

## The Parable of the Shrewd Steward (Luke 16:1-9)

A parable's story contains an inherent message intended by the Teller; which He can either conceal or reveal at His personal discretion (see **Mat 13:13-17**). So we must be careful not to be over-creative in our interpretation of the Scriptural parables, or understanding will be denied to us. Look at "*Introduction: Parables of Jesus Christ – Concealing and Revealing.*"

**Luke 16:1-9** recounts Jesus' parable of the shrewd steward. This is one of the more difficult parables to understand, because all of the characters seem to fall below the standard of true virtue; yet it seems that Jesus commended them. It is especially disturbing for me that the shrewd steward was commended for what was clearly a con artist's work.

I would like to walk us through the parable and through different questions and discussions help us extract the intended meaning of the text.

### Q: What is a Steward? And what was the task he was unfaithful in?

A: The word for "Steward," or sometimes also translated as "Manager" in use here comes from the Greek word οἰκονόμον (oikonomon). It comes from the Greek words Oikos (meaning house) and Nomos (meaning rule or law). The combined word oikonomon is also where we get the English word "economy." Its etymological meaning (ie. letting the words used define its meaning), therefore tells us that a steward is one entrusted with the rule of the house to manage and develop its resources.

A Steward manages resources that does not belong to himself; which the Owner places at his temporary disposal with the usual task of multiplying it. Mankind is placed in such a role, to govern the earth and its resources and to multiply and be productive in our stewardship (**Gen 1:26-28**). A steward is given full authority to act on behalf of the Master, which was why he could still legally (though I would argue, unethically) give discount to the debts *before* he was relieved of his position. The steward of the story was pictured as an incompetent, wasteful (ie. prodigal – which puts the parable in continuation from the Parable of the Prodigal Son) and unfit steward who not only squandered off his master's wealth, but was also unconfident of surviving through normal labor.

### Q: Who was the MAIN audience of this parable? Who was Jesus alluding to when He used the character of the rich owner?

A: The main audience of this parable is stated clearly, and they are the disciples (**16:1**), the people of the light (**16:8b**). Of course, the Pharisees were present (**16:14**) but they were secondary listeners who nonetheless got offended because the message struck a nerve.

Regarding the character of the owner. The confusion comes because Jesus normally (though not always) uses the character of an Owner (of an estate eg. **Luk 14:15-24**, a field or vineyard – eg. **Mat 20:1-16**, etc) to refer to God the Father; who is the ultimate Owner and Master of all there is. But this parable was intended to tickle our senses a little; as the characterization of the owner is clearly someone less virtuous than our God. For one, this owner is



so easily manipulated that He in effect got his wealth (in the form of the huge debts – “Accounts Receivable”) squandered again after he had already received reports of and reprimanded the steward for the mismanagement. This gives us a confusing puzzle to begin with: Who do you think the owner of this parable was intended to portray?

I say the confusion was intentional, because the owner’s characterization was a common mistake that we make of God. No religious person would deny that God is the ultimate Owner of everything; including all of our wealth. That part is easy. However, our everyday actions do not normally reflect this truth. Like the incompetent steward, we squander off the little that He has entrusted in our care, and live as if we will not be called into account. We live as if God can be easily manipulated, and that we can find loopholes in His law that can prove to be beneficial to our survival. The Chinese is known for believing that we can cheat our gods and then bribe them when called into account. So, I think that the owner in the parable refers to man’s wrong perception about God (or more specifically, the Jews’ common mistake about God).

And the parable, when told the way it was told, was intentionally exposing the idiocy of such notion. The Jews were repeatedly reprimanded by God for being unproductive in their faith; for no longer reaching out to the Gentiles and bringing the knowledge of God to them. They were so afraid of the sinful corruption an association with the pagan may bring (which did repeatedly happen all throughout the Old Testament, by the way) that they in effect stopped associating with them altogether (see **Jn 4:9, Acts 10:28**). But they forgot that the reason Israel was consecrated in the first place was to be a blessing to the nations (**Gen 12:1-3**) and to be a priestly nation that represents God to the people (**Ex 19:5-6**). Like the steward in this story, the Jews, who were being entrusted with the very word of God (**Rom 3:2**) were proven unproductive in their management. Jesus’ words have been demanding accountability from them, and they had been trying to find loopholes in the system for their unproductivity. So, the parable was in fact timely and direct.

But unlike the owner in the parable, the true God of Israel would not fall into trickery. Even in the story, the apparent loophole was actually a dead end. The owner may commend the steward for such shrewdness, which indeed was still within his authority to execute. But we all know that the owner would not view this shrewdness as competence and rehire the steward. And what choices did Israel have as Master? Jesus said, God or mammon; and they were not allowed to choose both. Tricking the Master is equal to abandoning Him; and abandoning Him is equal to foregoing their election.

How do we know this was the message Christ intended? Well, for one, by looking at how the secondary audience reacted. The Pharisees (and Luke made sure to include the comment “who loved money” – **16:14**) sneered as Jesus. They were offended, because they were guilty as charged! And when they responded with hostility, Jesus exposes them further by saying, “*you are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight*” (**16:15**). In other words, they were the ones who thought that they could justify their mismanagement. Although Jesus was teaching His disciples how not to be an unfaithful steward, the real crooks showed up and got offended.

**Q: Did Jesus (through the character of the Owner) actually praise the shrewd and dishonest manager for his unscrupulous dealings with his debtors in 16:8? And did He actually encourage us to be similarly shrewd and dishonest in 16:9?**



A: Hint. If Jesus only told the story and praised the dishonest steward and that was it, there would be no reason for the Pharisees to be offended at this teaching. Clearly, they understood that the parable was a rebuke of some sort.

Parallels are often used to either *compare* (thus exploring their similarities) or *contrast* (this distinguishing their differences). So we need to discern if the parallel in what the steward did, and what we are called to do herein is a comparison or a contrast, and we are called to avoid it. To ascertain this is not difficult, as Jesus Himself said that what the steward did was something a “*people of this world*” would do (**16:8**), and this is contrasted to what the “*people of the light*” should do (**16:8**). And the people of the light is supposed to emulate the shrewdness of the steward (we are not called to be naïve or stupid!), but we are to add to shrewdness, sincerity (**Mat 10:16**) – a character the steward clearly lacked.

Here is the key to understanding the parable. Jesus was setting out two distinct systems: One which was clearly applicable to the “people of this world,” and another which was to be applicable to the “people of the light.” All the characters in this parable were working within the system of the world.

- The steward acted within his delegated authority, and was smart enough to secure a huge last minute benefit for his pension.
- The debtors merely accepted the legal courtesy offered to them, without asking the question of honor (though we must note that what seemed to be a discount in debt would ultimately be demanded back as reciprocal aid).
- The owner got his wealth squandered off twice; with the final deal of the steward costing him around 10 years’ worth of wages.

But under this system, although at first glance it seems like everyone got away scott free; in reality everyone lost something.

- The steward lost his highly respectable position and well-paying job for the rest of his life. (and as I mentioned previously, this is equated to Israel losing their election, so that is very bad news).
- The debtors may find that they were dealt with a card that got them a discount, which would cost them a lifetime of reciprocity.
- The rich master got his wealth squandered off not once but twice. It is a system that seems to work at first glance, but fails to perform in the long run.

### **Q: How, then, would you summarize the message of the Parable of the Shrewd Steward?**

So, the system of the “people of the light” – what should it be like? Well the parallel is this.

- ***We as stewards will soon find out that the worldly wealth (or unrighteous wealth as some translation would have it) is in fact temporarily entrusted to us to test our faithfulness.*** So, just as the steward was called to give an account of his mismanagement, we too shall be called into account. However rich we think we are, the wealth that we can accumulate in this world is still comparatively “very little” (**16:10**). As Jesus had taught beforehand (**Luk 12:22-34**), we need to set our eyes on that which is abundant, true and our very own – all of which are descriptions of our treasures in heaven.
- ***We are called to be generous; but generously productive.*** True and sustainable generosity comes from productivity. We give off that which we have produced, so as not to deplete our wealth. The unfaithful



steward seemed extremely generous in giving away large discounts of debt (which seems like a first glance parallel); but those discounts deplete. By contrast, the people of the light must seek first God's kingdom, and from the abundant blessings that God then adds, we are to be generous in works of mercy (**Luk 12:31-33**). We need to note that Jesus was also rebuking the disciples for not acting with shrewdness; for thinking that righteousness can also mean lethargy (**16:8**).

Under this system, designed and mandated by God, everybody wins. The Master, God, sees His creative wonder multiplied and His glory spread through man, His image. The steward, us, gets to fulfill our calling and purpose and live meaningful and productive lives that earn us true praise from God and everlasting rewards from Him. And our friends, those we minister to, get to witness the light and taste the salt of God's creative order – one that is far superior than that which “the people of this world” could offer.

This is what Jesus meant when he commanded, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (**16:9**). Jesus was neither commending the unfaithfulness of the steward; nor commanding us to follow his example. On the contrary, He was warning us against succumbing to an inferior system and commanding us to a better shrewdness, a divine wisdom that would yield eternal benefits and rewards.

### **Conclusion: Intrinsic Purity and Extrinsic Productivity**

The problem with the post-exilic Jews in Jesus' time was this. For centuries, in the Old Testament, God had been teaching Israel to remain exclusively and wholeheartedly committed to Yahweh. Time after time they failed; and because of intermarriage with the pagan nations had incorporated their polytheistic systems of worship into the Jewish faith. Ultimately, they were punished by exiles (the ten northern tribes permanently exiled into Assyria, from which they lost their Israelite identity; and the people of Judah exiled into Babylon, which remnants returned and made up the Jewish community of Jesus' days). This hard lesson had taught them never again to meddle with polytheism; and they were now ready to defend their faith with their lives. But the Jews also became militantly protective of their system to the point of succumbing into elitism. They were no longer willing to let an outsider into their faith; and they too no longer reached out to the Gentile nations.

Jesus showed them that this was not the reason they were consecrated. Their purity was to be a productive purity; one that reaches out and purifies others. They were not to let the corruption of the world stain their faith; but were also not called into passivism where they now sat exclusively as elects. Pure on the inside, productive on the outside. But, as the rest of the New Testament will teach us, this is one impossible task, a sending of sheep among the wolves (but also one that is made possible only to those quickened by the Holy Spirit). And, with the authority that Jesus had to send us out into the whole world to productively make disciples for Him (**Matt 28:18-20**), the Church is now tasked with the Abrahamic blessing to cover the whole earth with God's glory. And this is what Paul then taught when he warned Christians against passively conforming to the corruption of the world, but to be actively transformed and transforming by the renewing of our mind (**Rom 12:1-2**). And how is that to be achieved? “In view of God's mercy,” or in other words, by God's equipping grace alone. *Sola Gratia!*

