

LUKE 16

Luke 16:1–12. Parable of the Unjust Steward

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 753–755.

Even with all its intricate details, the Savior’s parable of the unjust steward fits snugly together, illustrating His skill in its retelling. Luke’s deft placement of Jesus’s story about the steward continues and enhances a theme of the prior chapter—proper attitudes toward wealth. In Jesus’s hands, the one who possesses the property, the lord, quickly recedes into the background whereas the steward, who manages the property, emerges into the full light of day, where his actions come under tight scrutiny. These actions, thorough and self-serving in character, become the focal point for Jesus’s wide-ranging set of comments, both positive and negative, that follow.

Many important threads, some bright and thick, others dim and thin, weave their way through this parable and Jesus’s following comments. The most radiant thread running through the story itself has to do with the commendation of the steward: his lord calls him clever, pointedly acknowledging his skill when dealing with his fast-deteriorating situation. For, after bungling his master’s estate, the steward acts decisively and with dispatch, earning his lord’s grudging praise for creating a future for himself that will keep him upright in a material sense, thus allowing him to continue to enjoy the kind of lifestyle to which he has become accustomed. The rub, of course, comes because Jesus’s words, uttered through the lord, seem to condone the steward’s actions—all of them. But we must hold in mind that the lord does not call the steward good, but wise or clever. The distinction is significant because it allows a hearer to grasp that the steward’s efforts to recover from his dismissal—focused and intensely self-preserving—are worth emulating by Jesus’s disciples when it comes to eternal matters. For, as Jesus’s comments illustrate,

faithfulness when dealing with that which belongs to another adds threads to an eternal tapestry, and it is this principle that finally and ultimately judges the steward.

A second noticeable thread weaves a pattern through the checkered issue of wealth. In a change of direction, Jesus's words are strongly positive. Elsewhere, as we can see, He downplays wealth and property and elevates the poor (Luke 6:20–21, 24–25; 9:25). Here He softens His comments on wealth and instead focuses on the notion that the methods of acquiring it bring out the worst in people, leading Him to highlight “the mammon of unrighteousness” and “unrighteous mammon” (16:9, 11). Besides questioning people's unscrupulous acquisition of this world's goods, Jesus's words raise questions about how people use their goods (16:11). Elsewhere, He darkens the rich because they spend their goods on themselves, leading Him to say that such persons “have received [their] consolation” and have “wasted [their] substance” (6:24; 15:13). But in our passage Jesus brightens the prospect that “he that is faithful” will have committed to his “trust the true riches” (16:10–11). In concert with this idea, in an expansion of Luke 18:27, the Joseph Smith Translation quotes Jesus as saying, “It is impossible for them who trust in riches, to enter into the kingdom of God; but he who forsaketh the things which are of this world, it is possible with God, that he should enter in.”¹

Jesus interlaces this proper, even celestial management of personal wealth with the principle of properly managing the wealth of others (Luke 16:12). Perhaps surprisingly, both activities carry eternal consequences. But not surprisingly, they do so in the world of donated funds, for commentators see Jesus's words tying to the common practice of giving alms. Beyond this, the principle interweaves more than the simple acts of giving and receiving alms; it meshes with the proper use of donated funds within the church that Jesus is establishing. Those who properly manage these sacred monies and properties will eventually receive “that which is [their] own” as a heavenly gift (16:12). In a word, our eventual acquisition of heavenly property or possessions depends at least in part on our management of what belongs to God, whether our own material resources (which really belong to Him) or those donated by others for sacred purposes.

One question to settle is whether Jesus's comments on the story really derive from Him or whether they represent later additions to His words. A large number of scholars judge that the comments do not come from Jesus. Much of this judgment rests on a perception that some of the language in His comments is not at home in Jesus's world and therefore is not available to Him. But studies have shown that expressions such as “the children of this world” and “the children of light” (16:8) are fully at home in ancient Palestine, as the Dead Sea Scrolls illustrate.

Luke 16:13–18. Forbidden Paths

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 761–763.

The Savior thunders, “No servant can serve two masters,” and, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). Enshrined within these two brawny, negative statements stands the strong, beating heart of the chapter. For these driving declarations plainly point backward to the compromising actions of the unjust steward and to the lessons that Jesus draws from this man’s dishonesty. They also pull His disciples’ minds forward to His sayings about the impossibility or severe difficulty of pursuing certain courses of action without risking divine displeasure, including covetousness, devaluing the law, and seeking divorce (16:14–18). Moreover, at the center of Jesus’s story of Lazarus, Dives, and Abraham dangles the issue of the rich man’s choices—to clothe and feed himself and to avoid simple acts of charity that acknowledge God as the true owner of his abundant goods, thus choosing mammon over God (16:19–21). In this light, the entire chapter responds to the broad issues of proper and improper action in this world. Jesus’s probing proclamation about serving two masters forges the linchpin of the whole.

Moreover, Jesus’s nod toward the “law and the prophets” (16:16) links to His concluding remarks in the story about Dives, the rich man, and Lazarus, the beggar, when He twice speaks of “Moses and the prophets” (16:29, 31). Although the former reference points to ending the era of the “law and the prophets” with the coming of John and although Jesus’s later remarks about “Moses and the prophets” sustain the enduring value of the old era, both share the common judgment that the law remains relevant. For Jesus observes that “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail,” a clear knock against those disciples who evidently are already discounting the law of Moses (16:17).

It is exactly at the expression “the law and the prophets” (16:16) that the Prophet Joseph Smith inserts a substantial series of additions into the content of Jesus’s words that condemn the critically attentive Pharisees who stand within the crowd. At the pinnacle of Jesus’s sayings rises His affirmation of who He is—the one who fulfills the law so “that ye might all be redeemed” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 16:20). Besides rejecting Him, according to the added words, these Pharisees lack faith in the scriptures that they teach; they already persecute His meek followers with violence and by force, and they are adulterers (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 16:17, 20–22). Few recorded sayings reach this level of criticism except, perhaps, that in Mark 7:6–13.

In recent scholarship, Jesus’s statement that “the law and the prophets were until John” (Luke 16:16) has generated discussion about Luke’s historical scheme. Following the lead of Hans Conzelmann, the late German theologian and New Testament scholar who argues that Luke divides salvation history into three parts—the old era that includes the Baptist, the era that Jesus stands in, and the final age that His followers inaugurate—many scholars have embraced this verse as decisive for understanding Luke’s writings.² An untestable assumption underlies this view, namely, that not Jesus but Luke is responsible for formulating this saying, at least in its current form. Such an assumption, of course, lays down an uncertain floor upon which a good deal of scholarship is reared. To be sure, certain passages from Luke point to John as standing in an earlier era,³ but others hold that he is very much a part of Jesus’s age, not from a time now past.⁴

The most challenging issue among these verses has to do with Jesus’s teaching about divorce (Luke 16:18). Plainly, for His followers, He sets His standard high. At base is His concern for women who become victims of husbands’ whims. In His world, certain prominent Jewish teachers declare that a man can divorce his wife for almost any cause, including a mistake in cooking (“If she spoiled a dish for him”).⁵ Two results flow from Jesus’s words. First, He clearly stands for monogamy and against successive polygamy wherein a man marries a series of women in sequential fashion. Second, He raises the standard for marriage to that of priests who officiate at the temple: “[A priest] shall not take a wife . . . put away from her husband: for he is holy unto his God” (Leviticus 21:7). In the case of priests, the issue has to do with a divorced woman’s perceived reputation because priests are permitted to marry widows of other priests (Ezekiel 44:22). Whether this principle lies behind Jesus’s words remains uncertain.

Luke 16:19–31. Parable of Dives and Lazarus

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 770–772.

More than any other account in the Gospels, the Savior’s story about Abraham, Lazarus, and the rich man (who is called Dives through a misunderstanding of an early Coptic manuscript) opens an intriguing window onto the life to come, particularly the period between death and the Resurrection. Emerging from a sort of no man’s land with unclear boundaries and habitations, a sharpening vista presents itself for the next life—physical distance and separation, self-conscious awareness of status and station, and a clearly graded bundle of rewards and punishments. Life after death is not jumbled and indistinct; it does not consist in an impersonal melding of individual identities with that of God. Rather, the next world offers an existence not only fitly framed in accord with a person’s actions in this life but also textured by the character that people have forged in their mortal lives.

On the surface, the story concerns the matters of rich and poor, of caring and neglect. But the surface paves over a deeper set of issues such as why poor Lazarus ends up in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man finds himself in Hades. Even though Jesus opens wide the door to allow the wealthy to enter His kingdom, the warnings hold their place—“the rich [God] hath sent empty away” and “ye [rich] have received your consolation [in this life].”⁶ Why? Because like the rich man, many wealthy people spend their goods solely on themselves and on those closest to them—they have “wasted [their] substance” (Luke 15:13). Such a course of action, as the story illustrates, influences where former rich persons land in the next life, including Jesus’s current critics, certain Pharisees (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 16:23). For the divine requirement, based on the concept that all belongs to God, obliges the wealthy to share their substance rather than to horde it for themselves: “Wo unto you rich men, that will not give your substance to the poor, for your riches will canker your souls” (Doctrine and Covenants 56:16). To

drive home the point more sharply, we read in a passage that plainly alludes to Luke 16:23: “If any man shall take of the abundance which I [God] have made, and impart not his portion . . . unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.”⁷

On their part, poor persons must likewise meet a set of burnished expectations, which evidently Lazarus does. As any other person, they must turn their lives to God: “Blessed are the poor who are pure in heart, whose hearts are broken, and whose spirits are contrite.” As their reward, “they shall see the kingdom of God coming in power and great glory unto their deliverance” (Doctrine and Covenants 56:18). There is more. The impoverished, though they possess little of this world’s goods, must also sidestep the evils of greed and envy: “Wo unto you poor men . . . whose bellies are not satisfied, and whose hands are not stayed from laying hold upon other men’s goods, whose eyes are full of greediness, and who will not labor with your own hands” (Doctrine and Covenants 56:17; also Mosiah 4:24–25).

As much as any other principles that Jesus frames here, the twin standards that truth lies in the text of scripture and, implicitly, that scripture serves as a vehicle for inspiration and deeper understanding elegantly capture center stage. “They have Moses and the prophets,” intones Abraham. If the rich man’s five brothers will “hear them,” presumably in the Sabbath reading of scripture, “they will repent” because they will come to perceive the truth about the life to come (Luke 16:29–30). Notably, the brothers will not be persuaded any more forcefully, Abraham affirms, “though one rose from the dead” (16:31).

At base, this story about Abraham is apparently older than Jesus. Perhaps significantly, this account circulated first in Egypt before it came to Palestine where, plainly, Jesus adapts and retells it for His own purposes. This story underscores an Egyptian connection to the ancient patriarch and possesses possible relevance for the origin of the book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price. For it is a known technique among Egyptian Jews to repeat an old local story and attach it to a biblical figure.

Notes

- 1 Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 18:27; see the comments on Luke 18:26–30.
- 2 See Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1960).
- 3 Luke 3:16–17; Acts 10:37; 13:24–25.
- 4 Acts 1:22; 19:3–4; see the comments on Luke 3:1–6, 21–22.
- 5 Mishnah Gittin 9:10.
- 6 Luke 1:53; 6:24; Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 18:27; see the comments on Luke 16:1–12.
- 7 Doctrine and Covenants 104:18; also 2 Nephi 9:30; Mosiah 4:16–23.

Credits

Author: S. Kent Brown

New Testament Insights Series Editor: John W. Welch

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editors: Sam Lofgran, Verlanne Johnson

Content Manager: Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

Source: *New Testament Insights: Luke*, by S. Kent Brown