

The Agent of Unrighteousness (Luke 16:1-13)

1. The Problem: How can “the Lord” (or is it “the master,” an issue to be resolved) commend the dishonesty of a clever rogue?
2. The aphorisms that follow the parable in 16:8-13 help to interpret it
 - 2.1 They urge a faithful use of wealth, "what is not yours," to insure receiving "true riches" from God.
 - 2.2 They draw out what it means to sit down and count the cost (14:28, 31) and "to say goodbye to all that you possess" to be Jesus' disciple (14:33).
 - 2.3 The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) reinforces the point that wealth must be unloaded (Luke 12:13-21, 32-34; 13:13-14) if one is to have any hope of participating in the world to come.
3. The text and translation

The parable (16:1-7)

And he said to his disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had an agent and charges were brought to him that this one was squandering his goods. When he called him in, he said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Hand over the account of your management, for you are no longer able to continue as agent.’

The agent said to himself, ‘What shall I do because my master is taking the position of agent away from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do so that people will receive me into their households after I am no longer the agent!’

When he called his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘One hundred measures of olive oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your contract, sit down and quickly write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your contract and write eighty.’”

Interpretation of the parable (16:8)

And the Lord praised the agent [bound up, as he was, in the world] of unrighteousness because he acted shrewdly, because worldings are more shrewd in taking advantage of their opportunities than are the children of light.

Application of the parable (16:9-13)

And I say to you, “Make friends with unrighteous Mammon, so that when it fails they will receive you in eternal habitations.”

The one who is trustworthy with what is insignificant will be faithful with what is much more significant; and the one who is untrustworthy with what is insignificant will be untrustworthy with what is much more significant.

If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with unrighteous Mammon, who will entrust you with true riches? And if you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant is able to serve two masters, for he will hate the one and love the other, or he will help the one and disregard the other. You are not able to serve God and Mammon!”

4. Outline

- I. Parable of the agent bound up in the world of unrighteousness (16:1-7)
 - A. An agent’s crisis (16:1-2)
 - B. The agent’s decisive action to win friends for himself (16:3-7)
- II. Affirmation of the agent’s shrewdness (16:8-9)
 - A. The Lord’s praise of the agent’s shrewdness (16:8a)
 - B. Comparison to the lack of shrewdness on the part of the children of light (16:8b)
 - C. Command to distribute Mammon to win friends for oneself in heaven (16:9)
- III. Trustworthiness in the use of money (16:10-12)
 - A. Trustworthiness in small things is a condition for promotion to greater things (16:10)

B. Trustworthiness in a specious thing like Mammon is a condition for being entrusted with what is genuine (16:11)

C. Trustworthiness in what belongs to another is a condition for being given what is your own (16:12)

IV. Divided Allegiance (16:13)

A. Servants cannot serve two masters (16:13a)

B. Disciples cannot serve God and Mammon (16:13b)

5. The main characters in the parable

5.1 The rich man (master, creditor, landowner)

5.2 The agent

5.2.1 Guilty of shady activity

5.2.2 Fear about the future: Having to work or beg

5.2.3 Quick action: Fraud to nurture future benefactors (*quid pro quo*; I scratch your back; you scratch mine)

6. The Lord's Interpretation of his action

6.1 Who is "the Lord" (master) in v. 8?

6.1.1 The rich master?

6.1.1.1 who is gracious?

6.1.1.2 who is pleased that the agent lops of the interest from the debts so that he will receive praise from the debtors?

6.1.1.3 who enjoys being bamboozled?

6.1.2 The Lord (Jesus)

6.1.2.1 The absolute use of "Lord" with the definite article without any modifier refers to Jesus in Luke (7:13, 19; 10:1; 11:39; 12:42; 13:15; 17:5, 6; 18:6; 19:8, 31, 34; 23:61; 24:34).

6.1.2.2 Parallels with the parable of the widow and the wicked judge (18:1-8)

6.1.2.2.1 The parable (18:1-5) is interpreted by Jesus in 18:6: "The Lord said, 'Hear what the judge of unrighteousness [ὁ κριτῆς τῆς ἀδικίας] says.'"

6.1.2.2.2 This direction is followed, as in 16:9-10, by an application of the parable in 18:7 and a declaration, "I say to you," in 18:8.

6.1.2.2.3 Jesus does not always bring parables to a narrative closure (see the Samaritan; the Prodigal Son). What is important is not the conclusion to the agent's story but Jesus' application of his behavior as it relates to discipleship.

7. Misguided sympathy for the poor creditor

8. Praise for the agent of unrighteousness acting shrewdly