

Questions to take away ... ?

Here are a few questions that may draw together some of our thinking of the last few weeks. They have no simple answers, but they still may have some very personal value for us all.

Can you think of a parable that has really helped you at some point in your life?

Has any parable grown new meaning or significance for you over the years? Why do you think that change happened?

What are the pluses and minuses of saying that 'the meaning of a parable is in the eye of the beholder'?

How well do you think Jesus' parables would communicate to a new Bible reader, who had never heard them before?

The most opaque parable?

The Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)

Downing Place URC, Lent 2023 (Week Five)



From St Mark's Lutheran Church, Fargo, ND.

(Week Five) This may be Jesus' most perplexing parable. Like all his parables, it comes from a world we do not live in. It involves some odd commercial practices. It may assume customs and concerns that were obvious then but are almost invisible to us.

For example, class and debt. This is a story about business, with landowner, steward and merchants. Yet many of Jesus' hearers might farm and trade on a much smaller scale than this: how did they regard the people depicted, and how did they face and handle their own debts? Indeed, how common was debt in that society, and how much damage did it do? (Debt might even get a line in the Lord's Prayer – but that is a question for another day.)

Or honour and shame. In the ancient world a person's identity was determined by convention and conformity, much more fully than is typical in the UK now. It mattered to behave in ways that matched one's role in society, so as not to lose face in the eyes of the wider community. Would these concerns shape the actions of a landowner in the situation described? Would they shape the actions of the merchants, in returning kindness to the steward, who had treated them favourably?

Another background point is that Israel's law prohibited interest (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19-20). Did the steward's actions amount to remitting interest on the merchants' bills, thus obeying (and implicitly causing the master to obey) this law? Did that put the master in a bind – accept the steward's action, devious as it was, or appear to renege on a legal commitment?

With all that to clarify (or cloud) the story, let's look at it ...

This parable has a few verses of postscript, which reflect on its meaning and message. Indeed it is difficult to work out where the parable stops and the postscripts start.

'The lord commended the steward' (v.8). NRSV reads 'his master'? But who else could 'the lord' refer to? Is NRSV right?

Where do you think the parable stops and the postscripts start?

There are parables on either side of this one that involve money:
does that context help us to understand this parable?

What is 'unjust' about the steward:
the way he got into a mess, or the way he got out of it?

Why praise a person for something that doesn't seem honest?

What **do you think** Jesus wanted people to get from this story:

- a message about repentance?
- a message about interest, debt and dependence?
- a message about urgent action?
- a message about using money for the kingdom?

Does this story **say anything to us** about using money for God,

- or about coping with compromise,
- or about trying not to be corrupt
- or something else ... ?