

Money, Mercy, and Eternal Life

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you enabled Luke, the physician, to accurately write down the words of the Lord Jesus for us. I pray now that you would help us understand what we've just read, and more than understand, to actually live into the reality being described here, as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So, the point of the parable is that it is okay to manipulate your boss's spreadsheet. Right? Jesus even says that his followers could learn a thing or two from this unrighteous steward. Jesus says, the children of this age, an unrighteous age, are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the children of light. Compromise with unrighteousness, if you need to, in order to get out of a jam.

Right? Every commentator I have read on the parable recorded in Luke 16, says it is one of the most difficult of all of Jesus' parables to interpret.

Some even say it is the most difficult. And many of them use the phrase, bristles with problems. And some of them even say the problems are unsolvable.

[1 : 35] As I said in the introduction to this series on the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches his parables for a number of reasons. Clearly, one of those reasons is to make us think.

I quoted the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who argues that the parables are designed, quote, to increase perplexity and to call into question the reader's understanding.

Boy, you can say that again. I will. To increase perplexity to call into question the reader's understanding. Especially this parable of the unrighteous steward.

I have never had to work as hard on any biblical text as I have had to work on this parable. But I can tell you, all the work has been worth it.

For this parable turns out to be one of the most practical parables Jesus ever taught. Practical? Practical? Yes. For through this story, Jesus is helping us prepare for a crisis.

[2 : 49] The unrighteous steward is facing a crisis, and he rightly does not want to be homeless. We, too, are facing a crisis, and we rightly do not want to be homeless.

Through this parable, Jesus is teaching us how to prepare for this crisis so that we will be taken into our eternal home.

The text has two parts. In the first part, verses 1 to 8a, we have the parable. In the second part, verses 8a to 16, we have sayings of Jesus about money and wealth.

Not only do most scholars call this parable the most difficult to interpret, they also say that it is difficult to see how the parable and these sayings are related.

In his sayings, is Jesus counterpointing the parable? Or in these sayings, is Jesus elaborating on his parable? Luke tells us in verse 1 that Jesus also spoke the parable of the unjust steward to the disciples.

[3 : 59] Notice that little word, also. The also connects this parable with the parable recorded in Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son, or prodigal sons, or prodigal father.

In that greatest story ever told, Jesus reveals for us the scandalous love of God. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them, the scribes and Pharisees say in anger and disgust.

And Jesus responds to that accusation by teaching us the parable of the prodigal son, son's father. Then in Luke 16, Jesus also teaches the parable of the unjust steward.

He also links the two parables together, telling us that they are related. Well, how are they related? Luke 15, the scandalous love of God.

Luke 16, here is how you live the scandalous love of God. Luke 15, the gospel of unexpected and undeserved love.

[5 : 04] Luke 16, this is how you act when you experience undeserved and unexpected love. Now, before we work our way through the text, both through the parable and the sayings, let's step back from the text and see it and hear it in the larger context of Jesus' life and ministry.

Have you ever noticed how much of Jesus' teaching involves our finances? Have you ever noticed how many times Jesus speaks of wealth and all the issues around wealth?

One-third of Jesus' parables are about money. 16 of 47 parables. Jesus has more to say about money than he does about prayer and love.

Indeed, Jesus has more to say about money than prayer and love combined. Why? Because that's life.

We encounter the issues around money all the time. To be human in the present world is to have a relationship with money, right? It's simply the way it is. Money is part of the warp and woof of our existence.

[6 : 27] And what Jesus emphasizes again and again is that money is not a benign reality. Money is a power. Money is a spiritual power, which is why Jesus gives it a name, not always brought out in the text, the name mammon.

He names it mammon, a real power, a real spiritual power, not neutral, requiring much spiritual alertness to handle it.

So, if Jesus is going to lead us into a new life, if he's going to lead us into the kingdom of God, he has to speak about money. He has to teach us into a new understanding and a new relationship with money.

He would not be a good savior if he did not teach us about money. The good news is that Jesus knows all about money.

Jesus knows all the issues around money. Jesus knows what it means to live with money. Why? Because he was a man who had money.

[7 : 37] In his earthly life, Jesus had money. It has traditionally been assumed that Jesus did not have money, that he was a poor carpenter coming from a poor family living in a poor village, and that when he began his public ministry, he called around him poor fishermen and poor farmers and poor artisans and that therefore, Jesus was quite naive about the power of money.

But this assumption, is it correct? Rodney Stark, the distinguished professor of social sciences, that's actually his title. How about going around a campus at Baylor University with the distinguished professor of social sciences, along with other historians of the first century, is challenging the assumption that Jesus was poor.

In his book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, which I commend to you as a must-read. It's a must-read for discipleship in our time. In *The Triumph of Christianity*, Dr. Stark argues that Jesus of Nazareth more likely came from a world of wealth or, at minimum, from a life of reasonable financial comfort. In the book, Dr. Stark is dealing with what he calls the deprivation theory. The deprivation theory that explains the emergence of religion. It's a theory about the emergence of world religions, which presupposes that people adopt supernatural solutions to their misery problems, that is, religious answers to their problems, when direct action fails or is obviously impossible.

This is the theory held by people like Friedrich Engels, who was a friend of Karl Marx, Edwin Goodenough, Ernst Trolls, H. Richard Niebuhr. And Stark argues that the theory is simply not true.

[9 : 28] New religious movements do not emerge from the poor. They emerge from privileged classes. They emerge from people who have enough resources and enough time to study and write.

They can't emerge from people who are poor and having to work morning to night. They emerge from people who have money, like Buddhism, or like 21st century New Age movements.

Think Scientology. And according to Stark, Christianity is no exception. Christianity does not emerge from the poor. It is a religion for the poor, and it's informed by the poor, but it does not emerge from the poor.

According to Stark, it appears that Jesus' parents occupied a prominent place in the community.

They were well off enough to own property both in Nazareth and down the road in Capernaum.

And his parents were able to travel to Jerusalem every year for Passover, which most families were not able to do. They got to go to Maui every year.

[10 : 40] Stark points out that Jesus constantly used examples involving wealth, land ownership, investment, borrowing, having servants and tenants, inheritance, and the like.

Jesus was familiar with banking procedures and with employment contracts. Now, this does not necessarily mean that Jesus himself was privileged, but it does mean, says Stark, that he spoke to a privileged audience.

George Wesley Buchanan observes that Jesus' parables would have been pointless if told to people who had not enough wealth to entertain guests, hire servants, and be generous with contributions, etc.

I think this is why Luke mentions those who supported Jesus' ministry, particularly these wealthy women who were attracted to Jesus and then who underwrote Jesus and his disciples' travel expenses.

That wealth likely came from their husbands and their families. And then you look at Jesus' disciples. The assumption is that these are a poor lot of folk, but they weren't.

[11 : 48] They clearly knew their way around money. Fishing, for example. Fishing is big business, and it requires employing a lot of employees.

When Jesus called James and John, Mark tells them that they left their father in the boat with their hired servants. They're wealthy enough to have hired servants. Mark tells us Peter owned two homes, one in Bethsaida and one down in Capernaum.

And Mark's mother owned a home in Jerusalem which was big enough to house the emerging church after the resurrection. We could go on with those examples.

Now, all of this has made me rethink that powerful line in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 8, 9. For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich.

I've preached that text at Christmas many times announcing the good news that Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, rich beyond our imagining, leaves the comfort of heaven, comes down where we are to give us what he has.

[13 : 00] That's true, but that's not what that text is saying. Paul makes this great declaration in the context of raising funds for the hunger relief effort in Jerusalem.

And he points to the case of Jesus as what should motivate the Corinthians to be generous. Jesus, who was rich in this life, laid aside his privileged status and resources so that he could live freely for others in order that we might receive the life that he has.

So, writes Rodney Stark, Jesus' call to use the wealth entrusted to us for others is not a poor man's complaint against the rich, which is the way that's been taken, but rather the statement of someone in a position to say, do as I have just done.

Jesus knows money. He grew up with it. He knows all about money and he chooses to use money for others. So, back to the parable.

As I said, there are two parts. The first, verses 1 to 8a, is the parable. The second is verses, back to the text, sorry, the text has two parts. The first part is the parable and then the second part is the sayings on money.

[14 : 24] Now, the question is, how are the sayings relative to the parable? Has Jesus spoken the sayings to counterpoint what appears to be an endorsement of playing games with money or has Jesus spoken these sayings to explain the parable?

I take the latter. Jesus is elaborating on the parable. Jesus is drawing out more fully the movements of the human heart that are at place in this parable. So, let's listen to these sayings and then go back and listen to the parable.

Begin with the sayings in verses 10 and 11. 10 and 11. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.

Therefore, therefore, you have, I'm sorry, if, therefore, you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you?

Father, we pray that you bless these EMT guys on their way to whatever it is that they have to do. I do that all the time, all day long down here. Unrighteous mammon.

[15 : 39] Jesus is not saying that all mammon is inherently unrighteous. Jesus is simply saying that like everything in an unrighteous world in this age, as he puts it, all forms of mammon are compromised.

Right? Like everything in the world, money is tainted by sin. There is no pure money. But that's not because mammon is inherently evil. It's just because we live in a fallen world.

Faithful with unrighteous mammon. What's Jesus getting at here? Jesus wants to give us the true riches. He wants to give us the fullness of the kingdom of God. But he's saying that if we do not know how to deal with the riches right in front of us, how will we be able to deal with the riches he wants to pour in our lives?

If we do not know how to be righteous stewards with worldly wealth, how will we be righteous stewards with heavenly wealth? But look and listen more carefully.

Look again at verse 10. Verse 10. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much. Notice the is, not will be. Many of us tend to read that verse as, he who is faithful in very little thing will be faithful in much.

[16:54] Now, that may be true. If you're faithful in a little thing, you might be faithful in a big thing. That might be true, but that's not what Jesus is saying. He's saying that those who are faithful in the little are faithful in the little because they are first faithful with the much.

Faithfulness with the much precedes faithfulness with the little. Jesus is saying, I think, that in order to operate rightly in this world with the little, we have to first know how to operate in the other world in the kingdom of God with the much.

That is, we will not know how to relate to money in this world unless we first have the perspective of the kingdom of God. G. Campbell Morgan put it this way, the man who is faithful in his relationship with the spiritual world is the one who will be faithful with his dealings with money in the visible world.

I must be right with the much of the kingdom of God before I can be right with the little of the kingdoms of humanity. And that is what is going on in this parable.

The steward ends up being faithful with the little because he becomes faithful with the much. At the beginning of the story, he is unfaithful. He is unrighteous.

[18:18] He squandered the master's possessions. How? We are not told. But after he is caught, he acts differently. You see, being caught introduced this steward to the kingdom of God and in particular to the mercy of the kingdom of God.

His master does not throw him in jail. It's a great surprise. It's unexpected mercy. And in light of that mercy and grace, he gains a new perspective, the perspective of the kingdom, and then acts in mercy and grace.

His relationship with money is changed. We'll come back to that in just a moment. Thus the saying in verse 13, No servant can serve two masters.

He will hate the one or love the other or he will hold the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. It's not very often that Jesus speaks so absolutely.

It's not very often that he speaks of impossibilities. You cannot. Not you must not. And not even you must not try. He just says you cannot. We can't do it.

[19:26] It's impossible. It cannot be both and. Both mammon and God. It has to be either or. Either God or mammon. Because there can only be one God in our lives.

Either the living God or mammon. Either we use mammon to serve God or we try to use God to get more mammon. And this is what the steward in the parable discovers.

and why he then does what he does. When he was squandering the master's wealth at the beginning of the story he was serving mammon. But then the kingdom of God broke through to him and he began to use mammon for other purposes.

So to the parable. Verse 1. A certain rich man. Although in Luke's gospel up to this point the rich do not fare very well.

I do not think we're supposed to assume that this rich man was dishonest money grabbing person. If he were that would make him complicit in the actions of the steward.

[20:32] He's a landowner. He's a landowner. And he rents out his land at a just fee to others who then have the privilege of working his land for their own good.

Verse 1. He had a steward, a manager, an agent. He's authorized to act on the landowner's behalf. He's hired by the landowner to negotiate contracts with the renters.

He's paid for his work either by getting a salary or a handling fee for his negotiations. He also likely gets a little under the table but that's not part of the story.

Verse 5. The master's debtors. They are renters. And the rental fee for working the land is a portion of the harvest.

Just enough. Fair enough, right? The payment is only due after the harvest. In that day renters didn't pay a percentage of the produce. They paid a fixed agreed upon amount which of course is a huge risk because the crops can fail and you're still stuck with the bill.

[21 : 39] Now one renter has agreed to pay 100 measures of oil. The word translated measure in the text is batas. A batas is roughly equivalent to 8 and 3 quarters gallons of oil.

So 100 batas is 875 gallons of oil which is roughly the yield from 146 olive trees. Now that's just the rent which means this man is harvesting a whole lot more olive trees.

We're talking high finance here. The other renter has agreed to pay 100 measures of wheat. This time the word measure is the word koros and koros equals 10 bushels.

So this renter will owe 1,000 bushels which is the yield from 100 acres. Again that's only the rent which means this man is farming a lot more acreage. Again we're talking high finance.

These are very wealthy renters. The landowner learns that his steward has been squandering the possessions. Interesting. This is the same word used back in Luke 15 about the younger son who squanders all of his inheritance in the far country.

[22 : 46] We're not told how the steward squandered but we do know this charge is true because he doesn't argue. He knows himself to be unrighteous. The owner then rightly dismisses the steward.

Give me an account of your stewardship. You can no longer be my steward. And then the surprise we already noted. The steward is fired but he is not thrown into jail.

I owe this insight to Kenneth Bailey. The steward's fired but he is not thrown into jail. In the first century people listening to this parable would expect jail and they would be surprised to discover that the landowner did not opt for jail which means this steward is experiencing mercy.

Mercy is not being given what I deserve. Justice is being given what I do deserve. The steward deserves justice. He deserves jail.

He gets mercy like the younger son in the parable of the prodigal son unexpected mercy and like the older son in the parable of the prodigal sons unexpected mercy. The steward then faces a crisis.

[23 : 57] He's out of work. He's not strong enough to dig. He's too shameful to beg so he talks to himself. That's not a bad first thing to do when you're in a crisis. Talk to yourself.

Verse 4 Self I know what I'll do. Literally it is I have come to the knowledge of what I will do because of mercy I think.

He comes to the knowledge of what he will do because he's experienced mercy. He summons the renters the debtors they do not know he's been fired which explains the quickly in verse 6 sit down and write quickly.

He has to get them to do this before they discover that he was fired. The renters therefore assume the steward is still acting on the landowner's behalf with the landowner's authority.

The renters assume that what the steward is doing has all the blessing and all the approval of the landowner. If the renters knew he had been fired they wouldn't deal with him. Be too shameful.

[24 : 56] So the steward changes the rental agreements. He reduces the amount that will be due after the harvest. 100 measures of oil is reduced to 50.

That's 750 gallons down to 437 and a half gallons. 100 measures of wheat down to 80. That's 100 bushels down to 800. I'm told that if you turn all of these things into cash it comes out to the equivalent amount of rental decline.

They get the same deal. When the master discovers what the steward has done another surprise. The master praises the steward.

Now take careful note of the steward's motive. Verse 4 So that when I'm removed from the stewardship they will receive me into their homes.

Notice that Jesus calls us to the same motive when he summarizes the parable in verse 9. Make friends of yourselves by the mammon of unrighteousness that when it fails they may receive you into eternal dwellings.

[26 : 03] Receive welcome by the way the same word used in Luke 15 this man welcomes and receives sinners and tax collectors. The steward is facing a crisis. He's lost his job.

He's not going to get any other work because he carries the stigma of squandering the land owner's possessions so he has to prepare for the future. He makes friends to prepare for the future.

Friends who because of the unexpected mercy they receive from the steward are now going to receive or welcome him into their homes. The land owner who's going to lose some rental income praises the steward for such shrewdness.

This word shrewd is a wisdom word. It's a Proverbs word. It's a word blessed by the book of Proverbs because it means to act prudently, to act wisely.

The land owner praises the steward for acting in a wise, prudent way to prepare for his future. The land owner is praising the steward's farsighted realism. But is not the steward also acting wrongly? [27 : 14] I mean, does he have the right to change these contracts? He's causing the land owner to lose some income. Is this righteous? So, commentators wrestle with this as we do.

Some argue that what the steward has simply done is change the rental contracts by foregoing his handling fee. He's just taken out the profit.

Boy, it's a hefty profit, isn't it? But it's a possible interpretation. Others argue that what the steward has done, he's taken interest out of the contracts. See, there's the principle plus the interest.

Now, it was against Jewish law to charge interest. God had spoken against usury. So, the steward takes out what should have never been in the contract in the first place.

Now, if that's the interpretation, one, it's a very hefty interest. And also, that would call into question the integrity of the landowner, because the landowner is going to know about what the contract had. [28 : 13] So, I do not think the issue is whether the steward acts justly or not. The issue is how to deal with the crisis of possible homelessness. The steward is praised because he acts wisely in the face of the crisis.

He acts prudently to prepare for his future. And Jesus encourages us to do the same thing. We, too, need to act with similar farsightedness.

So, the point of the parable in light of the sayings is two points. First, the steward does mercy out of mercy.

The steward does mercy out of mercy. He has experienced mercy, and so he extends mercy.

That's what happens with mercy. When you experience mercy, you want to give it away to others.

The steward has been given unexpected mercy, and so he gives unexpected mercy. That is, in the face of the crisis, he's going to bank everything on mercy.

[29 : 29] Now, I use the word bank intentionally. He has no other hope for the future but mercy.

And so, he banks on mercy by pouring mercy on others.

A strange way of doing banking, but that's what Jesus is saying. He banks on mercy by pouring the mercy on others. And Jesus is telling us to do the same thing. We have received mercy, immense mercy, and because we have, we bank it all on that mercy by extending mercy to others.

Are you following me? Of course, how are you going to respond to this big of a crowd? So, the second point of the parable, and why I said that this turns out to be one of the most practical parables Jesus ever taught.

Second point, mercy, mercy is expressed through what we do with money. It's expressed in a lot of other ways, but it's expressed through what we do with money.

So, verse 9, I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal dwellings. The way there is probably likely a Jewish way of saying God and God's heavenly entourage.

[30 : 42] Make friends by the means of mammon, like the steward did, that God may receive you into eternal dwelling. Do not serve mammon, because mammon will eat us up if we try to serve it.

It's a real power that gets a hold on us. It's a power that wants us to be slaves. Do not serve mammon, rather use mammon.

Use mammon in the face of crisis. Use mammon to prepare for the future. For, says Jesus, it will fail. Did you see that when we read that?

Mammon will fail. That is the crisis we're facing. Mammon will fail. All forms of mammon will let us down in all kinds of ways, as we're painfully witnessing in the Philippines today.

Gone, overnight, everything. It will fail. Definitely so when we die. It simply will not count for anything on that moment.

[31 : 52] The only thing about mammon that is going to count in that moment is what we did with the mammon. Whatever mammon you and I have is all from mercy.

And we live out this mercy by using mammon to extend mercy. That's why the Pharisees did not like what Jesus was saying.

