

PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

Luke 16:1-14

By Raymond White

This parable of the Unjust Steward is the strangest thing Jesus ever said, that we know about. Why? Because it is difficult to believe that he actually meant what he said, that a crook deserves praise.

Let's review it quickly, then I'll take a shot at making sense of it. You may like my interpretation or you may not. Whatever, mine is just another opinion of this tricky text.

***Luke 16:1** And he also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. :2 And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no long steward. :3 Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? For my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig: to beg I am ashamed. :4 I am resolved what to do...*

So the steward, because of incompetence or dishonesty or laziness, has mishandled his boss's affairs and now is about to lose his job. He has a short time left to get things in order (clean out his desk) and wonders how he can use that short time remaining to his advantage. He hatches a plan, makes a decision, and goes for it. Let's continue.

***Luke 16:4** I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. :5 So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? :6 And he said, An hundred measures of oil, And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. :7 Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write four-score.*

So the steward's plan was simple. While he was "cleaning out his desk" he was still his boss's agent with full signing authority. And that enabled him to execute a devious plan: He would receive discounted payments from creditors and credit the accounts as paid-in-full. This would ingratiate himself to those creditors who he expected would reciprocate later in some way. In short, he was a crook embezzling from his boss to advantage creditors and himself. All of that is simple, but now the baffling part.

***Luke 16:8** And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely; for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.*

It is a stretch by any means that a boss, ripped off by his thieving employee, would then say, "At-a-boy. You did a great job stealing from me."

I have read several explanations how this could be so and none of those explanations ring true, not to me anyway.

I have my own explanation which (like any other) may or may not be true. My explanation was that Jesus was being sarcastic. We should allow Jesus to use all the speech

devices that we ourselves use. Indeed, throughout the gospels we do see him using humor, metaphors, exaggeration, anger, even name calling (pigs, dogs, whited sepulchers) — why should we deny to him literary license to be sarcastic? I think he rolled his eyes and conveyed with other body language (which Luke fails to mention) that he didn't really mean it. I think a more accurate translation would be something like: “And his boss told him, ‘You did a great job.’ Because after all bankers are smarter than prophets. Right? Yea, right!” In other words, it's nonsense. You *don't* get rewarded for stealing. That's the point in my reading.

But now what about the next verse where Jesus seems to add his own approval to the boss's.

Luke 16:9 *And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. :10 He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. :11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? :12 And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?*

I think Jesus is now conceding something to his own fictional characters. He is saying in essence, “I'll give them this: You do need to stay friends with the world. Go to school, get a job, work, produce, so that you can survive. If you're not good at handling money, how can you handle the things of God? The Unjust Steward is *not* going to get complimented or re-hired or promoted, he's going to get fired. He can't handle his boss's money, what makes you think he can handle his own?”

:12 convinces me that I'm correct to believe that **:8** is sarcastic. It is exactly the opposite conclusion. **:8** says the boss compliments the Unjust Steward. **:12** says, no way. Either **:8** is sarcastic, or **:8** and **:12** contradict each other. I prefer to believe that **:8** is sarcastic.

Now let's finish this off.

Luke 16:13 *No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot server God and mammon.*

Jesus turns this whole story of the Unjust Steward on its ear. While he concedes that we have to get along in the world by taking care of business, he quickly pulls us away from that “balanced” view and reminds us that we can't have it both ways. As much as you'd like to, you can't be dedicated to both money and God. You must decide which will dominate your life, which moves you: money or God. This was exactly the problem that the Pharisees were having.

Luke 16:14 *And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him.*

As I said, my interpretation may not be correct, but I think it is correct, and it at least makes sense. Some other explanations I've read don't even make sense.