

# The unjust steward

Jesus' Parables

No. 2

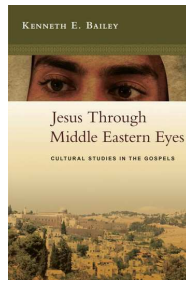
Luke 16:1-8

## A parallel parable?

Parallel Element	Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)	Unjust Steward (Lk 16:1-8)
Noble lord showing extraordinary grace to an inferior	The father	The master
Ignoble inferior wasting lord's resources	The prodigal son	The unjust steward
Moment of truth re. resources	Realised his favours were all spent, and it was better to be a slave in his father's house	Decided to use the resources to buy favour from others
Inferior throws themselves on mercy of lord	Asks to be taken back, just as a servant	Uses the lord's resources and hopes...
Broken trust	Prodigal wastes resources	Steward wastes resources

- Chapter break between Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward added by fourth century. However, in the original these are part of the continuous flow.

# Parable structure



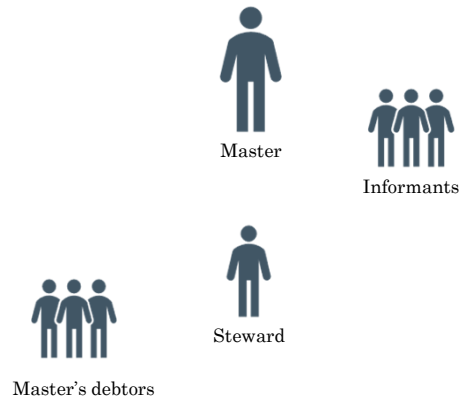
1. There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that he was wasting his goods.	MASTER STEWARD
2. And he called him and said to him, "What is this I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward."	LOSES
3. And the steward said to himself, "What shall I do, because my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg."	LOSES
4. I know what I will do, so that when I am put out of the stewardship they may receive me into their own houses.	A SOLUTION Identified
5. So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?"  And he said, "A hundred measures of oil." And he said to him, "Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty."	GAINS
6. Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?" And he said, "A hundred measures of wheat." And he said to him, "Take your bill and write eighty."	GAINS
7. Then the master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence.	MASTER STEWARD

For the sons of this age are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.

Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 333.

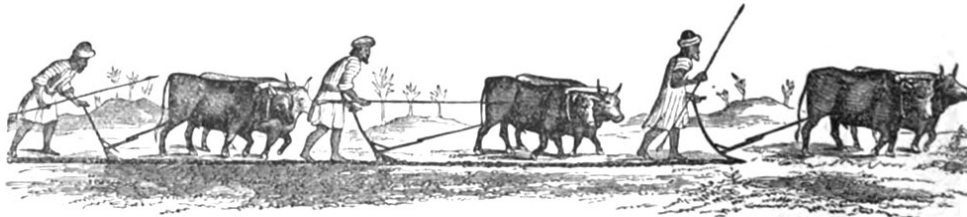
- Bailey calls this a *modified prophetic rhetorical template* because, rather than the classic ring of seven parts in a 1-2-3-4-3-2-1 format, it follows a 1-2-2b-3-4-4b-5 format
- The central part is still the turning point

## Parable's characters



- Master
  - A rich man – wealth in that time was usually either in land or banking, but his debtors owe agricultural produce, so most likely he was a land owner, and early translations agree
  - A generous man, as we will see
- Informants
  - Parable starts with people telling the master that his steward was wasting his belongings
  - The master immediately acts on these charges, therefore they are likely reliable witnesses, such as the master's peers
- Steward
  - A very clever man who understood human nature intimately, as we will see
  - But greedy
- Master's debtors
  - Likely tenants, given the nature of their debts

## Parable's social context



- Important social concepts:
  - Steward represents master, so if the steward does something, it is as if the master has done so
  - Employment practices allowed a steward to be dismissed on the spot, and he would immediately stop representing his master. Anything he said would not be binding on his master.
  - Any action, such as dismissing someone from a position, is rarely taken without extensive negotiation (haggling). For example, a dismissed employee might plead on the basis of his long service, or blame others, or ask to confront his accusers, or send good friends to argue for him. Silence is an implicit admission of guilt.
  - In a shame-honour society, reputation is a great asset, so a reputation for generosity is incredibly valuable, and a reputation for stinginess is incredibly dangerous. This constrained the range of actions that a person might undertake, given the effect that it may have on one's reputation. Also, a steward, acting on behalf of a master, has some control over a master's reputation (which can effectively be counted as another, very valuable, possession).
  - In a shame-honour society, there is a strong distinction between "public propriety" and "private awareness." In other words, so long as something looks right to others or no wrongdoing can be proven (it preserves public propriety), it

doesn't matter if you are privately aware of wrongdoing. Thus covert bribery thrives in shame-honour societies, but open bribery is rare.

- The idea of “people receiving you into their houses” is a figure of speech that refers to offering someone a job.
- With these in mind, we can unpack the story

## Parable's surprises



*Financial records (from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC)*

- First surprise: steward does not defend himself, he seems aware that he has no defense, yet the Bible is full of guilty characters protesting their innocence, from Adam onwards
- Second surprise: despite being greedy, steward has a keen grasp of his own abilities and his master's character
- Third surprise: the steward uses the short opportunity while he still has his master's books in his hands to use them in a way that, while technically illegal, will win favour for him and most likely not be undone by his master
- Fourth surprise: the master commends the steward for his cleverness (not for his dishonesty), "T. W. Manson summarizes the master's attitude: "There is all the difference in the world between 'I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly' and 'I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.' ""

Kenneth E. Bailey, [\*Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels\* \(Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008\), 341.](#)

## The steward's ruse

- Took advantage of the “secret” of his dismissal
  - Acted as if on behalf of the master
  - But this could later be undone by the master
- Forgave massive debts on behalf of master, meeting privately with debtors
  - Reinforced master's reputation for generosity
  - If the debtors were “privately aware” of steward's dishonesty in this, they could publicly disavow knowledge because steward met each privately
  - Master could not back out because it would destroy his reputation for generosity
- Result:
  - Master's debtors are happy, they may be aware that steward is untrustworthy, but if they keep an eye on him his intelligence would make him a good employee (and better he be working for them than for someone else)
  - Master's reputation is enhanced
  - Steward has job opportunities



# Parable's theology

## Theology

- God is just (the master dismisses the corrupt steward)
- God is merciful (he merely dismisses the steward, he doesn't imprison him or his family, and he accepts the cost of the stewards self-preserving actions)
- Sin is ultimately found out, it cannot be kept secret
- Sin leads to more sin (the steward chose to solve his problems with more sin)
- The steward's insight is commended, not his actions: he understands that his master (God) is gracious, and he banks on that
- The steward's courage to act on his convictions of God (his master) is approved of

## So the parable's point is?

- When even the wicked (the children of this world) can act upon their knowledge of God's character, how much more should we (the children of God) bank on his character
- Leads into Lk 16:9-13, discussing the use of worldly wealth

Break time!

# DIY Parable

Take the theology and build your own using a contemporary context

## Parable context?

**Context must:**

- Communicate the master's reputation and its importance
- Communicate steward's understanding of master's good character
- Communicate a wicked exploitation of the master's good character

# Parable's story

## **Should have:**

- Surprise
- Symmetry & simplicity
- Shared metaphors
- Setup for judgement

## **Must communicate:**

- God's extreme generosity
- Steward's shrewd understanding of God
- Steward's exploitation of God's goodness