EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE XVI. 1–12.

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? givean 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.

10 He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.

11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mam­mon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches?*

12 And if ye have not been faith­ful in that which is another man’s, who shall give you that which is your own?

THEpassage we have now read is a difficult one. There are knots in it, which perhaps will never be untied until the Lord comes again. We might reasonably expect that a book written by inspiration, as the Bible is, would con­tain things hard to be understood. The fault lies not in the book, but in our own feeble understandings. If we learn nothing else from the passage before us, let us learn humility.

Let us beware, in the first place, *that we do not draw from these verses lessons which they were never meant to teach.*

The steward, whom our Lord describes, is not set be­fore us as a pattern of morality. He is distinctly called the “unjust steward.” The Lord Jesus never meant to sanction dishonesty, and unfair dealing between man and man. This steward cheated his master, and broke the eighth commandment.—His master was struck with his cunning and forethought, when he heard of it, and “com­mended” him, as a shrewd and far-seeing man. But there is no proof that his master was *pleased* with his conduct. Above all, there is not a word to show that the man was praised by Christ. In short, in his treat­ment of his master the steward is a beacon to be avoided and not a pattern to be followed.

The caution now laid down is very necessary. Com­mercial dishonesty is unhappily very common in these latter days. Fair dealing between man and man is increasingly rare. Men do things in the way of business which will not stand the test of the Bible. In “making haste to be rich,” thousands are continually committing actions which are not strictly innocent. (Prov. xxviii. 20.) Sharpness and smartness in bargaining, and buying and selling, and pushing trade, are often covering over things that ought not to be. The generation of “the unjust steward” is still a very large one. Let us not forget this. Whenever we do to others what we would not like others to do to us, we may be sure, whatever the world may say, that we are wrong in the sight of Christ.

Let us observe, in the second place, that one principal lesson of the parable before us is *the wisdom of providing against coming evil.*

The conduct of the unjust steward, when he received notice to quit his place, was undeniably dexterous and politic. Dishonest as he was in striking off from the bills of debtors anything that was due to his master, he certainly by so doing made for himself friends. Wicked as he was, he had an eye to the future. Disgraceful as his measures were, he provided well for himself. He did not sit still in idleness, and see himself reduced to poverty without a struggle. He schemed, and planned, and contrived, and boldly carried his plans into execu­tion. And the result was that when he lost one home he secured another.

What a striking contrast between the steward’s con­duct about his earthly prospects, and the conduct of most men about their souls! In this general point of view, and in this only, the steward sets us all an example which weshould do well to follow. Like him, we should look far forward to things to come. Like him, we should provide against the day when we shall have to leave our present habitation. Like him, we should secure “a house in heaven,” which may be our home, when we put off our earthly tabernacle of the body. (2 Cor. v. 1.) Like him, we should use all means to provide for ourselves ever­lasting habitations.

The parable, in this point of view, is deeply instructive. It may well raise within us great searchings of heart. The diligence of worldly men about the things of time, should put to shame the coldness of professing Christians about the things of eternity. The zeal and pertinacity of men of business in compassing sea and land to get earthly treasures, may well reprove the slackness and indolence of believers about treasures in heaven. The words of our Lord are indeed weighty and solemn: “The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.” May these words sink into our hearts and bear fruit in our lives!

Let us notice lastly, in this passage, *the remarkable expressions which our Lord uses about little things,* in close connection with the parable of the unjust steward. We read that He said, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”

Our Lord here teaches us the great importance of strict faithfulness about “little things.” He guards us against supposing that such conduct about money as that of the unjust steward, ought ever to be considered a light and trifling thing among Christians. He would have us know that “little things” are the best test of character; and that unfaithfulness about “little things” is the symptom of a bad state of heart.—He did not mean, of course, that honesty about money can justify our souls, or put away sin. But He did mean that dishonesty about money is a sure sign of a heart not being “right in the sight of God.” The man who is not dealing honestly with the gold and silver of this world, can never be one who has true riches in heaven. “If ye have not been faithful in that which is another man’s who shall give you that which is your own?”

The doctrine laid down by our Lord in this place deserves most serious consideration in the present day. An idea appears to prevail in some men’s minds that true religion may be separated from common honesty, and that soundness about matters of doctrine may cover over swindling and cheating in matters of practice! Against this wretched idea our Lord’s words were a plain protest. Against this idea let us watch and be on our guard. Let us contend earnestly for the glorious doctrines of salvation by grace, and justification by faith. But let us never allow ourselves to suppose that true re­ligion sanctions any trifling with the second table of the law. Let us never forget for a moment, that true faith will always be known by its fruits. We may be very sure that where there is no honesty, there is no grace.

NOTES. LUKE XVI. 1–12.

1*.—*[*And he said...to his disciples.*]The parable of the unjust steward is notoriously full of difficulties. The curious diversity of the explanations of it which have been given is sufficient to prove this. Those who wish to examine some of these explanations fully will find them in “Trench on Parables.” I can only briefly refer to them.

Pearce thinks that the “rich man” means God, and that every man is His steward.

Schleiermacher thinks that the rich man represents the Romans, the steward the publicans, and the debtor the Jewish nation; and that our Lord’s object was to vindicate the publicans, and prove their kindness to their countrymen.

Anselm and others, think that the rich man means God, and the steward all true penitents; and that the steward’s lowering the bills represents the first actions of repentance and charity.

Vitringa thinks that the rich man means God, and the steward the Pharisees; that the accusation against the steward means the charges of the prophets and of Christ; and that the lower­ing of the bills means the effort made by the Pharisees to retain their position by lowering the standard of righteousness.

Jerome records an opinion ascribed to Theophilus, that the unjust steward is the Apostle Paul, who was thrust out of Judaism, and then made himself friends by preaching the Gospel.

Gaudentius, Bishop of Brescia, and Olshausen think that the unjust steward is the devil, and the creditors, whom he makes his friends, mankind.

Some have thought that the unjust steward represents Pontius Pilate or Judas Iscariot.

Many think that the parable is nothing more than an earnest exhortation to liberal almsgiving. This is the view of Irenæus, Augustine, Athanasius, Theophylact, Erasmus, Calvin, and Luther. Luther says “It is a sermon on good works, and especially against avarice: that men abuse not wealth, but therewith help poor and needy people.”

I shall not discuss these opinions. I will only say that I cannot assent to any of them. Some seem to me very fanciful. All seem to me more or less untenable or defective. My own opinion shall be summed up in a few general remarks.

(A) In interpreting this parable, we should carefully observe to whom it was addressed. It was not spoken to “the Scribes and Pharisees,” like the three last parables, but “to the disciples.” They have heard a lesson to the proud and self-righteous: now let them hear a lesson for themselves.

(B) The connection between the parable of the unjust steward and that of the prodigal son, which it immediately follows, is probably something of this kind. The disciples had heard of one who sinned by wasting money. They should now hear of one who sinned by dishonesty. They had heard of one who by carelessness squandered all his property and lost all his friends. Let them now hear of one who by cunning man­agement of money made friends, and secured himself a home. They had heard of the wickedness of riotous living. Let them now hear of another kind of wickedness, no less abominable in God’s sight: dishonesty, cheating, and fraud. They had heard the sins of Pharisees denounced and exposed. Let them now hear an exposure of the sins of impenitent and extortionate publicans. They had heard what Pharisees ought to do: to rejoice at the conversion of sinners. Let them now hear what publicans ought to do: to be faithful in money matters, and to make themselves friends by a right use of their wealth.

These, or some of them, appear to me the connecting links between the parable before us and the preceding chapter. It looks to me like a caution to our Lord’s “disciples.” They were not to suppose that all Publicans were right in the Lord’s eyes, or that the sins of Publicans were not noticed by Him as well as the sins of Pharisees.

(C) The rich man and the steward and the debtors do not appear to me to be allegorical persons. I regard them as actors in the story which our Lord is telling; but I cannot think that they were intended to represent any particular persons.

(D) The great lessons which the parable is intended to convey, appear to me to be three. The *first* is the wisdom of providing against the future. This is taught by the story of a rich man’s steward, who by a wicked contrivance secured himself a home when he lost his office. If a wicked man can do this for an earthly home, and in a wicked way, how much more ought a righteous man to provide for himself a heavenly home, in a lawful way? The *second* lesson is the importance of using money rightly. By prudent management of money, however dishonest, the unjust steward made himself friends. Let the disciples follow his example, but in an honest and righteous manner. The *third* lesson is the importance of faith­fulness in the least affairs of business, as a test of character. The dishonesty of the steward showed plainly the state of his heart. Let the disciples remember that unfaithfulness in money transactions is a sure evidence of a rotten state of soul. The cheating Publican who persevered in dishonesty, and the self-righteous Pharisee who trusted in his own good­ness, were both alike in one respect: they were both unfit for the kingdom of God.

[*A steward.*]The steward in this parable seems to have been an agent who received his master’s rents, which were paid in kind and not in money, and through whose hands all his master’s receipts passed.

[*Was accused.*]The word so translated is only found in this place in the New Testament. It is the root of the word “devil.” The word devil means “accuser.” It does not however mean in this place that the steward was falsely accused. On the contrary, his own language seems clearly to show that he felt the accusation to be just, and incapable of refutation.

2*.—*[*Thou mayest be.*]The expression so rendered means literally, “Thou wilt not be able to be steward any longer.” It is impossible that thou canst be. I cannot allow thee.

4.—[*I am resolved.*]The Greek word so translated means literally, “I have known.” I know what I will do.

[*They may receive me.*]Let it be noted that the expression “they” is here used generally and indefinitely. We are not told to whom it is applied. Precisely the same expression will be found in the ninth verse.

6.—[*An* *hundred...fifty.*]The dishonesty of the steward, we should observe, consisted in this: he struck off part of what was due to his master: he remitted debts which were law­fully due to his lord. Instead of attending to his employer’s interest, he robbed him, and made a present to his debtors. His master apparently had no means of checking this dis­honesty. If his steward told him that a debtor only owed him one half, or one fifth, of his real debt, he could apparently only take it for granted that the statement was correct.

[*Of oil.*]We should remember that olive oil was largely used in Eastern countries, and formed a large portion of the annual produce of the land.

8.*—*[*The lord commended.*]Let it be always noted in reading this parable, that the expression “lord” here, does not mean the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the “master or lord” of the unjust steward. He saw the result of the steward’s schemes in his reception at his creditors’ houses. It is not, however, quite clear that he saw that he himself had been cheated.

Compare with this expression the words of David: “Men will praise thee when thou doest well unto thyself.” (Psa. xlix. 18.)

Perhaps it is well to mention here that some think the deal­ings of the steward with his lord’s debtors were not really so dishonest and fraudulent as they appear to us in the present day. They say that this steward had a plenary power to remit or abate part of the debts due to his master, and that he simply exercised this power at a time when it very much promoted his own interests. If this explanation were true, it would certainly account for the absence of angry expressions on the part of the master. But it is an explanation which is slenderly supported.

[*The unjust steward.*]The Greek words here are remark­able. They mean literally the “steward of unrighteousness.” The expression translated the “unjust judge,” in Luke xviii. 6, is precisely similar.

[*Done wisely.*]The word translated “wisely,” might have been better rendered “prudently.” The wisdom commended in the steward is wisdom in attending to his own interests. It is not wisdom unto salvation. The Greek adjective of the adverb “wisely,” is the very word that is used in the Sep­tuagint about the serpent in Genesis iii. 1: “He was more *subtle* than all the beasts.”

[*Children of the world.*]This expression means worldly people; and the opposite expression, “children of light,” means godly people: people who follow the light, and walk in the light. See John xii. 36; Ephes. v. 8. Compare also Luke vii. 35.

[*In* *their generation wiser.*]The meaning of this expression is, “The children of this world are wiser towards their genera­tion (that is, in what relates to this world) than the children of light are towards their generation” (that is, in what relates to the kingdom of God.) It might even be rendered more closely, “The children of this world are wiser towards their own generation (that is, in their intercourse with worldly people like themselves), than the children of light are in their intercourse with their own brethren.”

9.—[*Make* *to yourselves friends, &c.*]The meaning of this saying of our Lord’s is often much misunderstood. The true sense of it I believe to be as follows: “Make to yourselves friends with your money, by a right use of it, in order that when ye die ye may be received into everlasting habitations.”

[*Friends.*]The question is often raised who these friends are, whom we are to “make” in life, and to be “received by” in death. Some have thought the Three persons of the Trinity are intended, some the angels, and some the people to whom our money has done good.

I cannot assent to any of these three views. The expression appears to me to be general and indefinite, and to be borrowed from the conduct of the unjust steward in order to make the lesson more pointed. The meaning seems to me to be no more than this: “Use your money with an eye to the future, as the steward did his. Spend your money in such a way that your expenditure shall be a friend to you, and not a witness against you in another world.”

[*The mammon of unrighteousness.*]This is a very remarkable expression. It means “riches.” But why “riches” are so called in this chapter and nowhere else in the Bible, we do not know. The word “mammon” is Syriac; or, according to Augus­tine, Punic. It means, all are agreed,—riches or gain. Some think that it was a name given to the god of riches. But this is questionable.

The expression, “riches of unrighteousness,” is very peculiar. Some think that our Lord meant “riches acquired unrighteously,” like “treasures of wickedness.” (Prov. x. 2.) Some think that He meant “riches which in the nature of things can never be got without some unrighteousness or sin.” Some think that He meant “uncertain, unstable riches.” This last, compared with the expression, “true riches,” in the 11th verse, appears most likely to be the true meaning. Pearce quotes in support of this view, John vii. 18, and 2 Thes. ii. 12. Compare 1 Tim. vi. 17.

[*When ye fail.*]This expression evidently means “when ye die.” It is very peculiar, and the Greek word is only found in this sense here. It is the root of our English word “eclipse.”

[*They may receive you.*]I cannot believe that this expression refers either to the Trinity, the angels, or the persons whom we have helped with our money. I regard it as indefinite, and signifying only “Ye may be received.” The same sort of expression is found in Matt. i. 23; v. 15; Luke xii. 20; Acts vii. 6; 1 Thess. v. 3; Rev. vi. 4.

[*Everlasting habitations.*]This expression must evidently mean heaven. The word translated “habitations,” is trans­lated “tabernacles” in every other place where it is found in the New Testament.

In leaving this verse I will mention two cautions which should always be remembered in interpreting it. On the one hand let us beware of supposing that by any use of money we can purchase to ourselves God’s favour and the pardon of our sins. Heaven is not to be bought. Any such interpretation of the verse is most unscriptural. On the other hand, let us be­ware of shutting our eyes against the doctrine which the verse unmistakeably contains. That doctrine plainly is that a right use of our money in this world, from right motives, will be for our benefit in the world to come. It will not justify us. It will not bear the severity of God’s judgment, any more than other good works. But it shall be an evidence of our grace which shall befriend our souls. There is such a thing as “lay­ing up treasure in heaven,” and “laying up a good foundation against the time to come.” (Matt. vi. 20; 1 Tim. vi. 19.)

10*.—*[*Faithful...least...much.*]This verse seems to be used in a proverbial way. It is an acknowledged truth, that a man’s con­duct in little things is a sure test of what he is likely to do in great things, and that when a man is unfaithful in small matters, we do not expect him to be faithful in important ones. The ap­plication of this principle is made in the two following verses.

11*.—*[*If therefore...not been faithful.*]The argument in this and the following verse is one and the same, though the expres­sions are different. The “unrighteous mammon” here means “money.” The “true riches” mean treasure in heaven. The doctrine is that he who is dishonest and unfaithful in the discharge of his duties on earth must not expect to have heavenly treasure, or to be saved.

12.—[*That which is another man’s.*]The argument in this verse is like that of the preceding one. Money is called “that which is another man’s,” because it passes from one to another, and is never our own long. Eternal life is called “that which is your own,” because it is the only property which endures for ever. Everything else that we have is only a loan from God, and may be withdrawn any day. Grace and peace once given are an everlasting possession. Once ours they are ours to all eternity.