

## **The parable of the shrewd manager Luke 16 v1-8.**

Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a servant who managed his property. The rich man was told that the manager was wasting his master's money,<sup>2</sup> so he called him in and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Turn in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'<sup>3</sup> The servant said to himself, 'My master is going to dismiss me from my job. What shall I do? I am not strong enough to dig ditches, and I am ashamed to beg.'<sup>4</sup> Now I know what I will do! Then when my job is gone, I shall have friends who will welcome me in their homes.'<sup>5</sup> So he called in all the people who were in debt to his master. He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe my master?'<sup>6</sup> 'One hundred barrels of olive oil,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'sit down and write fifty.'<sup>7</sup> Then he asked another one, 'And you—how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he answered. 'Here is your account,' the manager told him; 'write eight hundred.'<sup>8</sup> As a result the master of this dishonest manager praised him for doing such a shrewd thing; because the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light."

### **Introduction**

Who likes to support the underdog? Who wanted Wigan to beat Man City in the FA Cup? David & Goliath. Rags to Riches – Cinderella / Pretty Woman etc. What about when it comes to money, do you like seeing people who are very wealthy. Do you like to see the underdog win out against them and get a big slice of their money? Does it depend on what their character is like? Lowly Jack climbs the beanstalk to rob the Giants gold. Robin Hood works because of the evil sheriff, but what if there was some-one ripping off say Bill Gates or James Dyson. The inventor Dyson just gave £4m for a new cancer centre in Bath. Would that feel wrong if some-one stole off him to give to the poor.

Today we are going to look at one of the parables that was teaching specifically for his disciples. This parable – sometimes called the shrewd manager - has been described as the hardest parable to understand. We don't like the fact that Jesus has made a dishonest person the hero of the story, and seems to be praising him for his dishonesty.

Its made difficult because we see it though 21C Western Eyes. The story looks different if we put on spectacles that let us see through the eyes of a first century Middle Eastern rural peasant.

### **The set-up.**

The Master – a rich landowner – (If you like a Lord of the Manor). He has an estate of land which he rented out to peasant farmers.

The land-manager – He is employed by the Master to manage the estate. Most likely he worked for a fee. It was common for landlord to be absent from the area and appoint a land-manager in their place.

The peasant farmers – Rented land, but most likely it was for an agreed amount of crop (not a percentage of his yield). The amount was agreed up front (this is what is owed) and is paid after the harvest. The owner of the olive grove was to pay 100 barrels of Olive Oil. The wheat farmer would pay one thousand sacks of wheat. The point made here is that these were big farms, and there were a good number of them.

### **The dispute**

The farm owners were upset with the land manager and made a complaint against him to the Master. Perhaps they suspect that he is taking an unfair proportion of their money for himself and blowing it all on himself.

If the manager had been living in luxury at his master's expense, it is easy to imagine how word of his behavior eventually would have reached the rich man. We can also understand that the rich man would have been upset to hear about the steward's behavior and would have acted speedily to correct the situation. The master's primary concern was probably not the wealth the steward had allegedly stolen. Even more critical than lost money was the shame brought upon the rich man by the fact that his steward's thievery had become common knowledge.

The importance of honour and shame in the Mediterranean culture of Jesus' day was of key cultural importance. In those days, a master's standing in the eyes of his peers was partly determined by his ability to control those under him. A master whose assets were wisely managed by a loyal steward would have been viewed highly by others. On the other hand, the misdeeds of an employee would have resulted in a loss of honor for the master.

The land manager had cheated and dishonoured the Master. There is no suggestion of foul play by the Master or any collusion. The Lord of the Manor is blameless. Such rural communities thought and acted together. These were not individual complaints, but have been made jointly against the land-manager. He has the whole community against him.

### **The punishment**

The Master challenges the Estate Manager with the accusations. Is this true? It seems that both the Master and land manager know the accusations are true, as there is no debate. The land manager does not make any excuses. By his silence he affirms – 'I am guilty and my Master knows I'm guilty, The Master expects obedience and disobedience brings judgement, and excuses will not get my job back.'

The Master could have him thrown in Jail. Instead he is told that he can no longer have his job, and asks the land manager to surrender his account books. He would not be asked to balance the books and submit a final account as the Master knew he could falsify them for his own benefit.. *Note that jails in those days were primarily for those that fail foul of financial issues – people committing more serious crimes were more likely to be stoned.*

### **The predicament**

With his dismissal imminent, the steward faced a major crisis. Being a steward was the only work he knew. But who would hire a steward who had cheated and disgraced his previous employer? The land manager could not go and get another similar job –the Master owned all the land in that region. There was no Strutt & Parkers that land managers could go to and apply for work. All the masters land was rented out, so he would have to work for others. He was probably of feeble build and could not see himself doing manual work for the others (like digging their ditches). His other option was to beg, but he could not see himself doing that either. Then with the community against him, would he even find work or receive alms from them. He needed a plan.

He had lost the trust of the farmers and he had brought dishonour to the Master. He needed to do something that would not only win back the trust of the local farmers, but one which would leave them firmly in his debt so that he would be helped and supported by them in the future, and perhaps even a plan that could restore honour to the Master. But how?

### **The New Plan**

No one knows yet that he is fired, but he will have to act quickly. He would call in to his office, all those that were in debt to his Master. This we must assume was all of the farmers who were renting out land. They would all have a debt to be paid, which they could only pay after harvest. He would discuss their debt with them, and reduce what they owed very significantly; making out that it was he, the land-owner who had renegotiated the deal for them. The relationship between the farmers and master is a significant personal and economic one, perhaps even intimate. The farmers must not learn that the manager was being sacked, or they would not trust the new terms. Worst still, if they knew of the sacking and went along with the scheme knowingly then the Master may take the land from them and rent to some-one else, robbing them of their livelihood. The deception by the land manager must be maintained.

The land manager asserts that he is in authority, has arranged for the reductions himself and has had them authorised by the Master. To the first he said that instead of 100 barrels of olive oil, you only need pay 50 barrels of oil. To the next he reduced the fee by 200 sacks of wheat from 1000. And so on for each farmer. The reduction in both the cases given, amounted to about 500 denarii (silver coins) in value. He is keeping the deal equitable for all the farmers. This shows he is acting in a fair way, but is also much quicker to work out, than trying to do something fair on a percentage basis. Time was of the essence.

Such renegotiations of fixed rents were carried out by the land manager but normally initiated at the request of the farmers. This would normally be in response to trees dying from blight, or a spring drying up. This offer though would be seen as an unsolicited and generous reduction.

By reducing the tenants' bills, the steward decreased the rich man's profits, but he also improved the rich man's reputation. To understand why, it is important to remember that a steward generally acted as his master's agent. So when the steward reduced their debts, the tenants would have assumed that he was carrying out orders from his master and thus would have viewed their lower bills as a sign of the master's generosity. Instead of seeing the rich man as "the master who couldn't keep track of his steward," they would have thought of him as "the kind master who treats his tenants with consideration." Although the master would lose some profits, he would gain back something more precious to him: a measure of his esteem in the eyes of others.

## **The impact**

The big reductions would make huge difference to the livelihood of the farmers and thus their workers. Effectively each were being given 500 silver coins. They would be all celebrating praising the Master for agreeing to such a generous deal. The land manager would now be seen as a hero for brokering the deal, and they might even feel guilty now for bringing accusations against him.

The land-manager finishes his daring plan, by gathering up the freshly changed accounts and delivers them to his master.

The master sees what his manager has done. The Master is left with two options. He can go back to the debtors and explain that it was all a mistake, and the actions taken are null and void, but their joy will turn to anger, and he may be cursed for his stinginess. He could though keep silent, accept the praise that is being showered on him and allow the clever land manager to ride the wave of popular enthusiasm.

The Master turns to his land-manager and tells him that he is a very wise fellow ? . It had most likely been translated into Greek from the Aramaic word 'Hokmah' which means cleverness and skill in the act of self-preservation. The Master is recognising what a good job the land-manager has done at looking after his own

future. The implication is that the Master agreed the new terms, and effectively paid the price for the new arrangement which saves the land-manager from being destitute.

### **End times link**

The Master knowing of the dishonesty was entitled to have the manager thrown in prison, but he did not do so, or even scold him, he simply sacked him. This was actually a sign of the Masters generosity. The manager then gambled everything on this generosity, and took a fortune of what was owed to the Master and gave it back in reduced bills to the farmers. This made the Master look extremely generous and would have increased his popularity a lot. One important sign of a Middle Eastern nobleman was his generosity.

There is an odd end to the parable. Not only does the Master praise the landmanger, but he says that the people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the light. The Greek word for "more shrewd" or "wiser" is *phronimos*, which is a phrase Jesus uses when talking about the end times and being spiritually prepared for the end of this age and his return.

Knowing this, we can then fit this to a picture of the end times. God (is the Master in the story). He is a God of judgement and mercy. The land manager is caught up in his wrong-doings by the coming of the Kingdom., and now has to pay for what he has done. Excuses are worthless, he has done wrong and there is a price to pay. His only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master, who he is confident will accept to pay the price for the mans salvation. It is a very high price but God will pay it. God does pay the price for his salvation – this debt is not paid in denarii (Silver coins) but with the blood of Jesus himself.

The land-manager is praised for knowing where his salvation lies and not praised for his dishonesty.

### **Discipleship lessons**

Jesus don't forget was addressing his disciples. Just as the steward was called to account for his use of his master's resources, so will Jesus' disciples be accountable for their use of the resources, physical and spiritual resources, that they have received from their Master. With his job about to be taken away, the steward faced a crisis. Unless he could restore honour to his master, his future looked grim. Similarly, disciples of Jesus face the imminent return of their Master. In preparation for that event, they should live in a way that brings honor to Jesus. Jesus would shortly be leaving his diciples, and those that followed (including us) in charge of his affairs on Earth, until he returns. There was an urgency about the manager needing to put his new plan into action, in order to put things right for the end days. He could have been warning them that a disciple could lack the sense of urgency that led the steward to successfully provide for his future. Perhaps the disciple lacks a wholehearted commitment and does not sufficiently value God's calling. Or perhaps the disciple is sitting and waiting for the Master's return but not treating this life seriously enough. Not taking God plans for their lives seriously enough.

So this was a parable told originally to the disciples. It is a message for them to know where their salvation lies. For them to entrust everything to the mercy of God, and to get on with his plans for their lives, with intelligence and urgency.

### **More Than**

In first century Middle East stories, it was common for there to be a clever fellow who won out against the Mr Big of his community. This is a pleasing outcome for the peasant listeners. We have some such stories, like Robin Hood, but we have to make the Mr Big, a very evil sheriff for it to be palatable. The surprise to listeners of this parable would be that the land-manager is criticized for being dishonest, whereas we are surprised because the

Master seems to praise his dishonesty! First of all, it should be noted that Luke 16:1-8 is one of several parables in which Jesus draws a lesson from the example of a far-from-perfect individual. There are other parables that have unlikely leading characters, such as the man who knows there is treasure in some-one else's field, buys the field and takes the treasure, a neighbour who very reluctantly gets out of bed when a neighbour calls round for bread, and a dishonest judge who is worn down by a widow nagging for her rights.

Such examples involve "how much more" reasoning, an argument form often employed by ancient Jewish teachers. (The technical term for this type of reasoning is *kal v'chomer* Hebrew for "light and heavy.") For example, in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), Jesus argues that if an unjust human judge will grant justice to a persistent petitioner, then God surely will be responsive to the prayers of his people. Similar in the parable of the Friend at Midnight, the sleeper will get up at midnight and give the neighbour bread, so as not to lose face, then **how much more** will a God who loves you, answer your prayers. At other times Jesus said:- Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And **how much more** valuable you are than birds! He also said, If you then though you are evil know **how** to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

So in this parable - If the Master saves the land-manager who falls back on his generosity, **how much more** can you be assured of your Salvation in God .

### Links to the Prodigal Son

The books were written without chapters so we need to understand the passage in its context in the book of Luke. The parable is followed by a poem about money, and its dangers if you love it. You cannot serve both God and money. This may have been placed at the end of the parable as a corrective, in case it was misunderstood as being deceitful with money is alright. However the parable has more to do with the stories that immediately proceed it. In 16v1, in the Greek there is a linking phrase 'de Kai' (see p109 of PP) which shows a continuation of the previous story-telling. This parable follows on from the Prodigal son where a man asks for and takes half of his Dad's wealth (his inheritance) and squanders it. Then he throws himself on the mercy of his Father, whilst his brother is not at all happy with the situation and the party that follows. There are a lot of similarities. Both the son and the manager betray a trust. Both do wrong and offer no excuses. They throw themselves on the mercy of the one they have let down. Both receive extraordinary mercy. The manager is not jailed for changing the bills, and the prodigal is not punished for wasting his family assets. In both stories the final scene is missing – we do not know the response of the Prodigal's older brother, or the final result of the manager's act. Yet there is a shift from the gospel message of those who believe, to the judgement day.

### Our Plans –

Some people say that if you want to give God a laugh then tell him your plans. I don't believe that. I don't believe he takes fun or pleasure out of us doing the wrong things. Neither does God mock us. He loves us and has perfect plans for us. These involving working for him, doing his work – we are his feet and hands on the earth. You should be drawn to and focus on that part of his heart for this world that he has given you. The Master had plans for the land manager, work that would prosper them both. The Father of the Prodigal son also had plans for his son, steady work that would prosper them both. But the land manager had his own greedy plans, the Prodigal had his own self-centred plans. The day came when they reached crisis point, and they both made new plans. The land manager's shrewd plans fell back on the generosity of his Master, the new plan of the Prodigal was to fall back onto the generosity of his Father. Their new plans worked, but how much better would it have been for both of them, if they had not gone off and made their own plans in the first place.

We have got work to do for our Heavenly Father, his plans for our life, and yet we so easily make our own plans without any thought to what God's plans are for us. We then get to our last day and realise that our own plans were not good plans, they were not God's plans. We messed up. Our salvation is secure in him still, and we fall down on our knees, knowing he is a loving and generous God, knowing that Jesus paid the price for our selfish pursuit of our own plans. But it doesn't have to be that way. He wants more for us than that, he wants to work for us to prosper his kingdom, to do good things on his behalf, whatever that might be. It's working together for God doing his plans, just like the land manager should have stayed loyal in his work for his Master, just like the Prodigal should have stayed at his Father's farm working with his Father.

### **Our Salvation?**

The message for us from this parable is simple – it is the same as the one intended for the disciples. We are caught up in our own sin, and wrongdoing, but there is a price to pay for all of this. Excuses are no use. The price will be paid. The only thing we can do is to fall back on the mercy of God. The Prodigal's Father paid half his estate to enable the forgiveness; the Master of the Estate paid 500 silver coins to every farmer, to redeem the Land Manager.

Then comes the over-riding message through these parables and many others – if they (the Prodigal's Father and the Master of the Estate) are prepared to do that, then how much more will your loving God pay for you.

We are caught up in our trappings, excuses aren't good enough. We can make our own plans, but ultimately we have to recognise the mercy of our loving and forgiving God, to pay the price for our forgiveness, to give us a future.

Christianity is unique. Salvation by Grace – not by works. Other religions have salvation by works, that's not good news. Not knowing if you are saved or not – no assurance of forgiveness. It's a three step process, we ask for forgiveness, we accept it, and then we are assured that we have been forgiven. Game over. Slate wiped clean. Move on. We can be first confident that God has paid the price for our salvation, and that this price once paid holds good for continual forgiveness. It's sufficient. God has done enough for us, we don't need to worry. It's out of that love for God, for Jesus, that we do good things, do good works, not because we must but because we can (he lets us) and because we want to (he loves us).

### **Close**

This parable is a message for the followers of Jesus to know where their salvation lies. For them to entrust everything to the mercy of God. We are his followers. We need to pursue him and entrust our lives to him, and be assured that he will both forgive us and save us, not just one but again and again until we are judged and found to be acceptable to God not for what we've done, but for what he's done for us.

If the land manager can fall back on the generosity of his Master, if the Prodigal son can fall back on the generosity of his Father, then how much more can we fall back on the love and forgiving Grace of our Father in Heaven, who loved us so much that he paid the price for our mess by letting Jesus die on a cross. Our Salvation is assured. We do not have to do good works to be saved, but how much better is it for us to do seek after God's plan for our lives and do the work he has for us, rather than mess up doing our own thing. If we steadily do the work he has for us, then this may lead many others to Jesus and to the salvation that none of us truly deserve, but is our gift from a loving God, from a loving Jesus. Amen