

Young People's Forum (III.23)

Dear Young People,

We return in this forum article to the subject of the believer's calling with respect to his earthly possessions, especially money. It is an important matter because 1) Scripture talks a lot about this subject; and 2) it occupies such a large place in our lives.

Part of Scripture's instruction concerning our use of earthly possessions is wrapped up in the idea of stewardship. If I may compare this creation with God's house, we are called to be stewards in God's house. Scripture talks about that again and again.

The most important instruction on this matter is in the parable of the wicked steward in Luke 16:1-12. It would take too much room to quote it here, so I urge you to read this passage in your Bibles. And, we cannot go into detail on the passage, but I would like to have you read my explanation of the parable in *Mysteries of the Kingdom*, a book of explanation of the parables.

The steward in this parable was a man who was extremely important in his master's house. He had a lot to say about that was done in his master's business. He could even lower or cancel debts of people who owed his master money, and he could do this without consulting his master (5-7).

There are other passages of Scripture that speak of the great authority stewards had in their masters' houses. Joseph was steward in the house of Potiphar when his brothers sold him into Egypt. In Genesis 39:6, Joseph's stewardship is defined: "And he (Potiphar) left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat." And when Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph to commit fornication with her, he said to her, "Behold, my master wotteth (knoweth) not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; there is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou are his wife" (6, 7).

Apparently, Eiliezer was also steward over Abraham's possessions (Genesis 15:2). And if he was the same one who is mentioned in Genesis 24:2, then Eliezer was not only over all Abraham's possessions, but also was entrusted with the important responsibility of finding a wife for Isaac.

We are stewards over what God gives us.

What is implied in being a steward?

First of all, all the creation and everything in it belongs to God. He created it; he upholds it by the word of his power; he rules sovereignly over it.

Secondly, God gives to each person a part of his creation: a house, a business, a car, clothing, bread, health – whatever anyone possesses, it is given by God.

Thirdly, because we are stewards, what God gives us remains God's and is never ours. A steward owned nothing. Everything over which he was placed was his master's possession; nothing was his. This is true of our stewardship. We may never call anything our own. This is evident to us by the very fact that God can take away from us anything at all that he has given – even our children.

Fourth, a steward was always a slave. He was owned by his master in body and soul and could never claim anything as his own. We are slaves of Christ who, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, in Lord's Day 1, "are not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

Fifth, because we have nothing that is ours, but everything belongs to God, a steward must use what he has for his master's good. This was the work of a steward; this is our calling as stewards. Just as soon as we say of anything we own, I may do with this as I want, we sin, for we claim that for ourselves. Sometimes, for example, we pay our bills, give our money to the church that is the budgeted amount, pay our Christian School tuition, put sufficient money in the Benevolent Fund to take care of the poor, and then have money left. Then we say, This is mine. I can buy with this what I want. When we do this we sin, for it is not ours to do with as we wish: it is God's and he has the right to demand of us that we use it as a faithful steward.

The wicked steward in the parable did something that disqualified him for the stewardship. The Bible doesn't tell us what it was, but we do not have to know. He was sacked. But he had a little time to get his master's affairs in order before he turned over his responsibilities to a new steward. He used this time to prepare for the future when he would be left without a job. He didn't really want to work, so he used the position of his stewardship to make friends who would be indebted to him; and he did this by excusing some of their debt.

Jesus applies the parable in such a way that he explains to us, in a general way (we can be more specific presently) how we must use the wicked steward as an example.

Notice that Jesus calls earthly things (over which the steward was placed, and which are given to us "the mammon of unrighteousness.") That is a striking term and reminds us that anything used for wicked purposes is under God's curse – something we noticed in an earlier article.

Notice too that the steward is commended by his master for his shrewdness. That shrewdness is meant to be an example to us. We are not to imitate the wicked steward in his sin, but we are to imitate his shrewdness. What was that shrewdness? He had the good sense to use his position of steward to take care of his future.

Jesus says that this is generally characteristic of wicked men. "The children of this world are wiser in their generations than the children of light!" They prepare for their future. They put away in savings account money they can use when they retire. They invest their money in ways that will give them returns and be hedges against inflation. They are very clever about this and are as shrewd as the wicked steward.

But God's people do not do these things. And here comes the whole point of the parable. They are not to imitate the wicked by putting away money in one way or nothing so that they have a good investment program; they are to prepare for their future **in heaven**. That is their future: ". . . when ye fail (that is, when ye die) they may receive you into everlasting habitations." These everlasting habitations are, of course, heaven and our home there. The wicked prepare for their future here in the world; we prepare for our future in heaven.

The wicked are very skillful in preparing for their earthly future; we are careless and unconcerned about our future in heaven, too preoccupied with using the things of this world for our own pleasure. The wicked are wiser in a sinful way than we are in a godly way.

The key is that we “make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.” That is, as Jesus explains further, that we may be faithful over the unrighteous mammon. Jesus means that we are to use our “unrighteous mammon” to prepare for our future in heaven.

Does this mean we may not having savings accounts? No, of course not. But we are to use these accounts (and everything we have) to prepare ourselves for the future – in heaven.

That’s what stewardship is all about! Jesus makes a scathing denunciation of our use of this world’s goods as we seek our own pleasure. He rubs our spiritual nerve endings so that it hurts – deep down, where we live. Are we faithful stewards in his house? Or are we more like the wicked steward who used his opportunities to prepare for a future – on this earth?

Our space is up: we will talk a bit more about this in a later article.

In Christ’s service,

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