

LUKE
Chapter 16:1-9, "The Unjust Steward"

Technical Notes of Matthew Henry

(1) And he said 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 longer 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, 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 fourscore. (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. (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.

We mistake if we imagine that the design of Christ's doctrine and holy religion was either to amuse us with notions of divine mysteries or to entertain us with notions of divine mercies. No, the divine revelation of both these in the gospel is intended to engage and quicken us to the practice of Christian duties, and, as much as any one thing, to the duty of beneficence and doing good to those who stand in need of anything that either we have or can do for them. This our Saviour is here pressing us to, by reminding us that we are but *stewards of the manifold grace of God*; and since we have in divers instances been unfaithful, and have forfeited the favour of our Lord, it is our wisdom to think how we may, some other way, make what we have in the world turn to a good account. Parables must not be forced beyond their primary intention, and therefore we must not hence infer that anyone can befriend us if we lie under the displeasure of our Lord, but that, in the general, we must so lay out what we have in works of piety and charity as that we may meet it again with comfort on the other side [of] death and the grave. If we would act wisely, we must be as diligent and industrious to employ our riches in the acts of piety and charity, in order to promote our future and eternal welfare, as worldly men are in laying them out to the greatest temporal profit, in making to themselves friends with them, and securing other secular interests. So *Dr. Clarke*. Now let us consider,

I. The parable itself, in which all the children of men are represented as *stewards* of what they have in this world, and we are but stewards. Whatever we have, the property of it is God's; we have only the use of it, and that according to the direction of our great Lord, and for his honour. Rabbi Kimchi, quoted by Dr. Lightfoot, says, "This world is a house; heaven the roof; the stars the lights; the earth, with its fruits, a table spread; the Master of the house is the holy and blessed God; man is the steward, into whose hands the goods of this house are delivered; if he behave himself well, he shall find favour in the eyes of his Lord; if not, he shall be turned out of his stewardship."

Now, here is the *dishonesty* of this steward. He *wasted his lord's goods*, embezzled them, misapplied them, or through carelessness suffered them to be lost and damaged; and for this he was *accused to his lord*, v. 1. We are all *liable* to the same charge. We have not made a due improvement of what God has entrusted us with in this world, but have perverted his purpose; and, that we may not be for this *judged of our Lord*, it concerns us to *judge ourselves*.

[Here is] his *discharge* out of his place. His lord *called for him*, and said, "*How is it that I hear this of*

thee? I expected better things from thee." He speaks as one sorry to find himself disappointed in him, and under a necessity of dismissing him from his service: it troubles him to hear it; but the steward cannot deny it, and therefore there is no remedy, he must make up his accounts, and be gone in a little time, v. 2. Now this is designed to teach us (1) That we must all of us shortly be discharged from *our stewardship* in this world; we must not always enjoy those things which we now enjoy. Death will come, and *dismiss* us from our stewardship, will *deprive* us of the abilities and opportunities we now have of doing good, and others will come in our places and have the same. (2) That our discharge from our stewardship at death is *just*, and what we have deserved, for we have wasted our Lord's goods, and thereby forfeited our trust, so that we cannot complain of any wrong done us. (3) That when our stewardship is taken from us we must *give an account* of it to our Lord: *After death the judgment*. We are fairly warned both of our discharge and our account, and ought to be frequently thinking of them.

[Here is] his *after-wisdom*. Now he began to consider, *What shall I do?* v. 3. He would have done well to have considered this before he had so foolishly thrown himself out of a good place by his unfaithfulness; but it is better to *consider* late than never. **Note**, Since we have all received notice that we must shortly be turned out of our stewardship, we are concerned to consider what we shall do then. He must live; which way shall he have a livelihood? (1) He knows that he has not such a degree of industry in him as to get his living by work: "*I cannot dig*; I cannot earn my bread by my labour." But why can he not dig? It does not appear that he is either old or lame; but the truth is, he is *lazy*. His *cannot* is a *will not*; it is not a natural but a moral disability that he labours under; if his master, when he turned him out of the stewardship, had continued him in his service as a labourer, and set a task-master over him, he would have made him dig. He *cannot dig*, for he was never used to it. Now this intimates that we cannot get a livelihood for our souls by any labour for this world, nor indeed do anything to purpose for our souls by any ability of our own. (2) He knows that he has not such a degree of *humility* as to get his bread by begging: *To beg I am ashamed*. This was the language of his pride, as the former of his slothfulness. Those whom God, in his providence, has disabled to help themselves, should not be *ashamed* to ask relief of others. This steward had more reason to be ashamed of cheating his master than of begging his bread. (3) He therefore determines to make friends of his lord's debtors, or his tenants that were behind with their rent, and had given notes under their hands for it: "*I am resolved what to do*, v. 4. My lord turns me out of his house. I have none of my own to go to. I am acquainted with my lord's tenants, have done them many a good turn, and now I will do them one more, which will so oblige them that they will bid me welcome to their houses, and the best entertainment they afford; and so long as I live, at least till I can better dispose of myself, I will quarter upon them, and go from one good house to another." Now the way he would take to make them his friends was by striking off a considerable part of their debt to his lord, and giving it in his accounts so much less than it was. Accordingly, he sent for one, who owed his lord *a hundred measures of oil* (in that commodity he paid his rent): *Take thy bill*, said he, here it is, and *sit down quickly, and write fifty* (v. 6); so he reduced his debt to the one half. Observe, he was in haste to have it done: *Sit down quickly, and do it, lest we be taken treating, and suspected*." He took another, who owed his lord *a hundred measures of wheat*, and from his bill he cut off a fifth part, and bade him write *fourscore* (v. 7); probably he did the like by others, abating more or less according as he expected kindness from them. See here what uncertain things our worldly possessions are; they are most so to those who have most of them, who devolve upon others all the care concerning them, and so put it into their power to *cheat them*, because they will not trouble themselves to see with their own eyes. See also what treachery is to be found even among those in whom trust is reposed. How hard is it to find one that confidence can be reposed in! *Let God be true, but every man a liar*. Though this steward is turned out for dealing dishonestly, yet still he does so. So rare is it for men to mend of a fault, though they smart for it.

[Here is] the approbation of this: *The lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely*, v.

8. It may be meant of *his lord*, the lord of that servant, who, though he could not but be angry at his knavery, yet was pleased with his ingenuity and policy for himself; but, taking it so, the latter part of the verse must be the words of our Lord, and therefore I think the whole is meant of him. Christ did, as it were, say, "Now commend me to such a man as this, that knows how to do well for himself, how to improve a present opportunity, and how to provide for a future necessity." He does not commend him because he had done *falsely* to his master, but because he had done *wisely* for himself. Yet perhaps herein he did well for his master too, and but justly with the tenants. He knew what *hard bargains* he had *set them*, so that they could not *pay their rent*, but, having been screwed up by his rigour, were thrown *behindhand*, and they and their families were likely to go to ruin; in consideration of this, he now, at going off, did as he ought to do both in justice and charity, not only easing them of part of their arrears, but abating their rent for the future. *How much owest thou?* may mean, "What rent dost thou sit upon? Come, I will set thee an easier bargain, and yet no easier than what thou oughtest to have." He had been *all for his lord*, but now he begins to consider the tenants, that he might have *their favour* when he had lost *his lord's*. The abating of their rent would be a lasting kindness, and more likely to engage them than abating their arrears only. Now this forecast of his, for a comfortable subsistence in this world, shames our improvidence for another world; *The children of this world*, who choose and have their portions in it, *are wiser for their generation*, act more considerately, and better consult their worldly interest and advantage, than the *children of light*, who enjoy the gospel, in *their generation*, that is, in the concerns of their souls and eternity. **Note**, (1) The wisdom of worldly people in the concerns of this world is to be *imitated* by us in the concerns of our souls: it is their principle to improve their opportunities, to do that first which is most needful, in summer and harvest to lay up for winter, to take a good bargain when it is offered them, to trust the *faithful* and not the *false*. O that we were thus wise in our spiritual affairs! (2) The children of light are commonly *outdone* by the children of this world. Not that the children of this world are *truly wise*; it is only *in their generation*. But in that they are *wiser than the children of light in theirs*; for, though we are told that we must shortly be *turned out of our stewardship*, yet we do not provide as we should for such a day. We live as if we were to be *here always* and as if there were not *another life after this*, and are not so solicitous as this steward was to provide for *hereafter*. Though as *children of the light*, that light to which life and immortality are brought by the gospel, we cannot but see *another world* before us, yet we do not prepare for it, do not send our best effects and best affections thither, as we should.

II. The application of this parable, and the inferences drawn from it (v. 9): "*I say unto you, you my disciples*" (for to them this parable is directed, v. 1), "though you have but little in this world, consider how you may do good with that little."

Observe what it is that our Lord Jesus here exhorts us to do; to provide for our comfortable reception to the happiness of another world by making good use of our possessions and enjoyments in this world: "*Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness*, as the steward with his lord's goods made his lord's tenants his friends." It is the wisdom of the men of this world so to manage their money as that they may have the benefit of it hereafter, and not for the present only; therefore they put it out to interest, buy land with it, put it into this or the other fund. Now we should learn of them to make use of our money so as that we may be the better for it hereafter in another world, as they do in hopes to be the better for it hereafter in this world; so *cast it upon the waters* as that we may *find it again after many days*, Eccl. 11:1. And in our case, though whatever we have *are our Lord's goods*, yet, as long as we dispose of them among *our Lord's tenants* and for their advantage, it is so far from being reckoned a wrong to our Lord, that it is a duty to him as well as policy for ourselves. **Note**, (1) The things of this world are the *mammon of unrighteousness*, or the false *mammon*, not only because often got by fraud and unrighteousness, but because those who trust to it for satisfaction and happiness will certainly be deceived; for riches are perishing things, and will disappoint those that raise their expectations from them. (2) Though this *mammon of unrighteousness* is not to be *trusted to* for a happiness, yet it may

and must be *made use of* in subserviency to our pursuit of that which is our happiness. Though we cannot find true satisfaction in it, yet we may *make to ourselves friends* with it, not by way of *purchase* or *merit*, but *recommendation*; so we may make God and Christ our friends, the good angels and saints our friends, and the poor our friends; and it is a desirable thing to be *befriended* in the account and state to come. (3) At death we must all *fail*, οταν εκλίπητε--*when ye suffer an eclipse*. Death eclipses us. A tradesman is said to *fail* when he becomes a *bankrupt*. We must all thus fail shortly; death shuts up the shop, seals up the hand. Our comforts and enjoyments on earth will *all fail* us; flesh and heart fail. (4) It ought to be our great concern to make it sure to ourselves, that *when we fail* at death we may be *received into everlasting habitations* in heaven. The *habitations* in heaven are *everlasting*, not *made with hands*, but *eternal*, 2 Cor. 5:1. Christ is gone before, to prepare a place for those that are his, and is there ready to *receive them*; the bosom of Abraham is ready to receive them, and, when a *guard of angels* carries them thither, a *choir of angels* is ready to receive them there. The poor saints that are gone before to glory will receive those that in this world distributed to their necessities. (5) This is a good reason why we should use what we have in the world for the honour of God and the good of our brethren, that thus we may with them *lay up in store a good bond*, a good security, a good foundation *for the time to come*, for an eternity to come.