

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson No. 29

Parable of the Unjust Steward

The Scripture Lesson

Luke 16:1-14

In our lesson for this week we learn about the parable of the unjust steward. Do you know what a steward was? He was a very important person in the house of a rich man. A rich man often had a big business, and he needed someone to run that business for him. That was the steward's job. He was what we would probably call a *manager* of his master's business. The steward did not, of course, *own* any of the property himself. It all belonged to his master, and it was the steward's job to run the business for the benefit of the owner, his master.

In Jesus' parable there was a steward who did not always do that. He sometimes did things that were not good for his *master*, but good only for *himself*. The master was angry when he found out about that, and he told the steward that he must turn in all his record books, for he could no longer be steward.

The steward then became quite worried. What would he do for a living when his job was taken from him? He was not strong enough to work in the fields. He was too proud to beg. What could he do? Then suddenly he had an idea. He still had all the record books. He would, in the little while

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that he had left, use his power as steward to make friends with those who owed money to his master.

He quickly called in all of his master's debtors. He said to one, "How much do you owe my master?" The man answered, "A hundred measures of oil." Then the steward said, "We'll settle for only fifty." The debtor was very happy about that, of course, for it saved him a lot of money. The steward did the same thing with *all* his master's debtors, and soon he had many friends who would help him when he lost his job.

The master, when he found out about all this, was unhappy about what the steward had done. But he had to admit that the steward was pretty smart in taking care of himself that way.

That is true. The steward was pretty smart. He was clever enough to work things out for his own advantage. The people of the world are like that. They want the riches of this world, and they will work hard, and do everything possible, in order to get as much as they can.

And Jesus said that *we* ought to be more like that. He said, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." What did He mean by that, do you suppose? He did not mean that we should try to become rich. What He meant is this, that we should try as hard to get

what *we* are after as the wicked do to get what *they* are after. *They* are after earthly pleasures and treasures; and they work as hard as they can to get them. *We* seek heavenly treasures; and sometimes we forget about that and start seeking earthly pleasures instead. We ought never to do that. Jesus said that we cannot serve both God and mammon; that is, we cannot serve God with all our hearts (as we must), and then seek earthly treasures too. It is one or the other.

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Still another parable that Jesus told at that time was the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this story there was a man who had a lot of money. He had so much money that he could always wear the most expensive clothes, and he could have a banquet every day for himself and his friends.

Then there was another man in this story. His name was Lazarus. He had no money at all. And besides, he was covered with painful sores. Nobody liked him. Those who should have taken care of him brought him to the gate of the rich man's house, and just left him there to beg. The rich man passed that gate every day. But do you know that he *never* gave anything to poor Lazarus? He did not want to waste his money on beggars. So Lazarus had to pick up the scraps that were thrown out after the dinners at the rich man's house. The only friends he had were the dogs which, Jesus said, licked his sores.

One day when some people passed by the gate, they noticed that the beggar was dead. Servants were ordered to take his body away quickly and bury it. And the rich man was glad finally to be rid of that miserable beggar.

But then sometime later the rich man also became sick and died. When *he* died, there were hundreds of people who came to mourn for him. And a huge monument was probably put up at the place of his grave.

That is what the world thought of those two men. Lazarus was a nobody; the rich man was famous throughout the city. But how did *God*

look at them? The beggar was one of Christ's sheep. He put his trust in God. He was precious in God's sight, and when he died his soul was carried by angels to heavenly glory. But when the rich man died, he found himself in the torments of hell. And when he looked up, he saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus was there at his side.

How can that be? Was not the rich man a son of Abraham? Yes, he was of the line of Abraham. But Abraham is the father of *believers* — like Lazarus. The rich man had shown by his selfish use of the possessions God had given him, that he was not a true son of Abraham.

The rich man called out, "Father Abraham, send Lazarus that he might dip his finger in water and put just a drop on my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame." But Abraham answered that he did not deserve even that little bit, for in his lifetime he had had much riches, and he had never showed any mercy to God's poor.

Well, then, said the rich man, send Lazarus to my brothers, to warn them, so that they do not come to this awful place. Wasn't *that* request worthy of praise? No. What the rich man meant was that God is not really *fair*. God should have given a better warning, so that he could have known that he must repent — before it was too late.

But, you see, God *does* warn the wicked; and He *does* call sinners to repentance. He does that through His Word and by His Spirit. In answer to the rich man, therefore, Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." That is right. Nothing more is needed. Through His Word alone, God saves every one of His elect.

Memory Work

Group A

Luke 16:13 "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

Group B

Luke 16:29 "Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. A steward is one who is responsible for putting to good use the things which belong to someone else.
- ___ 2. Jesus told the parable of the unjust steward to show how people of God must use the earthly possessions which God has given to them.
- ___ 3. When the steward in Jesus' parable was informed that he would lose his job, he quickly called all his master's debtors, and charged them more than they really owed, so that he would have some money when his master would stop paying him for being steward.
- ___ 4. When the master learned what the steward had done, he praised the man for having acted wisely.
- ___ 5. Jesus' point was that people of God should work as hard at seeking heavenly things, as people of the world do at seeking their earthly things.
- ___ 6. When Jesus said that we cannot serve God and mammon, He meant that we should have nothing to do with earthly things.
- ___ 7. The Pharisees were not offended at Jesus' teaching about mammon, because they did not know that Jesus was condemning them for being covetous.
- ___ 8. To show the Pharisees how they were in fact unfaithful stewards, Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.
- ___ 9. Lazarus was a poor, sick beggar who was laid at the very gate of the rich man.
- ___ 10. Though the rich man had for himself everything that his heart desired, he gave to Lazarus only a little bit of food and a few pennies a day.
- ___ 11. When Lazarus died he did not have to be buried, because he was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.
- ___ 12. When the rich man died he was buried in great honor.

___ 13. In this parable of Jesus we learn that it is possible for those who are in hell to see those who are in heaven.

___ 14. The rich man addressed Abraham as "father" to remind Abraham that by his sonship he was entitled to favors.

___ 15. Since the rich man asked for only a drop of water to cool his tongue, Abraham was willing to oblige.

___ 16. The rich man then asked that Lazarus be sent to warn his five brethren to repent before it was too late.

___ 17. It was impossible for Lazarus to return to earth from heaven; but the rich man's idea was good, because a warning from a dead man would surely cause men to turn from their evil ways.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. What great responsibility did a steward have in Jesus' day? Did a steward have the right to make his own decisions, or was he required merely to carry out the instructions of his master?
2. How did it happen that the steward in Jesus' parable lost his job?
3. When the man was informed that he could no longer be steward, he was worried about how he could then make a living. What plan did he think of, to make sure that he would have friends to take him in when he would be put out of his master's house?
4. In dealing thus with his master's debtors, was the steward doing *right*? Why, then, did his master *praise* him when he found out what the steward had done?
5. There is a way in which the people of the world, like the unjust steward, can be an *example* to the people of God. Can you explain what that is?

6. How are we, too, stewards in this life? How, then, must we use the things which we possess?

7. Jesus warned against trying to serve both God and mammon. Do you know what He meant by that?

8. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, how did the rich man live? If he had so much money, why didn't he help poor Lazarus?

9. Both Lazarus and the rich man died. How were their *burials* different? How were their eternal rewards different?

10. The rich man in hell called Abraham "father." How had he shown on earth that he was not a *true* child of Abraham?

11. Because of the way he had treated Lazarus, the rich man did not deserve even a drop of water from Lazarus. But besides that, according to Abraham it was *impossible* to grant the first request. Why was that?

12. What was the man's second request? Do you see how that was really charging God with being unfair? Why did his brothers not at all need a message from Lazarus?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. After telling the story of the prodigal son, Jesus evidently went right on teaching. But, whereas the previous parables were directed especially at the scribes and Pharisees, He now turns to His _____ (that is, the broader gathering of followers, not just the twelve) and speaks to them a parable concerning a certain _____ man which had a _____. The steward was manager of his master's business. And this particular steward was caught in wrong-doing. Someone accused him before his master that he had _____ his goods. The master therefore demanded of him that he give an _____ of his stewardship (that is, turn in all the records in good order), for he could no longer be _____ (Luke 16:1, 2).

2. Faced with the loss of his job, the man began immediately to plan for his future. "What shall I do?" he asked himself. "For my lord taketh away from me the _____. I cannot _____; to _____ I am ashamed." He was however a shrewd businessman and he quickly devised a plan according to which, while he still had the accounts and still had authority to act in his master's name, he would assure that, when he was out of a job, there would be people who would feel obliged to help him. Accordingly, he called every one of his lord's _____ to

him in order to settle their accounts. He asked each one, "How much _____ thou unto my lord?" When the first replied, "An _____ measures of oil," the steward said, "Take thy bill, and sit down _____, and write _____" (Luke 16:5, 6). Since a hundred measures of oil is thought to be equal to eight or nine hundred gallons, it is obvious that the steward was dealing with large sums of money, and therefore with very generous discounts. After dealing thus with all his master's debtors, he had surely gained for himself some friends that day.

3. After the steward turned in the books, the master discovered what had happened. He must have been angry, for the steward's gain, by those transactions, was at his master's expense. Nevertheless, the master recognized how clever his steward had been and he _____ the _____ steward because he had done _____ (Luke 16:8).

4. By way of explanation, Jesus added this: "The children of this _____ are in their generation _____ than the children of _____." The worldly wisdom of which Jesus spoke was the kind of wisdom shown by the unjust steward. The steward knew exactly what he wanted, and he stopped at nothing to get it. And what Jesus is saying here is that *we* ought to be more like that steward. Our goal is heav-

only. Our goal is eternal life. But we do not always pursue *that* goal with the same zeal with which a man of the world pursues *his* goal. The world, in that respect, puts us to *shame*. The world is never distracted by our goals. But we sometimes are distracted by theirs — by “mammon.” And, Jesus warns, “Ye cannot serve _____ and _____.” We must in this life make *use* of mammon (earthly riches, material things). In fact, Jesus says that we are to make _____ of the mammon of unrighteousness. We must, in other words, turn mammon to our advantage — that is, to our *spiritual* advantage. Our use of mammon must not be for the self-serving purposes of the unjust steward, but rather in the service of God and the causes of His kingdom, as *faithful* stewards. For, says Christ, “if ye have not been _____ in the unrighteous _____, who will commit to your trust the _____ riches?” By faithful stewardship we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Luke 16:8-13).

5. In Jesus’ audience at this time were Pharisees, who were _____ — that is, they were guilty of using the things of this world not as faithful but as unfaithful, unjust stewards. They therefore felt the sting of Jesus’ parable and, when they heard these things, they _____ Him (Luke 16:14).

6. It was in response to this derision of the Pharisees, apparently, that Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus — to prove their unfaithful stewardship, as that was shown especially in their treatment of the poor whom God had placed at their doors. There was, Jesus said, a certain rich man who was clothed in _____ and fine _____, and who fared _____ every day. No expense did he spare — for himself. But there was a certain _____ named Lazarus, who was full of _____, and who, because he received no other help, desired only to be fed with the _____ which fell from the rich man’s table. His only friends were the dogs which came and _____ his ulcerous sores, and prob-

ably with him dug through the garbage for the scraps which were thrown out after the daily banquets (Luke 16:19-21).

7. And it came to pass, Jesus continued, that the beggar died. The noteworthy thing about his death is that, at it, he was carried by the _____ into _____ bosom. Later, the rich man died also. And the noteworthy thing about his death is that he was _____. What a burial it must have been! A long line of mourners, a beautiful coffin, a moving eulogy, a large monument. And in _____ he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham _____ off, and _____ in his bosom (Luke 16:22, 23). The earlier words of Jesus must still have been ringing in the ears of His hearers: “If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”

8. In the parable the rich man not only sees heaven (“Abraham’s bosom”) but also speaks to Abraham. He addresses him, in fact, as _____ Abraham, in an appeal to that natural descent of which he had long boasted, and which he believed would qualify him for heaven, if he knew and kept the laws of Moses. “Father Abraham,” he said, “have _____ on me and send _____, that he may dip the tip of his finger in _____, and cool my _____; for I am _____ in this flame.” Just a little relief. That is all he asks. But even that is denied. Notice that Abraham calls him _____ — an acknowledgment of that natural descent, the advantages of which were that he had the “oracles of God,” and knew therefore what was required of a man in relation to his neighbors. Then Abraham reminded him that, since he had in his lifetime set his heart on an abundance of earthly goods, and had shown only scorn to the needy neighbor, he was receiving now the just reward of his deeds. Besides, said Abraham, There is between us a great _____ fixed, so that they who would _____ from hence to you _____ ... (Luke 16:24-26).

9. "I pray thee therefore, father," said the rich man, "that thou wouldest send him to my _____ house. For I have five _____; that he may _____ unto them, lest they also come into this place of _____." The rich man was implying, of course, that his brethren were not being sufficiently warned ... and that he himself had not been sufficiently warned. Not so, says Abraham. "They have _____ and the _____; let them _____ them" (Luke 16:27-29).

10. "Nay, father Abraham," said the rich man, "but if one went unto them from the _____, they will _____." Thus did the rich man make bold to suggest that he knew of a *better way* to bring men to repentance than did God, who ordained that it be by the Word proclaimed. That Word, applied by the Spirit to the hearts of the elect, is the power of God to salvation. Nothing more is needed. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets," said Abraham, "neither will they be _____, though one rose from the _____" (Luke 16:30, 31).

QUESTIONS FOR OLDER READERS TO THINK ABOUT

1. From what you know of the work of a steward, can you think of any reason why the master in Jesus' parable did not even consider giving a second chance to the steward who was guilty of misconduct?
2. In explaining the parable of the unjust steward, Jesus declared that the people of the world are, in a certain sense, wiser than the people of God. He was talking, as you know, about the comparative zeal with which they pursue their goals in life. If the goal of the child of God is infinitely, incomparably more glorious, how can you account for the fact that the world is never distracted by our goals, but we are by theirs?
3. Notice that Jesus did not say that we *ought not* to serve God and mammon, but that we *cannot* serve God and mammon. Can you explain why the service of both is an impossibility? Why, if it is impossible anyway, does Jesus warn so urgently against it?
4. The warning concerning serving mammon evi-

dently came just after the parable of the unjust steward, and just before the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Do you see the connection?

5. We read in Luke 16:14 that the Pharisees, when they heard Jesus' instruction concerning stewardship and use of mammon, derided Him for it. What did they find so distasteful about that instruction? Do you see how the parable of the rich man and Lazarus was an answer to *them*?

6. The cold indifference of the rich man to the plight of poor Lazarus seems hard to imagine. Yet, Jesus was talking about conditions which actually existed in the Israel of His day. Rich Jews actually did ignore poor beggars. What reasons, do you suppose, would they give for doing so? Is their attitude entirely foreign to us?

7. How does this parable demonstrate the truth of Proverbs 13:7?

8. Why did Jesus use figurative language to describe the hereafter, instead of telling us what it really is?

9. The rich man in hell addressed Abraham as "father" probably because he saw in it some possible advantage for himself. Why, do you suppose, did Jesus have Abraham respond by calling the rich man "son"?

10. The rich man in hell argued that an eye-witness description of the horrors of hell would be more effective than the mere preaching of the gospel as a means to bring his brothers to repentance. Can you explain why that is in fact *not* true?

THINGS TO DO

1. The Jews of Jesus' day were sometimes guilty of not providing for the poor. Look up Matthew 6:1-4 to find out why Jesus also rebuked some of the Pharisees who *did* give for the poor.
2. Of all of Jesus' parables, only in this one does He give a name for one of the characters: Lazarus. See if you can find the meaning of that name. Can you tell why Jesus would have given him that name?
3. Use a Bible concordance to find other references in Scripture to hell as being a place of unquenchable fire. How, do you think, are we to understand that?