

The Unjust Manager – Preparing for Crisis

Luke 16:1-9

Turn to Luke 16 please. We are starting a series on parables of Jesus. A parable is a story to teach us something. Jesus liked to use parables. We are starting with the story of the unjust manager because this is the first parable that caught my attention. Back in my student days I read about this one in particular, trying to figure it out.

This is a story about a man facing a crisis. Something big was going to change everything for him, and he did not know how he would survive after this happened. The ways he had taken care of himself would end, that he knew. What can he do to take care of himself after this happens?

That was his question. And he came up with a good answer, and he put it into action, quickly. Jesus liked him. This manager was also a crook. Jesus did *not* say he liked that. But Jesus liked how the manager solved his problem, and wanted us to be like him.

The Crisis Begins: 16:1-2 - *Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’*

“Accused” could also be “charged with” – and the story assumes the manager is guilty. A rich man had a business manager, and the manager was careless. It was his job to be careful with his boss’s property, and he was not careful. And so he is being fired.

“Give an account” means “write down what you’ve done, record it so I know where things stand,” and then you are fired. (And he will not be able to get a job elsewhere after this.)

The Manager’s Response to Coming Crisis: 16:3-7 - *“The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ [To this point the manager just talks to himself; now he begins to act.]*

⁵ *“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ “‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.*

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’

⁷ *“Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’ “‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied. “He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’*

The doomed manager does not have many options. How will he survive after he loses his job? Physical labour is out, and he refuses to be a beggar. But there is something he can do, if he acts fast. He changes what his master’s debtors owe his master, he cuts it back considerably.

IOU - The accounting system must have worked something like old-fashioned IOUs. In my younger days: if I borrowed \$20 from a friend, to show him I meant to pay him back, I would write him an “IOU.” I would write “I.O.U. \$20” and then I’d sign my name, Ed Neufeld. My friend would keep this in his wallet to remind me if I forgot, or if I said I’d never borrowed it.

All these people were in debt to the master. They wrote IOUs to the master, which means the business manager kept these IOUs. The manager called in each debtor, handed them their IOU, and told them to write in a smaller amount.

The two examples Jesus gives are large debts. These debtors are not ordinary common folk. These are all prosperous people, to be moving around oil and grain in these large volumes. Jesus’ audience would have picked that up. Jesus said the master was rich, and so are the debtors.

The business manager’s logic: *when I lose my job here, these wealthy people will welcome me into their houses.* The manager is saving each of his master’s debtors a lot of money. He is doing each one a big favour. He knows that if he does this for them now, they will never let him go homeless or hungry in the future.

The story assumes a strong moral obligation to return a favour. If he does this for these prosperous people, they will all owe him and they will know they owe him. In those days, if you did not pay back such a favour, you shamed yourself. Suppose his master has ten debtors like this. Ten prosperous people each owe the manager a big favour. Good plan.

Dishonest? Yes. This manager has been unrighteous twice in this story. He was unrighteous before it began, by being careless with his master’s possessions. And now he is cheating his master out of considerable wealth.

Beware Historical Backgrounds Back in my student days, when I was curious about this story, I found an essay in a respected NT journal that explained the historical background so that this manager was *not* cheating his master at all. I like that, and I preached that in several places.

A few years later I noticed another essay in a different respected journal on this same parable. This writer also explained how the manager was not cheating the master. But the second essay had a different explanation of historical background than the first essay. They could not both be right. I was troubled, what’s going on here? I stopped preaching on this story.

Over the years there have been more, all different from each other. But the old-fashioned commentaries all said, “he *is* cheating his master, but he’s praised for shrewdness, not honesty.” And now most NT experts have come back to this. He’s as dishonest as it seems.

Over the years I have learned to mistrust any historical background of Scripture that changes the interpretation to something we would not have guessed from the Scripture itself. I have been through this cycle with other difficult Scriptures, not just Luke 16.

An interpretation of Scripture based on what is not in Scripture is probably wrong. It will sound wonderful, it is how teachers like me impress their audiences. But if the Scripture was not already hinting at this, be skeptical.

The manager solved his crisis by using his master's money to make wealthy friends that would care of him after his crisis.

Our Crisis: We also have a crisis coming. Our lives as we know them will end, and then there will be a judgement, where we will give an account of our lives to God. V2 – “give an account of your management.” And then there will be eternity. And this is true of everyone.

Jesus was not trying to scare anyone; fear is the wrong response. Jesus wanted us to *think* about the big picture, and *act* that way. The manager said, “what will I DO now?” “I know what I’ll DO ... “ V8, coming up, the master commended the dishonest manager because he ACTED shrewdly” (In Greek, “do” and “act” are the same word.)

The Master Praised the Manager for his Wisdom 16:8a - *The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*

“Dishonest manager” is “unrighteous manager” in Greek. The older title for this parable is “the unrighteous steward,” based on this description. This is a difficult line. Would the master praise a manager who had just cheated him out of much wealth?

It is certainly unlikely, but Jesus told parables that had unlikely parts. The master did not praise his honesty, but his wisdom. This is translated “he acted shrewdly,” but it is the same word as translated “wisdom” elsewhere in Jesus’ teaching, it is a positive word.

Is the manager unrighteous because of his carelessness in verse 1? Or his cheating in verses 5-7? No clear way to decide. Jesus probably has both faults in mind.

Which “master” in v8a? “The master” in v8a is *kyrios*, and some have said the parable ended in v7, and in v8a *kyrios* means Jesus himself praised the unrighteous manager, since the master of the parable would never praise his swindler. But the story calls the master the *kyrios* in vv3, 5, and nothing indicates we are not still in the story until the middle of v8 (“Because the children of light ...”). Most take *kyrios* in v8a as the parable’s master, I’m quite sure this is right, even though it seems improbable.

Verse 8a is the last line of the parable, and it ends with the wisdom of the manager, the shrewdness of the manager. He used the last day or two of his job to put a bunch of wealthy people in his debt. For a short time he had the chance to get this done, and he did so.

Silly Children of Light 16:8b - *For the children of this world are more shrewd (or “are wiser”) in dealing with their own kind than are the children of the light.*

It said at the start that Jesus told this parable to his disciples, did you notice that?

The disciples here will not be just the 12. Many other Galilean followers were traveling with Jesus by this stage. They are all listening. We find out in v14 that Pharisees mocked Jesus, so they were listening too. But Jesus was saying this to his followers.

The children of this world are wiser in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light. The children of this world are wiser in their system than the children of light in *their* system. For the children of *this* world, *this* life is all there is. The goal is to have money for their whole lives.

The children of the light know that this world is ending, and then there is a judgment, where we give an account of our lives, and then eternity with God. That's *our* system. The children of *light* know the *big* picture. This life is *not* all there is; it is ending, then judgment, then the next age.

The children of *this* world make good plans that fit *their* system, and put them into action. Like the unjust business manager. But the children of the *light* do *not* make good plans that fit *their* system.

Jesus is accusing his followers with a kind voice. They are children of light, in Jesus' mind that is secure. But as my dad would say, "you children of light are a bunch of wooden heads! Think! The pagans are brighter in their use of money than you are in your use of money!"

Use worldly wealth to be welcomed into eternal dwellings: 16:9 - *I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*

There are some confusing things in this verse, some of them smoothed out by the NIV translation. But the NIV has done the right things here, and I will give you the main point.

"Worldly wealth" is "unrighteous mammon" in Greek. "Mammon" means wealth or possessions. In the NT it is usually used negatively. "Mammon" in the NT usually means possessions that take compete with God for our attention and loyalty.

Outside the NT mammon can just mean possessions or wealth, not necessarily a bad thing. But in this verse Jesus leaves no doubt. Here it is bad, it is "unrighteous mammon."

Main point But Jesus says, "*use it!*" Use unrighteous mammon, to do what this unrighteous manager did. He was on to something. Be like him. Use unrighteous mammon to do what this unrighteous manager did: he made friends for the future, powerful wealthy friends for the future.

Jesus is saying, "do that with God. Do that with your Father in heaven." Use unrighteous mammon so that God will say "Good for you. You have used unrighteous mammon to show your loyalty to me, now welcome into my eternal dwelling and I will show my loyalty to you."

“Gain Friends for Yourselves.” The business manager gained several friends for himself, all his master’s debtors. Jesus is staying with that image, but “friends,” plural, does not work any other way but as a roundabout way of saying God himself.

The unjust manager did not feed the poor, no, he gained powerful friends for himself. We can use unrighteous mammon to warm the heart of a very powerful friend in heaven, our Father himself.

Elsewhere Jesus says, “don’t lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” There also, Jesus tells us that this is for our own good. The treasures last longer, the wealth lasts far longer.

Jesus is saying, “My beloved children of light, do yourselves a favour. Use unrighteous, worldly wealth to make a powerful Friend for yourself, so that when it fails, he will welcome you into his eternal dwelling.”

“When it fails.” “When it is gone.” We have a crisis coming. Our money, our possessions, our earning and spending, borrowing and lending, it will all end. Unrighteous mammon will fail, at our death, at the Lord’s return. We have a short window of time now to win the loyalty and favour of the most powerful eternal Friend, God Almighty, heavenly Father.

Confession On Friday of this week, when I had been thinking about this sermon and it was coming along nicely, I walked into a sports store in Steinbach to buy a \$10 item. In that store I saw the bicycle of my dreams, a fine winter bike, at a much lower price than I had ever seen it. Not cheap, you understand, just not as expensive as others I had seen. I was smitten.

I know Fred can understand feeling that way about a bike. Maybe not the rest of you. But most of us have something that grabs us this way. And I came home and tried to work on this sermon.

And half of me wants to teach this parable, which says we should be wise and use unrighteous wealth to win God’s favour, and the other half of me wants desperately to find a way to get my hands on this bike, use unrighteous mammon to please myself (and spending that amount does not make sense in our household right now).

I prayed, “God, help me, how can I teach that we should lay up treasure in heaven when I only want that treasure on earth?” The only answer I got was that I had to tell you. And I grumbled about that, too. “Lord, if I tell them, then I can’t EVER go buy that bike!” And I got the same answer: “Never mind about that, you just make sure you tell them.” So I am.

I don’t know how this will end. It would have been much more convenient for me if I had not seen that bike till this coming week. Then I could preach this with a good conscience. As it is, I am one of the children of light who is not yet wise. Confession over.

How exactly to we gain this Eternal Friend? In this parable, Jesus does not say one word about that. He covers that in other places, but not here. The line “don’t lay up treasures on earth, lay up treasures in heaven” does not tell us what to do, either.

Jesus’ other teachings make this clear, though. Be generous. With money and with your possessions, be generous. Lend freely. Live generously. Live simply. Live contentedly.

Summary - In this parable, Jesus wants us to use our heads in our use of unrighteous worldly wealth. In this story, all the world’s wealth is unrighteous. But we can use it in a way that it will help us after it fails. It will fail, the crisis is coming, money will be no more use.

We, the children of light, understand that we live in a different system. As those disciples. We know that this life ends, and then there is judgement, and then eternity with God. But just don’t act as if we live in this system.

This is not a new problem, this is not about consumerism or materialism in our day. This was true of those first disciples and followers, too. Jesus knew they were children of light, and he could see that they were not handling their money and possessions wisely, given what they knew about the big picture. It is an old problem.

Wise use of unrighteous mammon *now* can help us *later, after* it fails, it can win us a powerful eternal Friend *now*, with an eternal dwelling, and he will take care of us *later, after it fails*.

We want God to say this to us: “Good for you. You have used unrighteous mammon to show your loyalty to me, now welcome into my eternal dwelling and I will show my loyalty to you.” Jesus thinks we should give God some reasons to say this to us. So, let’s do that. Amen.

Verses 10-13 part of Jesus’ application? In these lines Jesus continues on the theme of possessions, and there is some debate about whether or not vv10-13 continue to apply this parable. At first they seem to continue on, because they are still on the general theme of possessions. But vv10-13 appear elsewhere in the Gospels, in other contexts. That is, they are not directly tied to this particular parable. And they seem to go in a different direction than vv8-9. So I agree with the common opinion that these teachings of Jesus are not directly tied to this parable. The explanation of this parable ends with 16:9.