

The Wasteful Steward

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The traditional division of Luke's Gospel between chapters 15 and 16 conveys a hidden meaning to the reader: a meaning which was not intended by Luke himself who did not make the division. The meaning is roughly: now we have finished with Jesus's parables on forgiveness; now we are moving on to another topic, the right use of money; here are a couple of parables on that issue.

Luke gives no signal in his text that he sees a change of subject at this precise point. There are signs of a shift at verses 9 and 14 of chapter 16, but this leaves open the possibility that the parable of the wasteful steward might be linked in its meaning to the three parables of chapter 15.

In a sense the parables of the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) are also about money, but everybody agrees that looking after money properly is not the point of these parables. The point of the lost coin story is brought out in verse 10. As regards the prodigal son, the final saying of the father in the story gives the meaning: 'It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found' (Luke 15:32). This directly answers the complaint of the Pharisees that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2).

The very next verse is: 'He also said to the disciples...' (Luke 16:1). The natural way to read this is: here is a follow up story on the same theme, but directly aimed at the situation of the disciples rather than the complaint of the Pharisees.

This view is endorsed by the way the parable of the wasteful steward ends. For verse 8, which is our clue to the parable's meaning, does not only commend the steward for his prudence. It also adds the comment, 'for the sons of this age are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light'. How are we to interpret this remark? The meaning is something like: worldly people know how to deal effectively with worldly people like themselves; by comparison, the sons of light are incompetent in their relationships with the sons of the world. This suggests that, as in chapter 15, Jesus is still talking about how the righteous should deal with sinners. But how exactly is this comment illustrated by the parable?

It is noteworthy that many contemporary commentators can see no connection between this remark and the parable. The usual argument is that the second half of verse 8 is not part of the original parable, but

should be regarded as one of a number of separate sayings (with verses 9–13) appended by Luke. This view, though, is implausible. Luke has in fact connected the comment to the master's praise of the steward's prudence, and it is marked off from the subsequent appended sayings by the phrase, 'And I tell you,' (Luke 16:9). This phrase is a sure sign that the saying it introduces was originally distinct, a stand alone saying of solemn weight. It is therefore wrong to try and link the remark about the sons of light with what follows. We should, rather, start our interpretation with the assumption that Luke himself saw some connection between this comment and the steward's prudence.

The most significant feature of verse 8 is this: it is the master who commends the steward. Now many ordinary modern readers of the parable, whilst intellectually and morally disapproving of the steward's behaviour, might nevertheless still admire him for his cleverness and resourcefulness in meeting the crisis which he suddenly faced. But the victim of his wastefulness, the master, is hardly likely to have this admiration. That the master praises the steward is paradoxical and surprising. If the point of the story were merely to commend energy, resourcefulness and ingenuity in a crisis, the story would not end with the master praising the steward. It would end: everyone who knew of it (except, probably, the master) could not but help admire the steward's astuteness, for the sons of this world are better at forwarding their prospects in this life, than are the sons of light at forwarding their fortune in God's Kingdom. However, the actual ending, with the master praising the steward, and with no reference to the sons of light progressing their prospects in the Kingdom, is deliberately paradoxical. It is not the conclusion that the original audience was expecting. The hearers were expecting to hear the master say: look; look at what he has done now; he is not only a wastrel, he is a fraudster; I was right to dismiss him from office.

At the same time, of course, the conclusion to the parable is not pointlessly paradoxical. A pointless paradox just ruins the story, and the hearers lose interest. The paradox has a point. The steward appears to be harming his master's interest by his wastefulness, but in fact he is really advancing his master's cause, and surprise, surprise, the master will praise him for it.

We do not see in the details of the parable story how the steward has been advancing his master's cause. This is why the story has been a puzzle to so many, and it is why the conclusion is paradoxical. How the steward has, all along, really been working for the master's best interest is presumably something that is revealed, if at all, in the application of the parable story, since it is not shown in the story of the steward itself. The conclusion to the parable surprises the audience. However, when the

hearers reflect on the matter at greater length, and apply its point to the situation Jesus intended, they will, eventually, realise it is the right conclusion.

What do I mean by talking of the application of the parables? I have in mind the kind of thing we find in Nathan's judgement on David (2 Samuel 12:1–15). David has committed adultery with Uriah's wife. Nathan does not come in and condemn David outright for his sin. Instead he puts to David a parable of two men, one rich, one poor. The rich man takes the poor man's lamb to provide for the traveller. The story elicits from David a judgement: 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die' (2 Samuel 12:5). Then, with that judgement in his pocket, Nathan applies the parable: 'You are the man' (2 Samuel 12:7). The point of using a parable here is that Nathan gets David, indirectly, to judge himself.

There are signs of this sort of application in some of Jesus's parables. An example is the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. Speaking to the chief priests and elders (Matthew 21:23, 33), Jesus obtains from them the verdict that the owner of the vineyard will put the tenants to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to others (Matthew 21:41). He then applies the verdict, or part of it, to these leaders: 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it' (Matthew 21:43).

Now the parable of the steward is different from these parables in that no judgement is elicited from the hearers. But nonetheless, the parable is about a judgement. The steward is judged, initially, to be wasteful. But later, surprisingly, the steward is praised. The parable reverses a judgement. I think, therefore, that it is plausible to suggest that this is a parable with an application. The parable is designed to reverse a judgement being made, by the disciples or by some of them (Luke 16:1), about a particular individual.

The clue we have to the application of the parable is, as I have said, the second half of verse 8: 'for the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light'. Who are the sons of light? If I am right the parable is aimed at them. Are they simply the disciples of Jesus to whom the parable is addressed (Luke 16:1)? Or are they some specific group?

The phrase 'the sons of light' is found as a description of Christian disciples in Paul's letters at 1 Thessalonians 5:5 and at Ephesians 5:8, and is also found in John 12:36. It is not used very often as a description for Christians. However, it is known to be a favoured description of the elect by the Essene or Qumran community. This connection suggests that there were some disciples of Jesus who, like the Essenes, were inclined to regard themselves as sons of light, with an implied assessment of others

as sons of darkness.

The parable of the wasteful steward may be taken as aimed at any tendency in the Lord's disciples to divide up humanity too quickly into the good and the bad. Perhaps the easiest way to picture how such a tendency might manifest itself is to think, not of a Pharisee but of a disciple of the Baptist.

Luke has preserved for us an account of the Baptist's teaching. John is a fearsome preacher who demands that his hearers 'bear fruits that befit repentance' (Luke 3:8). 'Even now'—note the word 'now'—'the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire' (Luke 3:9). This teaching of John should be contrasted with that of Jesus: see Luke 13:6-9, where the tree is given yet another year. John sees his mission as the one and only opportunity for people to repent, and when the Messiah puts in his appearance it will be judgement day: 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (Luke 3:17). Already the winnowing fork is in the hand: the final separation of good and evil is about to take place.

Clearly, Jesus did not fulfil these expectations of an immediate judgement. Far from bringing in the judgement and separating the sons of light from the sons of darkness, Jesus proclaimed the time for forgiveness on even more generous terms than the Baptist. Someone becoming a disciple of Jesus from having been a follower of John would experience a certain bewilderment and doubt. Is this man really doing God's business? We should consider, I suggest, whether the parable of the steward might not address such bewilderment and doubt.

Coming now to the first half of verse 8, I want to comment on the phrase 'dishonest steward'. The traditional translation is: 'The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence.' The traditional interpretation is that Jesus is not presenting the steward as a model to copy as regards the writing down of debts, which is the dishonesty. Rather the steward is an example of how to respond to a crisis, how to be resourceful, of how to act 'prudently'.

When we turn to verses 1 and 2, we find that the steward is not dismissed from office for being dishonest, but for being wasteful. It is important to observe that these two adjectives do not denote the same thing. In the parable of the prodigal son, this younger son wastes all his property (Luke 15:13), but he does not do anything dishonest: the property is his. Dishonesty suggests a theft or a fraud to make a personal financial gain. Wastefulness suggests an easy spend policy, possibly an indulgent way with debtors, and in particular a failure to get value for the money spent. This difference between waste and fraud should make us

think of the drama in the parable of the steward. We begin with someone who is wasteful, and dismissed for this reason; we see that at this stage, on being dismissed, he appears to act dishonestly; but then paradoxically he is praised. If the master thought the waste enough to dismiss him, why the sudden praise when it gets worse and becomes fraud? The only answer can be that all is not quite how it seems.

The drama of the parable suggests there is merit in considering an alternative translation for the first half of verse 8, namely: 'The master praised the steward for his dishonesty, because he had acted prudently' (2). The grammatical possibility of relating the dishonesty to the praise is mentioned in *Plummer's International Critical Commentary* (3), although he does not himself adopt this interpretation. On this view the dishonesty mentioned in verse 8 refers specifically to the actions described in verses 5–7. The strength of this translation lies in the way it reinforces the drama and impact of the story. The very thing which the hearers expect to confirm the dismissal from office, the "dishonesty", turns out to be praised. The steward is not praised for something else that he is doing, or some other quality he has, being prudent. He is praised for the very action which common opinion reckons to be dishonest, and he is praised for it because, despite the appearances, it is prudent.

The steward is not a likely hero for one of Jesus's stories. On the contrary, he is like the unrighteous judge of Luke 18:1–8, a character that it is awkward to identify with. However, a comparison with the parable of the judge may be illuminating. The point of that parable, Luke says, is that we should always pray and never lose heart (Luke 18:1).

Why did Jesus pick a character like the unrighteous judge to illustrate a point which could be effectively done with more congenial images (see Luke 11:5 ff.)? We can only speculate what the answer might be. A plausible suggestion is that the character of the judge is not Jesus's own creation. Rather the character was given to him by a critic, by someone who presented Jesus with a problem: what is the point of praying? We can imagine the objector putting his case to Jesus. God never answers our prayers. God is an unrighteous judge who lets the powerful get richer, who lets the evil man get away with his crime, while the poor and the widows get nothing of what they need and deserve. To them he turns a deaf ear. This is the problem, and this is the image and argument put to Jesus. He could respond by denying the aptness of the comparison: God cannot be compared with such a human and corrupt judge. But instead he lets the comparison go, and takes up the image he has been given, only he draws from that very image the opposite conclusion. Suppose God is an unrighteous judge; still, persistence in prayer will pay off in the end, and justice will be done.

The image of the steward is similar to that of the unrighteous judge. It

arises, I suggest, not from Jesus's imagination, but from the imaginations of those who present him with the problem. Rather than argue with the image, he turns it to his own purpose. It is notable in the parable of the steward that, when he is told he is to lose his office, the steward does not try to justify himself. Nor does he, in his last moments in office, mend his ways, and adopt the standards of non-waste and strict accounting which his critics would value. Rather, he continues with his wasteful ways. Indeed, he goes further: by writing off debts on such a scale he ventures into territory which looks dishonest. Nevertheless, he vindicates himself in the eyes of the master, who praises him. These features of the story point, I claim, to the fact that Jesus is here working with an image given him by critics, and surprisingly turning it round to produce the opposite conclusion to the one originally put to him. We will understand the parable, then, when we appreciate what the problem was that was put to Jesus, and when we see how it is plausible that the content of the parable turns this point around.

I now turn to the question of the writing down of the debts. In our private prayer and liturgy we use the Matthean form of the Lord's prayer. In England traditionally we have said: forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. I often wonder why we were landed with this mistranslation. Would the history of British capitalism have been any different if generations of English people had been taught to pray: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?

In the teaching of Jesus, forgiveness of debts illustrates God forgiving us our sins. Matthew's Gospel has the great parable of the king, the servant and the fellow servant (Matthew 18:23–35). In his Gospel, Matthew presents the parable as a development of the Lord's reply to Peter: forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21–22). The parable connects very clearly to the petition in the Lord's prayer. In Luke's Gospel we have the story of the woman who was a sinner coming to the house of Simon the Pharisee while Jesus was at table, and washing his feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus says to Simon: 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?' (Luke 7:41–42). Jesus goes on to say that the woman's many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much (Luke 7:47). The parable invites Simon to compare himself to the debtor who owed only fifty, and so who, according to Simon's own judgement, loved the less. Again, in this parable, the cancellation of debt is an image for the forgiveness of sins.

In the parable of the wasteful steward, debt is not cancelled altogether, but just reduced or written down. This, however, perhaps reflects only the difference between the owner, who can cancel if he

wishes, and his manager, whose discretion is more limited. It perhaps reflects that the image of the steward is not Jesus's choice, but one put to him by critics. But in any event, the reductions of debt are large ones. I suggest that the story of debts being written down is again meant to illustrate in some way the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, this interpretation is borne out by the context in which Luke has placed the parable.

The overall context is the story of Jesus travelling up to Jerusalem where he is to fulfil the prophecies and meet his destiny. The immediate context for the parable of the steward is that given by the three parables of forgiveness in chapter 15. The mention of the Pharisees at 15:2 and again at 16:14 does serve to link our parable to the ones that have gone before it. The three parables of chapter 15 are answering the murmuring of the Pharisees that Jesus is receiving sinners and eating with them. The opening parable of chapter 16 is, I suggest, answering the same murmuring, except that it deals with such murmurs or hesitations as there may be on the matter amongst Jesus's own disciples.

I will now present my interpretation of the parable in full. Jesus is proclaiming the Kingdom and the forgiveness of sins. God forgives sins, and forgives them, at least during this 'acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:19), on very favourable terms. Jesus does not demand to see the fruits of repentance before he proclaims the forgiveness (contrast Luke 3:8). In the parable of the father and the two sons, the father embraces his returning son and celebrates, regardless of the son's confession and his offer to do the work of the servant (Luke 15:20–24). So Jesus receives sinners and eats with them, before their lifestyles and moral attitudes give evidence of change. The Pharisees and other groups cannot accept this. But even among his own disciples there are some who find this generous approach hard to accept. They say to Jesus: 'Yes, God is merciful; yes, this is the favourable time; yes, the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed; but, we must see the fruits of repentance first.'

'Jesus', they say, 'the mercy of God is a priceless treasure. We are only the stewards of property that belongs to God alone. How can we cancel the debt of sin so readily? Are not you yourself like a wasteful steward? One day you will have to give an account of how you have used this mercy that really belongs to God. God will ask you to explain what this has all achieved. And you may find yourself dismissed from office. Further, you yourself seem to recognise that the end is only just over the horizon. Surely now is the time to get the account in order?'

And Jesus replies with the parable of the wasteful steward. Taking up the image given him by others, he turns the point around. What will the wasteful steward do once his time is known to be running out? Will he then suddenly change his ways, and become miserly and cautious with his

master's property? What good would that do at that late stage? Is he not more likely rather to use what little time is left, what little discretion is still his, to finish his office in the way he has always carried it out? In fact, he will be even more extravagant than ever. Besides, this is his best chance of securing a future once his time of office has run out. In his life after his stewardship he will hope to have at least a few friends if he has been generous right up to the last moment. Maybe in these dying moments, by writing down the debts, he will gain the one or two crucial friends that will make all the difference to his future. Perhaps Jesus, by persisting with the proclamation of forgiveness of sins beyond all reason, will in fact gain the friend who will make all the difference to his mission—perhaps a friend such as St Paul.

Furthermore, in the end his policy will be praised as the right one. Praise will come from God for Jesus in his position as a steward of God's forgiveness. God will vindicate him, praising him for being generous with his mercy. For this was the right and prudent policy to win back people to God. How do children of this world win themselves friends amongst their own kind, except by granting favours to win favours? Do we imagine that we can somehow win over the children of this world to God by being severe, and demanding retribution? Is this going to attract the children of the world to the Kingdom of light? No, the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light: their method is the way to get results (even though it will not yield the right results in every case). Let us write down the debt of sin as far as we can while we still have the discretion to do it

The parable shows how the only hope of winning sinners back to God is to pursue the path of writing down the debt of sin. This, although it may appear wasteful and even dishonest or wicked, is in fact the only way of achieving anything, all the more so as time is running out. The policy of the Baptist and the sons of light was appropriate for the period up to the time of the Messiah: 'The law and the prophets were until John' (Luke 16:16). But now, in the favourable year, a different policy is needed. To continue with the Baptist's approach would be to protect God's property at the cost of keeping most people out of the Kingdom. Will only a few be saved? (Luke 14:23). God will in fact praise the more wasteful policy. It is not apparent in the story of the parable why the master should praise his steward for prudence and right judgement. The reason why is indeed not in the story, but rather in its application to Jesus. The story is an important addition to the parables of chapter 15, for it emphasises to the disciples that they are not to be swayed from proclaiming the forgiveness of sins by the murmurings of the righteous and those who believe in strict accounting. Even if the wasteful steward of God's mercy appears to get his dismissal, still in the end God will vindicate him.

The interpretation of verse 9 is a key point in chapter 16. As I have already said, the opening phrase, 'And I tell you...', marks it off as a stand alone saying of Jesus, not originally connected to verse 8, and in the Gospel as we now have it, it suggests the beginning of a new paragraph or a new section. It should not be construed as an interpretation of the parable of the steward. Rather, it should be understood as a saying giving in anticipation the point of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. This parable, as uttered by Jesus during his ministry, may well have been directed at the Sadducees. This may be indicated by the importance of the theme of the resurrection of the dead which the Sadducees denied. Luke, however, ignores this aspect of the story. For him, the parable is aimed at the lovers of money (Luke 16:14). With this emphasis, the central part of the parable becomes the reversal of fortune, and the chasm fixed between the rich man and Lazarus (verses 25–26). The rich man did not attempt to bridge the gulf that separated him from Lazarus in this life; so in the life to come the gulf is equally unbridgeable, and has become fixed. Luke says: let this be a warning. 'Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous Mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.'

This saying has been brought forward to verse 9, because there is a similarity with the steward who uses his opportunities with mammon to make friends for himself. Luke uses the link to effect a change of subject from forgiveness to alms and social solidarity. To serve God, we must know how to be generous, how to be the very opposite of the strict accounting employed by the lovers of mammon (Luke 16:13). The opposition to strict accounting, and the favour shown to generosity or wastefulness, is the link between the two subjects.

And so we come back to where we started. Luke did not have a heading in his text: 'Chapter 16'. How then does he signal a switch from forgiveness to money? The first signal is verse 9 of chapter 16, with its solemn introduction, 'And I tell you...'. This is reinforced by verse 13 which indicates the great divide between the ways of God and the ways of money, and also by verse where the Pharisees are described as lovers of money. We are then ready for the parable of the rich man and Lazarus which illustrates both the gulf of verse 13 and the warning of verse 9. But the wasteful steward is all about how to dispense the mercy of God in forgiving sin.

- 1 I am very grateful to Adrian Graffy of St John's Seminary, Womersley who read an earlier draft of this article, and made a number of comments which I have incorporated, or which have led to important alterations.
- 2 I had my attention drawn to this translation, and to Plummer's commentary, by Adrian Graffy.
- 3 Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, Fifth edition, 1922, pp. 383–384.