

THE PARABLE OF

The Unjust Steward

IN THE LIGHT OF ITS CONTEXTS

Untangling Jesus' most puzzling story

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Published by DeeperStudy.com

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The Unjust Steward in the Light of Its Contexts

by Steve Singleton



Someone once compared interpreting the parables of Jesus to filling up a barrel. You can load it up with boulders and say the barrel is full. Then you can drop rocks into the barrel; they will fall in between the boulders and fill the barrel a second time. And even after a load of sand has sifted down around the boulders and the rocks and filled the barrel a third time, you could still

pour several gallons of water and fill it once again. Each time the barrel was full, yet there was still room for another filling.

The 65 or 70¹ sayings of Jesus we call His parables are like that; they are incredibly elastic, despite their simple plots and elementary vocabulary. Anyone who hears them for the first time will probably say, "Wait a minute! There's more to this story than I thought at first." They were created to make us ponder. That's why some of them begin or end with a question.

Because they reach down into our depths so effectively, the parables have power—power to convince, power to convict, power even to convert. And because of these two elements, their elasticity and their power, interpreting the parables can be

dangerous business. We can easily go astray in ferreting out their meanings, supposing we know what Jesus meant when we don't. Even when we understand and apply the parables properly, we should hold our breath, because we have dared to lay our hands on instruments God uses for delicate spiritual heart surgery.

Am I scaring you off? You might react to all of this, "Why not leave well enough alone?" We can't do that. God wants us to blow the dust off of these parables, to take them apart and reassemble them, and then to cock and aim them. Certainly they can be misfired, but if we handle them carefully we can shoot them well.

What guides our understanding of the parables? Two things do: hermeneutics and context.

Hermeneutics is the science and art of proper interpretation. It is the set of assumptions we bring to a passage and the principles we will follow as we examine it. Below are some of the interpretation principles we must apply to the study of the parables:



PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE PARABLES

1. The purpose of a parable is to use a story or a description of a customary action to symbolize a spiritual truth.
2. Although some parables have a single point of comparison, the possibility exists that in addition to an overall message, it may have several details intended to symbolize discrete elements which combine to support that overall message. In other words, many of the parables of Jesus are, in fact, allegories, or at least have allegorical features to them.²
3. The context should supply clues as to the parable's intended audience, original application, and whether its details have allegorical features.
4. If the parable has allegorical features to it, members of its original audience often have their counterparts in the various characters or objects within the parable.

5. Only after we have determined the parable's meaning to its original audience can we go on to give it a modern application, and we must be able to demonstrate compatibility between the two interpretations.

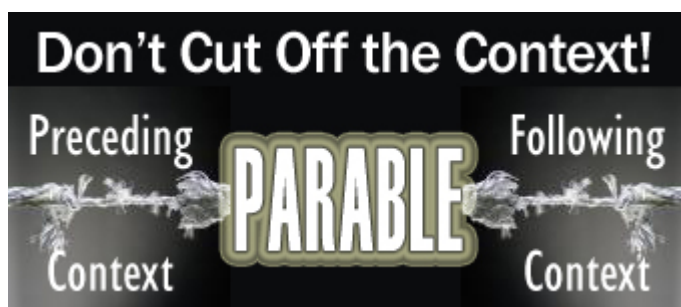
These hermeneutical principles will guide our study of the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16: 1–8), by far the most difficult of Jesus' parables. As early as 1901, Alfred Plummer observed:

The difficulty of this parable is well known, and the variety of interpretations is very great. A catalogue of even the chief suggestions would serve no useful purpose: it is sufficient to state that the steward has been supposed to mean the Jewish hierarchy, the tax collectors, Pilate, Judas, Satan, penitents, S. Paul, Christ.... The literature on the subject is voluminous and unrewarding.³

Nearly a century of scholarly work has done little to change such a negative verdict. The literature has grown considerably since Plummer's day, adding more and more divergent interpretations.⁴

The parable's contexts are fundamental to interpreting it. By "contexts," I refer to the immediate context in Luke, the larger context of the entire Gospel According to Luke, the remote context of the entire teachings of Jesus, and the cultural context of first-century Palestine.

Taking passages out of context is a common blunder in biblical study, but it is almost ubiquitous when it comes to the parables. You



see, the liberals don't believe that the setting of the parables is genuine; they assume that the early church or at least the last editor of the gospel was either ignorant of or ignored what

actually happened and so arranged all of the material for theological reasons.⁵ Conservatives, on the other hand, have isolated the parables from their contexts in their praiseworthy efforts to preach them and posterize them and reprint them.⁶

When we get together to discuss the parables, the context, even the immediate context, is routinely shut outside. It wants to speak, to tell us what it knows, but we're not listening. I am determined to open the door and invite Mr. Context in to take part in the discussion, and perhaps even to lead it for a time.

The immediate context is determined by identifying those places in the text in which a definite change of time, place, audience, or subject occurs. These four categories, which serve as context markers, I have listed in priority, because sometimes Jesus seems to change the subject while speaking to the same people at the same place and time.⁷ He also may speak to a number of different factions within the same crowd, one after the other, while retaining a unifying thread of thought.⁸ Even a change of place might occur without a break in the context.⁹

A search for such context markers before and after the parable of the Unjust Steward reveals geographical context markers at Luke 14:25 and 17:11. These constitute the beginning and ending parameters of the immediate context. All of the material in between Luke 14:25 and 17:11 forms one discourse on the theme of forgiveness and judgment.

Within this discourse are five audience shifts: Luke 14:25 (the crowds), 15:1 (the Pharisees), 16:1 (the disciples), 16:14 (the Pharisees), 17:1 (the disciples). Changes in subject further break down the discourse into these components:

DISCOURSE ON FORGIVENESS

- I. To the Crowds: A Call to Discipleship (14:25–35)
 - A. Who is unworthy to follow (14:25–27)
 - B. Building a tower (14:28–30)
 - C. Going to war (14:31–33)
 - D. What happens to worthless salt (14:34–35)
- II. To the Pharisees: Rejoice that Sinners Come to Repentance (chapter 15)
 - A. Occasion: Muttering of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (15:1–2)

- B. Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3–7)
 - C. Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8–10)
 - D. Parable of the Prodigal Son (and his angry older brother) (15:11–32)
- III. To the Disciples: Warning of Judgment (16:1–13)
- A. Parable of the Unjust Steward (16:1–8)
 - B. Multiple Applications of the Parable (16:9–13)
- IV. To the Pharisees: Warning of Judgment (16:14–31)
- A. Denunciation of their poor stewardship (16:14–18)
 - B. Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31)
- V. To the Disciples: Exhortation to Forgiveness (17:1–10)
- A. Warning against causing others to sin (17:1–2)
 - B. Willingness to forgive as much as seven offenses in a day (17:3–4)
 - C. Exhortation to increase in faith (17:5–6)
 - D. Parable of the Unworthy Servant (17:7–10)

The parable of the Unjust Steward is right in the middle of this long flow of context, and what precedes it and proceeds from it has a dramatic effect on its interpretation. Let's start at the beginning of this discourse.

Jesus is unwilling for the crowds to follow him as "groupies," people interested only in getting near a celebrity, or merely wanting to be amazed by some miracle. He is looking for life-long, heart-committed disciples, and in Luke 14:26–35 He calls on people to submit to His lordship by first counting the cost and then yielding to His demands for absolute, total surrender.

In the opening verse of chapter 15,¹⁰ the tax collectors and "sinners" gather around Jesus, apparently willing to accept those terms and become committed disciples. The Pharisees and law-teachers, however, cannot imagine that tax collectors and "sinners"¹¹ would actually repent, and they criticize Jesus for condoning their sinful life-style by receiving them.

The rest of the discourse revolves around this situation, answering these questions: