

The Unjust Steward

Stewardship and Responsibility · Parables of Jesus

This perplexing parable, in which Christ appears to commend dishonesty, requires careful interpretation. The Lord commends not the steward's unrighteousness but his shrewd foresight—his wise preparation for an inevitable future. The parable rebukes believers who fail to use present temporal resources to secure eternal rewards, demonstrating less prudence regarding heaven than worldlings display regarding earth.

A certain rich man's steward was accused of wasting his master's goods. The master demanded an account and announced the steward's dismissal: 'thou mayest be no longer steward' (Luke 16:2). Facing unemployment, the steward reasoned, 'I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed' (Luke 16:3)—his position had left him unfit for manual labor, and pride prevented mendicancy. He resolved upon a scheme: 'I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses' (Luke 16:4).

Note: The steward's precise method remains debated. He may have reduced the debts by forgiving his own commission (making him generous rather than dishonest), or he may have genuinely defrauded his master (making the parable's point his foresight despite his dishonesty). Either way, Christ's commendation focuses on the steward's shrewd preparation for the future, not his ethics. The amounts reduced were substantial: fifty measures (Greek batous) of oil represented about 400 gallons, twenty measures (korous) of wheat roughly 1,000 bushels.

He called his master's debtors individually. To the first, owing 100 measures of oil, he said, 'Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.' To another, owing 100 measures of wheat, he commanded, 'Take thy bill, and write fourscore.' By reducing their debts, he secured their gratitude and future

hospitality. When his lord discovered the scheme, he 'commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely' (Luke 16:8)—not righteously, but prudently. The steward recognized his crisis, understood his limited time, and acted decisively to prepare for his future, though that action was morally compromised.

Christ then drew His startling conclusion: 'For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light' (Luke 16:8). Worldly people demonstrate greater shrewdness in temporal affairs than God's children often display regarding eternal matters. The unregenerate diligently pursue earthly security; believers should pursue heavenly treasure with equal or greater zeal. Jesus commanded, 'Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations' (Luke 16:9)—use worldly wealth strategically for eternal purposes, investing in people and kingdom work that will welcome you into heaven. The parable's subsequent applications emphasize faithfulness: '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' (Luke 16:10). If believers prove unfaithful in handling earthly 'mammon of unrighteousness,' who will entrust them with 'true riches' (Luke 16:11)? The parable challenges comfortable Christianity that fails to leverage temporal resources for eternal gain, rebuking spiritual complacency while commending sacrificial, forward-thinking stewardship.

Key Verses

Luke 16:1-2

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.

Luke 16:3-4

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.

Luke 16:5-7

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.

Luke 16:8-9

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.

Luke 16:10-11

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?

1 Timothy 6:17-19

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, 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.