



Conducted by
James Gardiner

In commending the conduct of the unjust steward in Luke 16 in the parable, was Jesus not condoning "sharp practice," especially in business?

THIS parable tells, of course, of a rich man who had a steward, or manager, over his business interests, who had squandered and perhaps embezzled much of his master's goods. Seeing the day of reckoning fast approaching and knowing he would be exposed and dismissed the steward decided to make arrangements for his future welfare. Too proud he was to beg and too disinclined he was to dig, so he decided to try to avoid having to do either. He contacted all his master's debtors, and using the remaining authority vested in him as steward, discounted

and rebated drastically the settling of the debts owed by those debtors, in the sure hope that when he was eventually dismissed by his master he would find succour in the new friends he had made, i.e. the grateful debtors of his late master. Verse 8: "And the lord commended the unjust steward because he had done wisely:"

It is essential first of all to notice that it was the lord and master of the steward in the parable who commended him—not Jesus. So felicitous and clever was the device of the steward, that the master, although a considerable loser, when he learned of what had been transacted, could not withhold an expression of admiration, of a kind. The steward could not be taken to law, because what he had done, although immoral, was not criminal—he had acted in his capacity as steward. The master had been swindled and was certainly not commending the dishonest steward on this account, but apparently could not but be impressed by the servant's worldly wisdom and forethought. In much the same way, I suppose we all may at some time or other have felt some admiration for the cold skill and daring employed by fettered prisoners escaping from some impregnable prison but, of course, the admiration ends there. A year or two ago, an old man in Edinburgh was sent to prison for making and passing counterfeit two-shilling pieces. He had been doing this successfully for years, so completely authentic in appearance were the coins he made. Indeed while he was in prison he was visited by counterfeiters from all over the world, each trying to get him to divulge to them the secrets of his obvious skill and some even suggesting partnership arrangements. At the trial the judge also marvelled when he saw the amazing similarity of the counterfeit coins to reality but, while admiring the skill he nevertheless condemned the practice and put the old man behind prison bars.

Dishonest business transactions regrettably occur many times every day and Jesus, by the parable, is certainly not commending dishonest dealings provided they are cleverly carried through, nor is he encouraging "sharp practice" in any shape or form. The parable, I think, simply teaches that sagacity, effort, diligence and forethought in making provision for the future is something to be inculcated by the disciple of Christ—a zeal for the life to come so that when earthly values fail and death levels all earthly distinctions, he may be received into eternal habitations.

Verse 8: ". . . for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." The unjust steward showed more imagination and interest in his material future than many of the children of light show in their heavenly future. It is very often true that the business world at large manages its worldly affairs far more efficiently and wisely than the Lord's church manages hers. (Perhaps this is why some would have the church run on the same lines as a business enterprise). It is also very often true that "the children of light" give to their earthly master a greater share of their native ability and natural wisdom than they give to their heavenly master. The "child of light" often would be ashamed to give his earthly master the kind of performance he gives to his Saviour, and indeed would be sacked by his employer if he tried to do so. Of a truth, "the children of this world, are in their generation, wiser than the children of light."

Verse 9 probably contains the key to the whole point of the parable, i.e. "make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." As stewards in God's vineyard so use our position and authority, and so deploy our talents and resources that, when it is time to leave the vineyard, we shall have friends outside (God and Christ) waiting to receive us. The unjust steward's methods were uncommendable but his wisdom in looking out for a new home when he was about to lose his present one was to be admired, and so the point is taught that it is prudent foresight to use earthly resources (unrighteous mammon) to provide for a time when these resources will fail us. Use our money wisely and by good deeds make to ourselves friends (especially Jesus) who shall take us into heavenly habitations when death comes and we must leave earthly possessions and opportunities behind. I think the Revised Version makes this difficult verse more clear.

Luke sums it up perhaps in 12:33: "Sell that ye have and give alms; provide yourselves bags [purses] which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupt."

(This feature depends on questions being sent to it: please send all questions to James R. Gardiner, 88 Davidson Terrace, Haddington, East Lothian, Scotland.)