

The Wisdom of Christ
Parable of the Dishonest Steward
Bible Study 7 – Luke 16:1-8

Goals:

- 1) To be able to describe the core truth of each parable in a sentence.
- 2) To be able to explain crucial cultural and literary facets of each parable.
- 3) To be able to describe how each truth challenges the way you live your life day to day.

Expectations:

1-2 hours of prep work (reading the parable, answering the questions and preparing to discuss your findings and create a plan for real life application)

Note:

Much of the information in this study, especially the cultural observations, was taken from Kenneth Bailey in his books *Poet & Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*. Both would be wonderful for additional reading.

Suggested Homework:

- 1) Print out these studies or have a way of filling them out and accessing them on your phone.
- 2) Read Luke 16:1-8 before completing this study. When you finish the study, reread the passage again.
- 3) Complete the following questions after the introduction.
- 4) Come to the group with 2-3 observations from the text/study and 2-3 ways you need to apply the lesson.
- 5) Read the parable three times this week. As you read through it, connect it to your experience of God's grace and seek to focus on that this week.
- 6) Meet with another member of the group to discuss issues of accountability and growth this semester.

Introduction:

DISCUSS: What was one blessing that encouraged you this week?

DISCUSS: What makes sacrifice to God hard? Is it worth it? Give a personal example you've seen/experienced lately.

Review:

Background for Luke: The original reader- Written to Theophilus, a patron who wanted to know more of Jesus Christ. Luke compiled Luke and Acts as the answer to how the Church got started and who Jesus was.

Purpose: **Luke's purpose is to show that Jesus is the Son of Man, who came to save the world through his death.** The parables we will study this semester will articulate different parts of that main thrust- the Son of Man's sacrificial death for all as Savior. The Son of Man is a distinctive title of note as well. It comes from Daniel, Son of *Man* focuses on the unique ONE of mankind who ultimately fulfills God's purpose of being the visible representative of the invisible God and in the process redeems the rest of humanity. There is only one OF US who has fulfilled God's plan. There is only one OF US who redeems us. And those who by faith express their solidarity with the SON OF MAN will also be redeemed to fulfill God's purpose for humanity. Luke contains a distinctive approach to humanity in the book (as noted below), and consequently an emphasis on Christ's humanity as the human Messiah.

Audience: Luke is writing specifically to Theophilus, and more broadly to Gentiles, especially those who are disenfranchised or ostracized by society. **Luke wants those people to know that the Son of Man cares for and died for them.**

Luke shows particular attention on the oppressed, unfavored and gentile recipients of Jesus' ministry, such as Samaritans, women, Romans, gentiles, children, tax collectors and other non-religious elites. Luke wanted to show that Jesus is the Son of Man, come to save all.

Luke 9-19 has been recognized as a great chiastic artistic/poetic masterpiece. Known by many names, this account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is laden with brilliant poetry and magnificent composition of the parables and anecdotes within.

Review Questions:

- 1) Summarize the main point of Luke's gospel in your own words.

- 2) Describe the person Luke is trying to teach.

- 3) What was one truth from last week's parable that you had the opportunity to apply this week? Did you take advantage of that opportunity?

Literary Background

To say that the parable of the dishonest steward or unrighteous manager is a difficult passage to interpret is easily an understatement. Commentators have offered many suggestions as to the meaning of this particular passage, and their conclusions fall into two different interpretations. When dealing with such a passage as this, it is important to consider which

solution fits best within the cultural and literary framework in which it was recited by Christ and then written by Luke.

The majority position understands the parable of the dishonest steward in light of the verses which come after the parable. This is certainly an uncommon structure than that which Jesus typically uses for his parables and which Luke has utilized to chronicle them, however not there are example of Jesus not explaining parables or Luke arranging them in different ways. The proponents of this interpretation give verses 9-13 precedent and interpret the parable only concerning the use of wealth- that you cannot love God and money. This interpretation would exhort the believer to utilize his or her possessions for God's glory, even if it doesn't seem advantageous at the time or in the culture.

An alternate position connects 16:1-8 with the end of chapter 15, the parable of the Two Sons, which we studied last week. This position argues that the wording at the beginning of the chapter is not referencing a change of topic, but a continuation from the previous parable. In addition, this view would assert that Jesus was talking about a separate topic when commenting on some of the details of the story, much in the same way as a person who reads a book, then comments about something that was not the main point, but still a valid application from a principle contained therein.

Below I will show some of the argumentation for each, starting with the minority position and ending with the majority. First, we will take a look at the structure to the Parable of the Dishonest Steward and describe the cultural scene of the parable. Minority positions believe this parable has the same structure and also the same core meaning as the Prodigal Son: **We must realize the character of our Master/Father and choose to cast ourselves on his grace and mercy alone.**

Then the majority position will then be defended, and application to the principle of **shrewdness and how we handle our wealth** will be discussed based on an analysis of verses 9-13.

Read the parable and then answer the questions below:

QUESTION: What do you notice at the center of the chiasm?

QUESTION: What is most startling in this parable to you?

Text: Luke 16:1-8

1 Now He was also saying to the disciples,

“There was a rich man who had a manager,

and this *manager* was reported to him as squandering his possession.

2 “And he called him and said to him,

‘What is this I hear about you?

Give an accounting of your management,

for you can no longer be manager.’

3 “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do,

since my master is taking the management from me?

I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.

4 ‘I know what I shall do,

so that when I am removed from the management

people will welcome me into their homes.’

5 “And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he *began* saying to the first,

‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ “And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’

And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’

7 “Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’

And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’

He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’

8 “And his master praised the unrighteous manager

because he had acted shrewdly;

for the sons of this age are more shrewd

in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.”

Summary Form:

Rich man brings charges to steward (v.1)

Steward’s problem (v.2)

Steward’s problem (v.3)

Idea (v.4)

Steward’s solution (v.5-6)

Steward’s solution (v.7)

Rich man commends steward (v.8)

Cultural background:

--Please highlight two sentences in this section you found particularly interesting or that helped your understanding of the parable.

Landowner- Fantasy Picture

Although it is not totally clear to the 21st century American audience, the rich man in this parable is actually a landowner. This is primarily because of the measure of wealth in this time as well as other clues from the parable about the tenants or debtors. The picture is much like the wealthy lord of the middle ages in Europe. This lord would rent out tracts of land to tenants, who

would in turn tend the land. The lord would then offer protection to the serfs and provide for the tenants out of what was harvested. This is the closest analogy to the times reflected in this tale. This rich man is a landowner, and his tenants care for the land and owe the rich man a certain amount annually for the use of his land. They then keep the remainder as extra for themselves.

As this landowner discovers that his steward, or manager, has been wasteful, he charges the steward with these claims and removes him from his management. This man, who has been entrusted with managing the finances of the landowner, as well as setting the rates for the tenants, and increasing the wealth of the rich man, has failed to do his job. The rich man fires the steward, but an unusual set of circumstances unfold after this pronouncement.

Steward's Response to Charges

There are many unusual components of the discussion between the rich man and his steward. The first of these is the lack of protests made by the steward. In that culture, if one was going to lose a position like this, he would fight and argue to keep it. He would claim that the charges were not true and give reasons for why those charges were illegitimate or why he should be kept. The steward does neither of these things. This can only mean one thing to the original hearer: he is guilty. If he were not guilty, he would fight for justice. If the claims were untrue, he would reveal the truth. A Middle Eastern man who does not answer a charge or set facts straight accepts them true as given.

Yet stranger still is the apparent irony of the severity of the offence and the leniency of the response. The master here is unbelievably gracious. It would not only be common, but was expected for this rich man to expose the steward for the cheat that he is and shame him publicly. Many a master would undoubtedly beat a servant or slave who has squandered his possessions and yet cannot defend himself. It is a wonder that the master responded as kindly as he did. His action was akin to Joseph's resolve to "divorce Mary quietly" earlier in Luke referring to Mary's unexpected pregnancy. This master here refuses to expose his wasteful steward and instead of shame and injury, he bestows a level of mercy and kindness.

The plan

The next part of the story brings us into a conversation this now-fired steward has with himself. He discusses the problem and then comes to a solution, followed by the account of his execution of the solution. His conversation with himself is highly instructional as well. One common interpretation is that his goal is to live with the men he conspires with. An alternate

position looks at what this man is attempting to avoid. He says that he cannot dig and does not want to beg, and in doing so selects two professions. He does not discuss living arrangements but careers, so his goal must be something other than securing housing.

The passage doesn't say what he realizes as much as stating that he knows what he must do. Scrutinizing the passage, it can be argued that his end goal was to keep his management position, not just hurt the rich man. An important piece is to realize that if the men receiving a discount on the due fee for tending the land know that the steward is being dishonest, they would never accept his bribe. The importance of community in the Middle East has been discussed in previous studies in this series, but it cannot be stressed enough the mentality of these people in regard to their identity within the community. These tenants will not do something that will shame the master for two reasons. The first reason is because they will not dishonor themselves and their community by cheating the rich man, who consequently has the largest influence in the community they live and work. For a second, more selfish reason, they would not dare offend their master who owns not only their positions as his tenants, but also their land and security. An important piece to this puzzle is that the tenants are ignorant of the steward's intentions and false actions.

Another important consideration is that the steward acts on behalf of the master. This is shown by the steward summoning the debtors and even in his command to change the values. This is not seen as an act of the steward, but an act of the rich man. Any praise or goodwill would not be thought to have its origin in the steward, but in the rich man. It was not uncommon for the rate of payment due at the proper season from the rich man to fluctuate slightly depending on the market and weather. The rich man would begin with one price, but that could change up until the harvest time to account for unforeseen issues, such as a famine or drought. This decrease in payment owed will be seen as an act of grace toward the hardworking tenants, a thank you for their service or a lightening of the load for kindness' sake.

I believe it is possible this steward, accounting for the generosity and kindness of the master, appeals to this quality by placing his mercy on display for the entire community to see. For surely, upon returning to their homes, these tenants will be singing the praises of the rich man and lauding his kindness and consideration for them. The steward is counting on this grace, and as he throws everything upon that quality of mercy, he sees fruit in being allowed to continue his post as manager. This interpretation is also seen to parallel the interpretation of the two sons, where the prodigal must throw himself on the mercy of the father. **In both parables, the main character**

commits an evil and receives mercy, not retribution or punishment. In both cases, that man throws himself at the mercy of his master/father and receives even greater mercy.

In this we see that we must do likewise. The steward is commended, and so will we be. Following Christ is worth the loss of our physical possessions. It is not on those things we trust to make us right with God, it is only His mercy. We appeal to that mercy, to the blood spilled on Calvary to make restitution for our souls; we do not offer excuses. We do not offer promises of being better. We do not offer works. **The steward was ultimately praised for knowing where his salvation lay, not his dishonesty.** All we possess is a self and possession abandoning plea to the mercy of our great Master and Father, for only He can save.

Alternate View: verses 9-13

The predominant view of this passage takes a different track at interpreting it. The preceding explanation focuses on the structure and the passage which comes before the parable to give clarity, but the other main view of this passage looks to the end, Jesus' wisdom saying in verses 9-13, to clarify the difficult passage of verses 1-8. The proponents of this view would focus on the character quality of shrewdness as it is described in verses 9-13 and make that the focal point of Jesus speech.

The steward is grudgingly affirmed for the quality of shrewdness and understanding of where his possessions and his eternal state lay. His understanding of his possessions and money only being temporary, but his livelihood/living being of far greater importance convicts us to view our wealth in this way as well. We ought not to see our things as deserving our full attention, but our eternal destination and the eternal rewards we receive from forsaking our things and using the opportunities available to us for the Kingdom and in the service of the King of Kings.

This passage then is seen to be a commendation to use your wealth for the glory of God. Do not horde it or try to keep it, instead use it for what will endure forever. Once this explanation is the lens through which we see the story, it takes on a very different perspective and application. The focus then rests far more on the act of sacrificing his own goods/his master's money in order to secure a place to stay when judgment day comes. This is a far more straightforward and less nuanced explanation of the passage and preferred by a majority of contemporary scholars today.

QUESTION: What do you think? Which explanation seems to make the most sense to you? Why? (there is no wrong answer, just discuss your thoughts)

Conclusion

As we proceed, we will discuss the application of both of these possible interpretations. Both interpretations- our need to throw ourselves at God's mercy using any means necessary and using our material possessions shrewdly so as not to mishandle opportunities for God- are found elsewhere in Scripture and find a vivid representation in this passage. Because both are true (and also explained in Scripture in other places), the questions below will ask applications on both sides of the interpretation.

Good, godly men disagree on this issue, and although we need to seek to be convinced, we ought not to be prideful in claiming complete certainty in a view on this passage being "the right one." I hope that this study has walked that line as well. I do favor the first position, but have preached the second and understand why many believe it the correct interpretation. **Enjoy the freedom we have in Christ to hold diverse interpretations of this passage and yet remain unified in our love for the Savior, the Scriptures and our commitment to follow our Lord.**

Discussion Questions:

- 1) **DISCUSS:** What do you believe is the main point of the parable in your own words?
What most influences you to think this way?

- 2) **DISCUSS:** When you think of sacrificing material possessions to obtain greater joy and lasting rewards, what do you think that looks like? How would you go about living this out?

- 3) **DISCUSS:** How do you sometimes fail to admit that the only remedy for whatever situation you are in is Christ? How could you grow in this area?

- 4) **DISCUSS:** In what ways are the children of light not as shrewd with their possessions as people of the world? What is really important? How are you doing at prioritizing these things over the less important things in life?

ANSWERS: (spoiler alert)

- 1) My goal here is to provide an opportunity for each student to come to their own ideas about the passage and learn to discuss each position in an honest, humble way.
- 2) Answers may vary. Here's an example: We ought to think about how we can use God's gifts that he's entrusted us (both financial assets, spiritual gifts, abilities, time and strength) for His glory always. Often this is difficult because we are selfish and unwilling to submit our things to God for His usage.
- 3) Answers may vary. Here's an example: It's easy to think that better advice, taking control, communication or some other solution will fix the difficulties of life, yet this thinking is so opposite of what Jesus taught. Only through dependence on Him can we be where He wants us to be and enjoy the blessed life He wants us to live.
- 4) Answers may vary.