

Luke 16:1-13: The unjust steward

Rev. John Nordin / 2nd rev. June 1996

Background issues

- ✓ The parable takes place in a small town where everyone knows everyone else. Small town ways will affect many aspects of this story.
- ✓ The "rich man" owns an estate, the debtors are probably tenant farmers.
- ✓ The text does not tell us that the rich man is dishonest or evil. Why do we try to make him such?
- ✓ Notice our tendency to make the owner bad or the servant good - neither supported by the text.
- ✓ Notice our tendency to assume that Jesus must be telling a simple, moralistic tale - rather than one with some "bite" to it.

16:1

- ✓ That the charges were brought to the attention of the rich man indicates he is well-thought of in the community. If he were dishonest, people would be undercutting him right and left.

16:2

- ✓ The master does not give specifics of a complaint to the manager. The master may not know the specifics, but by silence the manager must assume the master already knows everything.
- ✓ The manager is fired effectively immediately; but the village does not know he is fired.
- ✓ "Give me an accounting" is probably a bad translation; better is "give me the account books."
- ✓ The manager is silent in front of the master; this is unexpected, and tantamount to admitting guilt. In this verbal society, even if the manager was guilty, the expectation is a loud protestation of innocence.

16:3

- ✓ The manager discovers that he is not put in jail (or expelled from the village) immediately (the master will fire him, yet is merciful).
- ✓ Since everyone knows everyone, public dismissal will mean ruin for the manager, no one will want to have anything to do with him for if they did, they risk offending the master. His public image needs to be fixed - this motivates his trick.

16:4

- ✓ "when I am dismissed," in other words, "when people find out."

16:5

- ✓ He can only "summon" debtors if he is thought to still have the authority of his position.
- ✓ He summons them one by one so they can't talk among themselves and decide that something is up.

16:6-7

- ✓ He summons them quickly because he doesn't want someone to come with the news that he is dismissed.
- ✓ The debtors assume he is acting for his master; they are not conspiring with the manager to defraud the master. The master is too important in the village, the manager has power only by delegation

from the master. If people thought there was a conflict between the manager and the master, everyone would select the master.

- v The master will get credit for the great "bonus;" but the manager will get the credit for arraigning it.

16:8

- v The "master" who is doing the 'commending' is the landowner, not, as some say, Jesus.
- v The accounts are now presented to the master. It's a small town: people have already started celebrating the mercy, goodness and generosity of the master. The master knows this.
- v The master is stuck with the changes. If he goes to the debtors and removes the "bonus" he will either be attacked as stingy or derided as someone who got taken by his own workers. The master cannot lose face by admitting the favors were not his idea. Further, if the master now dismisses and publicly attacks the manager, people will be puzzled. The manager has secured his reputation, at least for a while.
- v The commendation is for "shrewdness" not "dishonesty."

The meaning of 16:1-8:

- v If a crook understands the nature of his merciful master, and can use that mercy to secure his "salvation," why don't Christians understand equally well the merciful nature of their God?
- v The story makes its point by contrast or inversion. It isn't that the master is God and the manager represents us. Insisting on simple direct one-to-one representation ties us up in knots as we try to subvert the text to make it suitably pious. Jesus is a more daring storyteller than we give him credit for.
- v The future holds both a judgment, a calling to account, as well as mercy.
- v The crook trusted unconditionally in the mercy of his master; likewise you should trust your heavenly master.

16:9-13 A Poem about Money and God

And I tell you, make
 friends for yourself
 by means of dishonest wealth
 so that when it is gone
 they may welcome
you into the eternal homes.

Whoever is faithful in a very little
is faithful also in much;
 and whoever is dishonest in a very little
 is dishonest also in much.

If then you have not been faithful
 with the dishonest wealth,

 who will entrust to you
 the true riches?
And if you have not been faithful
 with what belongs to another,
who will give you
what is your own?

No slave can serve two masters;
 for a slave with either hate the one
 and love the other,
 or be devoted to the one
 and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and wealth.

Interpretation:

Use your wealth so that it builds riches in heaven,

 Warning: if you cannot be trusted with possessions, you will not be trusted with truth
You cannot serve both possessions and God.