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The Unjust Steward

Digging Deeper into the Parable



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And he said also unto his disciples, there was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, how is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, what shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. 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. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. 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. 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, who shall give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Luke 16:1-13 KJV

This parable has flummoxed many a Bible student and scholar alike. There are several players and concepts that are not completely grasped to give a definitive meaning to this parable. A portion has even been called, “perhaps the most difficult verse in the entire Gospel,” by Bible scholar Darrell L. Bock (Bock 1996, 1334; cf. Pickar 1939, 250). The purpose of this research paper is not to definitely answer the question of this parable, but more so to allow students of this

parable to have some straws to grasp upon. Maybe after a deeper delving of scholarly minds can we sleep content knowing the plausible meanings of this difficult passage.

There are some scholarly theories that this writer would like to reject outright. The presuppositions that the Bible is the inspired word of God negates many of the more disrespectful views. For example, the view that Luke was confused when writing the gospel (Schellenberg 2008, 263) is not displayed prominently in this paper. The view that Luke's gospel was outside of the primary writings that everyone copied (Fitzmyer 1964, 24), is not given much credence either. As valid as these views are in modern day scholarship, they will not be given much weight in this paper.

For those wanting a simple explanation to the parable, there are a few general theories that are of note before getting into the elements of said parable. First, there are those that lean to the theory that the parable does not commend dishonesty, but the foresight and wisdom of the steward (Mathewson 1995, 30; Pickar 1939, 253; Lambrecht 2010, 179; cf. Gachter 1950, 122). In line with this thinking is the proposition to look at the general lesson of the parable without getting bogged down in the minutia (cf. Plummer 1896, 380).

Some of the more modern views involve looking at the social and historical context of first century Judea (Combrink 1996, 282). One of the proponents of this view is Mary Beavis. Her paper on this parable was seen (either positively or negatively) in many of the other research papers (Kurz 1994, 140; Udoh 2009, 311). Her view is that Aesop's fables played heavily into this framework (Beavis 1992, 37 and 44). If Aesop was not the focal point, then the genre of the servant/master was definitely prominent in the parables as well as the contemporary secular literature (ibid., 37-39).

According to some, it all boils down to the “nature of the steward’s actions.” (Gaechter 1950, 122). This approach will hopefully benefit with the reading of this paper. By a thorough examination of the elements of the parable should enlighten us to the nature of said steward. Others will argue semantics over where the parable stops and starts (Fitzmyer 1964, 27). There will also be those that argue that the parable must be viewed in context of eschatology (Ireland 1989, 302). There are those that propose the parable must be viewed in light of the heavy emphasis that Luke places on the poor (Ukpong 1996, 196). This last view concerning the poor does have credence since the population would have been predominately poor (Marulli 2012, 200).

The first step is one of breaking down the characters and looking at each puzzle piece before trying to solve the puzzle. The pieces are as follows:

1. the certain rich man (Luke 16:1);
2. the steward (16:1);
3. the wasted goods (16:1);
4. the giving account (16:2);
5. the impending firing (16:2);
6. the steward’s plan (16:3,4);
7. the lord’s debtors (16:5);
8. the debt and reduction of said debt (16:6,7);
9. the lord’s commendation (16:8);
10. the lord’s saying (16:8);
11. the Lord’s sayings (16:9-13).

1. The Certain Rich Man (Luke 16:1)

What do we know about the “certain rich man” in this text? We can tell that he had at least one steward working for him. There are also several debtors that owed him some kind of amount of the produce that was of the harvest. We see this in verse seventeen concerning the hundred measures of wheat. As far as the amount of oil, this would indicate one that either grew, harvested or processed things that oil is made of, like olives. The certain rich man probably owned the land on which these items were produced.

The wealthy land owner many times would entrust the management of land to a steward (Pickar 1939, 251; Plummer 1896, 381). The land owner, according to some, would be represented by “negative characterization” (Schellenberg 2008, 266) in Luke’s gospel. This writer discounts this view because of the positive portrayal of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10, just a few chapters after the parable of the unjust steward.

Much of the confusion of this parable is the division where the rich man is speaking and the words of Jesus. This would create some confusion as stated by David Landry. He states, “Some scholars believe that the parable ends at 16:7, and that the ‘κύριος’ who commends the unjust steward in 16:8a is not the ‘master’ of the story but Jesus.” (Landry 2000, 288; cf. Scott 1983, 174). Ironically other peer reviewed papers say just the opposite (cf. Denaux 1994, 476).

2. The Steward (Luke 16:1)

The steward holds much of the mystery of this parable. If the steward can be fully understood, then the parable meaning should follow suit. There are many theories about what the steward represents. Some are as follows: Jewish hierarchy, the tax-collectors, Pilate, Judas, Satan, Paul, even Christ Himself (Plummer 1896, 380). Much of which has very little foundation. What

exactly was the steward in context of history? Even though there are some that believe a historical account of the steward has not been properly done (Santmire 2010, 337), this author believes credible sources can be used to ascertain the historical steward of this parable. There is ambiguity whether the steward was a slave or freeman according to modern research on the subject (Udoh 2009, 311; Plummer 1896, 381). Let us consider the first option.

During this time of Israel's history, slavery was a prominent thing. The steward could have been a slave from this time (Udoh 2009, 311). The slave population was drawn mainly from war conquest of Augustus (Beavis 1992, 38, 39). Other sources of slaves would be "from kidnapping, debt enslavement (cf. Matt. 18:24), self-sale, home breeding, foundling rescue," according to Beavis (*ibid.*, 39). Also noted by Beavis is that much of the accomplishments of the elite land owners was on the backs of slavery (*ibid.*, 38). According to W.G. Rollins, there was a 1:5 slave: free ratio throughout the empire (*ibid.*, 38). As we look at the meaning of the parable, there is sometimes a parallel drawn between this steward and the stewardship that mankind is involved in with God's creation (Topel 1975, 225). Some parallel the steward releasing of the debt with "Jesus releasing debts to sinners." (Matthewson 1995, 31). Again, though true, these assumptions have little foundation.

The steward could be compared to many modern day positions such as a secretary or a business manager (Friedel 1941, 338). This comparison is made because of prominent stewards from the Old Testament. Abraham had a servant that was over his entire house (Gen 24:2) and Joseph was such a steward to Potiphar (*ibid.*, cf. Gen. 38). There were also many accounts in the gospels of stewards. Jesus gave examples of good and bad. One sees examples of bad stewards beating and abusing the other servants (Luke 12:45). There seems to be a responsibility to take care of those you have been entrusted. (Schellenberg 2008, 274). A steward was not to be

selfish. Many of these attributes of the good steward were usually equated to “the task of a disciple with the responsibilities of stewardship” (ibid.; Denaux 1994, 476). The same could be deduced from the bad stewards that many times resembled the Pharisees and scribes (Schellenberg 2008, 275). This is the basis for the term unjust which the parable is named. According to Ukpong referring to Fitzmyer’s arguments (Ukpong 1996, 200), “the term ‘unjust’ is used in two different and contradictory senses in the parable of the shrewd manager and in the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-10). The former parable, it is the rich man who pronounces the manager unjust” (ibid.). As far as being “just,” it seems Luke gives weight to the fact, even though dishonest, was preparing diligently for the imminent “catastrophe” described by Francis John Moore (Moore 1965, 104). This will be discussed more fully later.

Consider another aspect of the first century steward. A steward could and was entrusted with responsibility. This would allow the steward to make decisions over the master’s valuables and land (Scott 1983, 177). The parable has been paralleled to that responsibility of Christians managing what God has given to them (Caemmerer 1963, 69). Of all the various interpretations, it seems that this is a running theme throughout.

3. Wasted Goods

In research for this paper the writer found writings of Shakespeare that draw their story line from these parables. *Timon of Athens* is one that seems to draw from this one parable. Timon is guilty of wasting his goods giving in generosity to others (Tiffany 2011, 155). The motivation was to get things in return. This is a possibility for our protagonist in this parable. The details concerning the wasted goods are not given. Some even argue that the steward was wrongfully accused by the debtors (cf. Landry 2000, 297). The belief of this writer is that their reasoning

was to make the end of the parable more palatable. It seems that this was not a false charge because there was no denying the charge against him (Plummer 1896, 382). It is also quite possible that there was some fraudulent arrangement with creditors (ibid.). This could be the reason for the information coming before the land owner. Possibly a guilty conscious or a prying neighbor would motivate the telling to the master.

4. Giving of the Account

It seems that the giving of the account was more of a formality than a true accounting. The master seems not to care about the accounting since the end result was to fire the steward. There is no recourse in any of the facts of this accounting per the master's words "so I can fire you." The steward was prepared to give account because he possessed the records to go and renegotiate with the debtors. The actual accounting would have been after the reduction of the debts otherwise the steward would have been fired. The books were changed before approaching the master.

5. The Impending Firing

Something that is lost in our modern Western culture is the idea of the master/slave dynamic. The punishment for a slave was usually exacerbated if the honor of the master is diminished in any way. The immediate firing of the steward would be "to save face and recover a measure to his honor," according to Landry speaking of Kloppenborg's view of the dishonored master (Landry 2000, 293). Many slaves were punished beyond normal because of the shame brought on the master (ibid., 299). The ultimate result of a firing would be the impossibility of further employment. The danger would be in hiring a steward that might dishonor (ibid., 300). The steward was truly in danger of having to beg.

6. The Steward's Plan

Taking the bills to the debtors and trying to make friends by reducing their debt had some validity besides the fact that we know the ending of the story. Consider the thinking behind it. When he approached the debtors with a variety of reductions this benefitted the debtors with immediate relief (Pickar 1939, 251). The master would still receive payment and possibly be celebrated by these people that were usually in dire straits. This makes sense to one that is familiar with that culture under the Roman land owner. They would reduce or eliminate entire payments during times of famine. This ensured that next year would bring payments. Some think that the steward was acting fraudulently in this dealing (Ireland 1989, 296). The prior seems to be the more probable scenario. More will be said in later sections.

7. The Lord's Debtors

Those in the Bible that are working the land, many times do not own the land. There are several parables concerning collection of payments from those on the land. Jesus speaks of those in the land that killed the son of the master (Mark 12:1-9). This is probably the situation that we find here. They would pay part of their crop for the luxury of using the master's land. At harvest the portion would be required to the master (Combrink 1996, 292). If payment was not made, there were several legal ways it could be handled. First, the land owner could expel the unpaying tenant from the estate. Second, their property (farm equipment, animals, etc.) could be confiscated. Third action would be imprisonment. Finally, there was debt bondage. See the following verses concerning these four legal actions: Matt. 18:23-34; 5:25,26; Luke 12:58,59. (Goodrich 2012, 554)

8. The Debt and Reduction of Said Debt

The amounts that are described may seem foreign to those in a modern industrialized nation. The amounts of the oil (described in terms of the Greek βάτος, the *bath*) was equivalent to thirty barrels. The bath was equivalent to eight and three-quarters gallon. If one is still confused, consider that it would equal approximately four thousand quarts (Friedel 1941, 340). J.M. Ollivier put a price to this. A quart at twenty cents. This would put the complete debt of the oil at eight hundred dollars with a reduction that would equal four hundred dollars (ibid.). The other measure called a *cor* or *homer* was equivalent to ten *ephah* which in modern day terms would equal ten bushels (Plummer 1896, 383). This reduction of debt was not entirely unheard of during the time of the gospels. The entire amount was owed to the land owner (Goodrich 2012, 548), but reductions could be made in good standing by a trusted steward. Even Jesus spoke of debt reduction in His teaching (Matt. 18:23,24; cf. Marulli 2012, 201). Some have accused the steward of “cooking the books” (Santmire 2010, 335), this is unfounded when taken in the context of first century Roman society. Roman society saw its share of debt remissions during times of hardship (Goodrich 2012, 554). It could be surmised that the debt reduction “offered a subversive challenge” to those religious elites that were unwilling to budge on the manmade religious acts that marked the Pharisees (Kuhn 2002, 566).

9. The Lord’s Commendation

So far the parable can somewhat be grasped. At this point there has to be more to explain what is going on. At this point in the parable there seems to be a missing part. What occurs between the steward reducing debts of his master without his consent to a glowing commendation? Also

how could Jesus approve of and even promote villainy (Gachter 1950, 121)? It seems there are some missing facts. There is indeed some missing context.

Consider the motivation of the master in this situation. The master is about to lose honor and a worker. The honor would be much more valuable than the worker. At the new deal devised of his unjust steward a few things would occur. First, the debtors would be eternally grateful and more likely to pay next year's full portion. Secondly, word would spread about the gracious actions of this master of the land, who so unselfishly gave to ensure the survival of his tenants. There would be celebration of this man. For him to come back and take it back would further break down this most precious honor (Pickar 1939, 251; Landry 2000, 293). This interpretation of the parable shows a shrewd steward, forcing the hand of his master. Even though the lord commends the steward the description used by Jesus "unjust steward" would give a divine judgment of truly unjust (Ukpong 1996, 200), but with redeeming qualities. Even though the steward started out as a "waster of his master's goods," through quick wit and prudence made it work out. Jesus would use this example to encourage wisdom and prudence for disciples (Kurz 1994, 140).

10. The Lord's Saying

There is much discussion about who is speaking at these latter verses of the parable. Some look at the stylistic claiming that Luke received the parable with verse eight as the conclusion (Scott 1983, 176). If this is the lord of the steward speaking and not the Lord Jesus narrating, the pronouncement is derived by an "oppressive society's" view of justice (Ukpong 1996, 200). This would skew how this is seen. The lord of the steward would have different words than the Lord Jesus. There are even those that want to divide the parable as ending mid-verse in verse eight

(Fitzmyer 1964, 28). Since the divisions are manmade and not divine, it may well be mid-verse. Consider that the words belong to the lord of the steward. There is validity to the lord's comments. There are admirable traits that can be praised by this lord. The steward was showing wisdom during a time of distress (cf. Caemmerer 1963, 69).

11. The Lord's Sayings

Consider this section to point to the Lord Jesus and not the lord of the land or steward. This will be the approach throughout this section starting in verse nine and going through verse thirteen. During a Wednesday night Bible study covering this section there was much push back and confusion in the audience. One of the ladies actual stated, "Jesus would not say that." This author stated back that, "He did because it says it right here." The confusion comes from the fact that Jesus normally would not condone this kind of behavior. Could there be a satisfactory explanation for the "uncharacteristic" words of Jesus? This section will consider many of the theories to rectify the parable with other teachings of the Master.

"For the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." At this point one of the disciples should have raised a hand. "Jesus, we need a little clarification on that." On the surface it seems that this is opposite of the truth. Those who are truly wise will seek God. Consider Proverbs 1:7, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*" There must be something that is missing to make this work with other teachings of Jesus. There are even scholars that state that Jesus was speaking with "deep irony" (Bretscher 1951, 757). It seems that would be an unfair assessment because other places in the gospels spell out the emotion behind the stated word when needed to clarify the situation. Take, for instance, the times seemingly innocent questions were asked of Jesus to

trap Him by the religious elite. It was made clear that their motives were not pure. It seems that God would give us insight into irony being used by our Lord if that is the case. The case could be made that the decisive nature in dire situations could be reason enough to praise this shrewd steward (cf. Topel 1975, 219).

Consider the lesson for the rich. Much of Jesus' teaching concerned money, the rich, the poor, etc. Could there be a lesson for the rich that heard this parable? In light of the recent telling of the rich man and Lazarus, the lesson would still be ringing about the tormented, remorseful rich man. The lesson was not explicitly stated, but can be deduced that Lazarus was in need and the rich man was guilty of not supplying help. The only sin that was stressed for the rich man was the negligence to the poor. Keeping this in mind, the parable of the steward could be lined up with this lesson. The steward relieved the debt of the tenants. This in essence not only took care of the debtors but also himself. The connection could be made by adding the statement about making friends with the world. The rich in giving away their money would make friends of the world. The poor would then usher you into the heavenly realm (Moore 1965, 105; Williams 1964, 294, 295). When we relate God as the master of the land, giving away His resources to those in need, the connection becomes more in focus. This should point us to better almsgiving (Moore 1965, 294, 295). As stated by Denaux concerning the views of Ireland, "True wisdom is to use money as seen from an eternal perspective" (Denaux 1994, 476). This seems to be the consensus among the scholarly papers with only a few outliers disagreeing such as above mentioned Ireland. Ireland does not espouse to the negative view of the rich in the gospel of Luke (Kurz 1994, 141). Not only should there be a prudent use of God's money but the man should not be in a "slavish servitude" to money. The Pharisees were entirely consumed with this greed and looked upon material wealth with an unhealthy avarice. This is ironic

considering this love of money to be such an abomination to God. (Fitzmyer 1964, 25). This wealth that was such a snare for the Pharisees (and many others), God is encouraging us to use it to take care of the poor. When considering the striving steward was looking for a temporary home with the debtors, Christians strive for a permanent dwelling (Plummer 1896, 385). Money will fail according to this parable (when it shall fail) so heavenly goals are what one must shoot for (ibid.).

When one looks at early Christian writers we find Jeremias pointing us to prudence in light of end times. Jeremias alludes that Jesus would say “For you, too, the challenge of the hour demands prudence, everything is at stake!” One must grasp the importance of our actions now in light of the ultimate, heavenly end (Fletcher 1963, 18,23). One could imagine Jesus encouraging his disciples to make the most of the opportunities afforded them in light that the world would be destroyed very much like the steward facing devastating circumstances (Denaux 1994, 476). To sum this up Malone explains it this way, “If people put out as much energy or more for the kingdom of God than this steward put out to save his own skin, what a difference this old world would be” (Malone 1978, 152). As far as the sons of this world being wiser than the children of light Malone makes a great point. He states, “Listen, we’re talking about eternity. We’re not just talking about a five-bedroom house with the three-car garage and four televisions. We’re talking about heaven! We’re talking about hell! That being true, why should the sons of man be wiser than the sons of God” (ibid. 153)?

Even though the parable is addressed to the disciples, there seems to be an underlying message to the Pharisees who were lovers of money. There were also times when they would mistreat the widows (Brawley 1994, 542). The parable could definitely be directed at them.

Much of the problem with this parable is approaching it with a Western mindset. The characters present in the parable and those listening to this parable would be far from Western. This parable would be coming from an Oriental [Middle Eastern] Jesus and being addressed to Orientals (Jews). It should follow that the parable should be interpreted in an Oriental framework (Gachter 1950, 124). As seen earlier, the steward was involved and responsible for much of the master's possessions and had great freedom in how to best use the resources. Honor would be more important than money. This seems to be the opposite in Western society. Money is more important than honor many times here in America.

Conclusion

To reiterate, this was not a work in definite conclusions. There is really nothing in academia that convinces this writer to one concrete model of this parable. One benefit of the research is to weed out the chaff of the theories. The Western view of this parable seriously cripples the understanding of said parable. Much can be gleaned by setting aside Western thought and immerse in the culture and history of Oriental, first century Judea. By placing the setting in the proper framework, much more can be gleaned from this valuable parable.

Much of the issue is in the role of the steward. When one considers that the steward had freedom in certain matters (as in debt reduction) the serious issue of dishonesty can be somewhat dismissed. This is not to say that the steward was not entirely guilty. There was enough neglect and selfishness that warranted a permanent firing.

Also missing from equations of this parable is the emphasis on the money with a lack of interest in the honor. Western equations would many times place material wealth over honor. This is simply not the case in this parable. Honor was at the top of the list with money being

pretty far down the list of priorities. Add to this the business model that valued sustainability over immediate profits (not to say that this never happened), the master can commend this unjust steward.

If one is still confused, join the club. Without further discoveries this will remain inconclusive. With certainty this will be disputed for as long as there are journal articles. Having said this, there can still be much learned from this parable. There is the rush and priority of the steward to fix the upcoming calamity. The Christian in this modern day world must prioritize and put godly things first over seemingly important temporal things. This makes the individual heavenly minded and not earthly minded. Many places in the New Testament speak of “the day” that is approaching (cf. Heb. 10:25). This many times is referring to destruction of Jerusalem but can be applied to the end of the world (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12).

Another lesson that prevails throughout the parable is the prudence and stewardship of money. When the steward was being unfaithful with the resources of the master, the problem manifested. The fast rectifying of the accounts could be a lesson to Christians to use the money that God entrusted them prudently. This goes along with the additional statement of Jesus after the parable concerning “unrighteous mammon.” Luke tends to focus on the poor all throughout the gospel. The debtor land tenants relieved of possibly a grievous and unbearable amount represent the poor. There is no doubt that Jesus teaches to take care of the poor.

Much has been learned in this examination of the parable of the Unjust Steward. By breaking it down to the smallest element, there should be greater ability to build it back up again with better understanding. Hopefully, a fresh reading of this parable will show much more than previously seen. Typically, this parable is glossed over because of the difficulty. This need not be. Consider this paper a spring board to start digging through this wonderful parable.

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