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## Brief Studies

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## BRIEF STUDIES

### THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD—A NEW APPROACH TO LUKE 16:1-9

Any pastor who has preached on this text will be inclined to agree that it is one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables, if not the most difficult. The strain involved in its interpretation is apparent in all conscientious commentaries. Edersheim is representative. He is sure that he has the right view and that he sees it clearly enough. Yet to get it down on paper involves a real struggle with words. Three times in his introduction he feels called upon to define, or redefine, the point of the parable. The very repetitiousness suggests that he himself, for all his explanations, is not wholly satisfied. Here are his three definitions; they represent the interpretation which, in its general outlines at least, has found common acceptance.

"In the parable [of the Unjust Steward] we are told what the sinner, when converted, should learn from his previous life of sin. . . . It follows . . . that we must not expect to find spiritual equivalents for each of the persons or incidents introduced."

A few lines farther he explains again:

The point of the parable is "the prudence which characterizes the dealings of the children of the world in regard to their own generation—or, to translate the Jewish forms of expression into our own phraseology, the wisdom with which those who care not for the world to come, choose the means most effectual for attaining their worldly objects. It is this prudence by which their aims are so effectually secured, *and it alone* [italics his], which is set before 'the children of light' as that by which to learn."

Again a few lines intervene. Then he explains for the third time:

"It cannot now be difficult to understand the parable. Its object is simply to show, in the most striking manner, the prudence of a worldly man, who is unrestrained by any other consideration than that of attaining his end. . . . All else, such as the question, who is the master and who the steward, and such like, we dismiss, since the Parable is only intended as an illustration of the lesson to be afterwards taught." \*

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\* Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. II, pp. 265—266.

"It cannot now be difficult to understand the parable," he says. These are brave words, but they are a whistling in the dark. The fact is we still are not satisfied. The parable seems so clear and powerful for the first seven verses. But then suddenly we are shocked in the last two verses to find Jesus saying *the very opposite* of that which, not on the strength of human wisdom, but on the very analogy of faith, we would have expected Him to say. We would expect Christ to say: "The steward is a *fool* for all his cleverness and pretended wisdom." Yet the Savior instead seems to glorify his wisdom. We would expect Christ to say: "You, the unjust steward, the son of darkness, you think you are so clever. You had better learn wisdom from the sons of light." Instead the Lord tells the sons of light to learn from the sons of darkness. We would expect Christ to say: "Forget about making friends in this world. See to it first that you are on right terms with God. For He, not they, will receive you into everlasting habitations." Instead He says we should make friends with people, and He seems to say, though this is manifestly impossible, that *people* will open heaven to us.

Where is the answer to this problem? Must we take the words of Jesus at face value and then resort to the difficult and unsatisfactory interpretation and application of Edersheim and other commentators? Or is it possible that Jesus is deliberately saying *just the opposite* of His true meaning? It is the object of this study to show that this latter interpretation is possible; that it not only gives satisfaction and unity to the entire parable, but also makes this parable one of the richest and most powerful that Jesus ever spoke. The interpretation is possible if we read into the voice of Jesus as He utters the words of verses 8 and 9 the overtones of deepest irony. I recognize that this interpretation is also not without its difficulty. We shall consider that later. For the moment, however, let us assume that verses 8 and 9 are indeed spoken in irony, and let us briefly restudy the entire parable from that point of view.

Verses 1 and 2 present a theme that is familiar in the teaching of Jesus. There is the steward, with all the connotations of stewardship in that day and with all its applications to ourselves as administrators of that which, though entrusted to our hands, forever remains the possession of God. The steward abuses his office; he wastes, misuses his master's goods as though they were his own. This is descriptive of every sin in us. The steward is called to account, inevitably, for he cannot forever hide his unfaithfulness from his master. So also God will call us to account, and demand a full return for every penny of

wealth, every ounce of strength and ability, every moment of time, He has entrusted to our care.

Verses 3 to 7 picture the reaction of the steward, a description unique among the parables of Jesus. Immediately he asks the question "What shall I do?" Contrary to Edersheim, who would have us brush aside such details as irrelevant to the *tertium*, every word that follows is richly significant and full of practical application.

First we see what the steward does *not* do. He does not repent. There is in evidence no sense of guilt, no realization of wrongdoing, no regret at his failure in discharging his responsibilities, no tear, no conscience, no confession, no apology. The only concern is regret at being caught and fear of the consequences of losing his job. Thus we also conceal our sin, resist confession, hate repentance.

"I cannot dig," he says. Why not? Has he no strength? No, he simply does not want to dig. Digging is hard work. It is degrading for one who has been a steward. It represents honest labor for honest pay. It presents no opportunity for quick advancement or for skillful manipulations. It is not for him. Thus the opportunity to reform, to turn from a life of selfishness and dishonesty to one of hard work, is rejected. The gracious purpose of the master in calling him to account has failed. So we also are parasites by nature. Though we protest graft in others, we ourselves also suck in all we can get and give as little as possible in return.

"To beg I am ashamed," the steward says. He cannot throw himself on the mercy of his master, cannot beg forgiveness, cannot in humility acknowledge that all he has ever had anyhow has been a gift of free grace and that he has been a beggar, in fact, all along. So we also do not like to regard ourselves as beggars on God's doorstep and to receive His gifts as *gifts*. We like to put on the front of independence, as though we had deserved and earned what we have. We, too, are ashamed to beg.

Thus repentance, honest labor, humble begging are rejected. The steward adopts a different course of action. Who cares what the lord thinks! Other debtors like himself will respect him! So he gets in good with people. He reduces their bills. He encourages them also not to take their sin seriously. True, it is the lord's money he is signing away, but he sees to it that he, not the lord, gets full credit for such liberality. Whether this would have the lord's approval does not concern him. He does not need the praises of the lord. At least people like him, approve him, and sing: "He's a jolly good fellow." Thus he

comforts himself, drowns his guilt, and assures his future. So it is also with us in our sin. We, too, ignore the opinion of God. We care only about what people think of us. We are glad to brush aside their sins against God (though not their sins against ourselves) if they will do the same for us. And when we have won the respect and honor of men, we can forget and ignore the wrath of God.

What is the judgment of God on all this? In the last two verses we have it, in words which we shall interpret as powerfully effective irony. "The lord commended the unjust steward." "You surely are clever!" he might say. "You have displayed real ingenuity, yes, the very highest wisdom this world knows—the wisdom of disguising your sin, pretending righteousness, shrugging off the anger of God, quieting a guilty conscience by gaining the approval of men, showing off a few good works to cover a heart full of evil."

Jesus adds His own commentary, also in irony: "For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Yes, this is a wisdom and cleverness the sons of light would not dream of. It is a damning cleverness, in fact, deceiving no one more than those who engage in it. The sons of light are not so clever. All they can think of when they sin is to repent in tears, to confess their guilt, to cry for forgiveness, to rest their comfort in Christ, to turn in renewed honesty to a life of begging and digging.

Then comes the climax in verse 9: "Go ahead, then! Use all God's gifts to you for your own unholy and ungodly purposes! Use them to make friends of the sinners of this world! Get sinful men to admire and honor you! Win their approval! See that when you lie in your coffin, they will weep over you saying: 'He was *such* a good man! Surely he will go to heaven if anyone will!' Let them be your judges, let them open the gates of everlasting habitations to you!" And the implied conclusion: "You fool! They cannot do it! It is before God that you stand or fall, the God you ignored and despised. He will condemn you to the torments of hell."

Such would be the interpretation. Can it be upheld?

It is upheld in this respect that it is entirely in the spirit of the teaching of Christ.

It is upheld by its own powerful unity of thought, a unity never achieved by the commentators who would have us learn *wisdom* from the unjust steward, and then are at a loss what to do with the theme of *unrighteousness* and of *stewardship*. Here the lesson is clear and simple: "The Folly of Sinners Who, by Wisdom, Avoid Repentance."

It is upheld by the wider context. The parables of chapters 15 and 16 center in one theme, "Repentance." The three parables of chapter 15, climaxed by "The Prodigal Son," teach the wisdom of true repentance, which finds a God of perfect mercy. "The Unjust Steward," and "The Rich Man and Lazarus" of chapter 16, teach the folly of those who in their wisdom do not have to hear the Word of God and repent, for they meet the God of perfect wrath and justice.

The interpretation is upheld also by the narrower context, verses 10 to 15. In 10 to 12 the theme is faithfulness to one's trust, clearly showing that the theme of stewardship in verses 1 and 2 is by no means to be regarded as purely incidental to the theme of wisdom, as Edersheim and others would have it, but is essential to the meaning of the parable. Verse 13 warns against the foolhardy attempt to live a double life, to serve God on the one hand, and yet to regard the world and the things God has given you as your own. Again, the stewardship idea is prominent, for this is the key to unfaithfulness in stewardship. Verse 15 is a warning to the Pharisees, putting into plain words the thought of verses 4 to 7 of the parable. The man is a fool who thinks that just because men approve of him, he can forget the opinion of God. On the contrary, the judgments of men mean nothing; everything depends on the judgment of God. Notice that these six verses of context relate not to verse 8, from which is drawn the theme of "wisdom," but to verses 1 to 7. This context forces us therefore to reject the conclusion of Edersheim, quoted above: "We must not expect to find spiritual equivalents for each of the persons or incidents introduced." Or again: "All else, such as the question, who is the master and who the steward, and such like, we dismiss, since the Parable is only intended as an illustration of the lesson to be afterwards taught." Jesus Himself defines the "spiritual equivalents." Jesus Himself proves that verses 1 to 7 are not to be reduced to the level of mere "illustration," but are in every sense of the word, a "parable."

Finally, we can argue from the negative, the extreme awkwardness of interpretation when these words are taken in the direct sense. I have already indicated that there is no unity in the text when Edersheim's interpretation is followed—and this applies equally to every one of a dozen commentaries I have consulted, for all in general hold to Edersheim's theme. If the moral of the story is that we should learn wisdom from the world, then what shall we do with the injustice of the steward? Either we omit it (regarding it as purely substructure to the *tertium*), or we teach two distinct lessons. Furthermore, there is no analogy in the teaching of Christ for making the wisdom of the

world in any sense an example to be emulated by Christians. The phrase "children of light" in the text implies that the steward is a child of darkness. Always in Scripture, light stands for the wisdom of God, and darkness for the folly of worldly wisdom. Shall it now be reversed, and darkness set an example for light? Furthermore, holding to the former interpretation always results in a dreadful mutilation of verse 9. The words are so clear, and the intended meaning of Christ so obvious. "The mammon of unrighteousness" stands for the gifts of God, time, talent, and treasure, abused and misused by sinful men who fail to recognize God's ownership. Christ here commands that we use God's gifts in such a sinful way, to make and keep friends with the world, even as the steward did. We should do all this for the purpose of the steward, that when God casts us out, they may receive us into heaven. "They" can mean none other than the friends we have gained by the sinful self-appropriation of God's gifts. Interpreted as irony, these words can be taken simply as they stand, and we remain perfectly in harmony with the analogy of Scripture. Interpreted in the direct sense, they violate the analogy of Scripture, and gross distortions are necessary to bring about any harmony at all. All attempts to deal with this verse have, in fact, proved cumbersome and unsatisfactory.

Are there other instances in which Jesus uses such irony, in which He says one thing, but means precisely the opposite? Examples are rare, but they do exist. There is, for instance, Matt. 23:32. Jesus has pointed out to the Pharisees how their fathers have always opposed the prophets, resisted their message, and even killed them. Then He cries, "Fill ye up, then, the measure of your fathers." "Go ahead," He would say, "kill Me as your fathers killed the former prophets." He means the exact opposite. What He wants is that they should repent. But the cry of irony makes the call to repent the more powerful.

Then there is Matt. 26:45, where Jesus in Gethsemane says to His disciples: "Sleep on now, and take your rest. Behold, the hour is at hand. . . ." All His previous pleadings "Watch with Me" have been of no avail. Now the crucial moment has come, and Jesus says in effect: "All right, then, sleep if you must! How can you sleep at a time like this? He is at hand that doth betray Me!"

There is another example of irony in Luke 13:33: "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem." Here the rhetorical structure is slightly different, for Jesus does not mean exactly the opposite of what He says. Yet it is definitely irony. To interpret it literally would be to make Jesus a liar, for many prophets, e.g., Peter and Paul, did perish outside Jerusalem. The irony carries a powerful warning to

the very leaders of the Jewish religion, that from them would proceed this horrible crime against the God they professed to worship.

One major difficulty remains. The passage we are studying does not sound like irony or give any indication of it in the course of casual reading. It is possible that the Aramaic in which Jesus originally spoke carried the impression of irony more clearly. In any case, irony is conveyed by modulation of voice and is readily lost in the written word. Only the context can point to such irony in its written form. And that this context does.

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