, but instead of being faithful (see 1 Corinthians 4:2), he was corrupt and

wasted the goods of his master. The day of reckoning came when his master called on him to give account. Knowing the fate that awaited him, he decided to meet his master's debtors to doctor the accounts, obviously, so that they would help him by the time he loses his position. His "foresight" then informed the praise of his master in verse nine of Luke chapter 16 which the King James version renders thus: "And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations". The New Living Translation puts the text this way: "I tell you, use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. In this way, your generosity stores up a reward for you in heaven". ("Heaven" in this context does not mean that every good person will go to heaven but that the person will be rewarded in God's order of things in His Kingdom fully established.)

Jesus Christ's declaration that we should make to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness thus means that we should make ourselves friends of God Almighty and Jesus Christ by means of the wealth God has blessed us with, so that at the time when the world will be destroyed and money will be useless, He will save us by virtue of the faithful deeds we had done, by His grace. (Genesis 22:1-17; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23; John 15:13-15) The fact that money will in course of time become useless will readily be appreciated if we recall that once there is a change of currency, all the old notes and coins cease to be legal tender.

As the steward made plans to have friends, comfort, and a home by using the means at his disposal to secure his future, so Christians should use their material endowments to support the work of God and help their fellow man so as to secure comfort, peace and salvation in God's Kingdom fully established.

#### Faithfulness A Christian Virtue

It is the commendation given the unjust steward by his lord (i.e. his master) and the exhortation by Jesus Christ to Christians to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness that several Bible students find problematic. It should be pointed out right away that the Bible does not in any way recommend dishonesty or fraud, whether by servants to their masters or by any one. Rather, the Holy Bible persistently charges us, as Christians, to be faithful in any capacity we find ourselves.

In his letter to Titus, Apostle Paul, writing in regard to those who are under servitude, voluntarily or involuntarily, declared as follows: "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things...Not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things". (Titus 2:9, 10) To purloin means to steal (especially something of small value). It is sheer dishonesty for those under authority to covet what belongs to their masters or employers. Rather, they should show "all good fidelity" or honesty in handling what has been put into their care. That way, they present the Christian faith in good light to their masters. Jesus Christ declared: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven". – Matthew 5:16. Apostle Paul further exhorts: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eye service, as men pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free". – Ephesians 6:5-8.

Those who are in positions of trust and responsibility as religious, political or business leaders should not abuse the opportunity by enriching themselves. In Leviticus chapter 19 verses 11 and 13, God Almighty commanded the children of Israel thus: "...Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him..." (See also Ephesians 4:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:6) Instead of engaging in fraudulent practices and refusing to work, each person should labour to earn an honest living and thereby be of help to others, including the old, the young, the sick and the poor.

-2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 4:12; Acts 20:35.

Rather than infidelity, what the Bible encourages is faithfulness. In Proverbs 28:20, the Bible says: "A faithful man shall abound with blessings: but he that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent." In the drive to be rich at all costs many have lied, robbed, blackmailed and oppressed their fellow men; some have even killed. But such approach to wealth leads ultimately to ruin.

The Bible states: "He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him". – Proverbs 28:22; see also Jeremiah 17:11.

Moreover, in his letter to Timothy, St. Paul wrote of the danger which comes from the love of money. He declared: "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." -1 Timothy 6:9, 10.

These facts have been highlighted to show that the Bible totally condemns what the servant did as his attitude could only have brought great loss to his master.

### Go to the Mountains

Worshippers of God are enjoined by Him to work hard to enable them help themselves and the needy. In their quest for material things however, they should do things in the fear of God and be patient. Solomon says: "Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathereth by labour shall increase". (Proverbs 13:11) In chapter 10 verse 22 it is written: "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it". Having been blessed by God by His grace, Christians should not hoard their wealth or turn a blind eye to His work.

Thus, in Haggai 1:8, we are admonished to: "Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD". Many of the natural Jews in the time of Haggai the prophet were greedy and selfish, and so allowed the house of God to lie waste. As a result, God withheld His blessings from them. (verses 9-11) The people of God are enjoined to work hard so as to be blessed by Him with riches (or mammon of unrighteousness) in order to use them to support His work. They should not therefore refuse to use such wealth for the promotion of His work on earth. In Matthew 6:19-21, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ exhorted: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also".

Whoever says he is serving God but does not show love to his fellow man by way of doing good to him whenever the opportunity comes, is yet to mature in understanding. "But whoso hath this world's good," asserts Apostle John, "and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth". – 1 John 3:17,18; compare John 13:34,35.

It is by using their wealth to support the work of God that the rich will get life in God's Kingdom. They should not think their wealth is a source of defence or protection and therefore turn it into an object of worship. David the prophet stated: "Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them." (Psalm 62:10; see also Proverbs 23:5) Also, Jesus Christ gave a stern warning to his disciples concerning trusting in material things when he stated: "...Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15) He then gave a parable about a Rich Fool, who, having stored immense wealth felt at peace with himself. Concluding Jesus Christ said: "But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for

himself, and is not rich toward God". -Luke 12:20, 21.

The man who is liberal in the work of God will not go a-begging. David the prophet stated: "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread". – Psalm 37:25; see also Proverbs 13:7.

All the wealth in the universe belongs to God. (Psalm 24:1) He gives them to us to glorify His name by supporting His work, taking care of ourselves and helping the needy. It is by using the blessings of God for His service that we demonstrate that we owe our lives and all we have to Him and that we are appreciative of His goodness on us. (1 Chronicles 29:11-15) It is by such tokens of faith in God that He will give to us "the true riches" in God's Kingdom fully established. Hence Jesus Christ made an important inference from the parable of the Unjust Steward when he asserted: "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust 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 that which is another man's, (the blessings and provisions from God Almighty, 1 Corinthians 4:7; Deuteronomy 8:18, 19) who shall give you that which is your own?"- Luke 16:10-12.  
(Parenthesis ours)

### God's Kingdom

The point must be made that this world has an end. Time is coming when the devil and everything that answers to unrighteousness will be wiped off the surface of the earth by God Almighty through Jesus Christ. That day of reckoning will definitely come anytime within these last days. But as Jesus Christ said, "... of that day and hour knoweth no man..." (Matthew 24:36) In the book of Zephaniah, the prophet under inspiration stated: " The great day of the LORD is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the LORD: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly..." The record further states: "Neither their silver nor their gold

shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land". -Zephaniah 1:14-18.

As the Bible says, at that time, money or riches will be of no avail in securing anyone salvation as it is written: "Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death". (Proverbs 11:4) Those who use their material endowments to support the work of God, thereby laying up for themselves treasures in heaven, are wise. (Matthew 6:19-21) St. Paul also wrote in this vein when he stated: "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life." – 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Because St. Paul was anxious that the Christians should do works that will stand them in good stead in future, he told the Philippians thus: "Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account." (Philippians 4:17) He also warned that worshippers should serve God with honesty, diligence and steadfastness in order to get a full reward when he wrote: "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. ..Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but

he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire". -1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Let us therefore resolve to imbibe the over riding virtue of using our blessings for the service of God and humanity so that when they (our material possessions) fail, God may receive us into "everlasting habitations", which is God's Kingdom fully established.