

## THE UNJUST STEWARD

*Luke 16*

Both parables in our chapter are important. We have centered the lesson on the first because its meaning is so often questioned. The lesson of both is the same: “No servant can serve two masters.” It is a very important lesson and a hard one to learn, for children and adults alike.

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### Doctrinal Points

*The Lord knows and makes allowance for our weakness.*

*The Word is eternally true. Its laws must be fulfilled.*

*Faithfulness to the Lord expresses itself in faithfulness to the neighbor.*

*Charity in the heart must be developed in this world.*

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### Notes for Parents

There are two important parables in our chapter for today, both bringing out the lesson of verse 13: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” We should know that *mammon* is from an Aramaic word meaning “riches.” It is used in the Bible to mean all the things of the world—money, learning, social position, power—which men and women are likely to want for their own sake.

The Lord gives us all our gifts—our abilities, our material possessions, our place in the family, the community, and the world. All these things are entrusted to us to use for the benefit of everyone, for the advancement of the Lord’s kingdom on earth. Every one of us is the Lord’s steward, and our various possessions and abilities are the “servants” who owe the Lord their full measure of love and good deeds—the hundred measures of oil and wheat. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we have not always been faithful stewards. We have often used our means and abilities to serve self instead of the Lord. We can never correct all our shortcomings of the past, never pay our full debt.

The steward in the parable, when he was found out, saw three possible courses: to dig, to beg, or to collect as much as was still possible from his lord's servants. To dig is a picture of trying to find some goodness deep within himself on which he could live—some people like to think they are just naturally good. To beg pictures asking the Lord to forgive us without making any real effort to change our lives. The steward chose the third course, and his master commended him and said he had acted wisely. On the face of it what he did looks dishonest, but it pictures making up as far as we can for the selfish and wrong things we have done and determining to try to hold our position as the Lord's stewards by being more faithful in the future. We make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness when we use all our worldly gifts unselfishly in the service of the Lord and the neighbor. The Lord gave this story of a steward in the world who made a wise choice as an example for the "children of light," who mean all who are really trying to live in the light of truth from the Lord.

And then the Lord gave the Pharisees another parable, because the Pharisees were not willing to admit that they had ever done anything wrong. They considered themselves wiser and better than others, whereas inwardly they were cold and uncharitable and domineering. You recall that the first of the blessings is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In the Bible the rich are often condemned and the poor exalted, and we should see that by the rich are meant those who think themselves great, and by the poor are meant the humble-minded.

The parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus was given by the Lord to teach us that we must make our choice between God and mammon while we are in this world. This world is our "seed-time," when by our own free choice we give our souls the form according to which they will develop to eternity. We cannot change our ruling love after death. The great gulf between the rich man and Lazarus in the other world was not put there by the Lord but by the two men themselves. The Lord has given us in the Word all the truth we need in order to make our choice. People think

sometimes that they would believe in God and heaven if they could see a miracle or a vision, but this is not true. If they did not want to believe, they would scoff at the miracle and the vision and explain them away. “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.”

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### Primary

The thought of our life as a kingdom which the Lord has given us to manage for Him is a good one to put in little children’s minds, as well as the thought that we can never fully make up afterward for wrong things that we do.

What is a parable?

Can you tell why the Lord used so many parables?

Can you remember some of the parables we have had in the Gospel of Luke?

Today we have another parable which the Lord told His disciples about a man who had done wrong. The man was a steward. A steward was a trusted servant who managed his master’s affairs for him.

In this parable what did the Lord learn about his steward?

How did he say he would punish him?

Why could not the steward afford to lose his position?

What did he decide to do?

What did he do for the first of his Lord’s debtors?

What did he do for the second?

He knew that in this way at least part of his debt would be paid.

What did his Lord think of it?

We see clearly that the steward was not a faithful or an honest man.

Do you know that you are a steward too? The Lord has given each one of us a little kingdom to manage. This kingdom is our own heart and mind and life. The Lord wants us to manage our little kingdom in such a way that the world will be a better and happier place because we live in it. This is the service we owe to Him in return for all that we receive from Him.

The Lord gives us all our abilities and everything we have.

We are supposed to use them faithfully in His service.

Do we ever waste our Lord’s goods?

Whenever we do what we know is wrong, we are like the unjust steward.

And the sad part is that we can never fully right the wrong.  
But if we will do our best to make up for it, the Lord will forgive us.  
This is what the parable teaches.

One of the sad things about doing wrong is indeed that we can never fully make up for it afterward. But our story teaches us that we should do the best we can to make up. If we do this, our parents will forgive us, and the Lord will forgive us, too. Only we must try to become more faithful stewards every day, because we cannot serve the Lord truly and be selfish at the same time.

Now read verse 13 of our chapter.

*Mammon* is from a Chaldee or Aramaic word for “riches.”

It is used in the Bible to mean all the things we want selfishly.

So this verse teaches that we cannot serve the Lord and be selfish at the same time.

Let us read another parable which the Lord gave His hearers after this one.

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### Junior

Take up both parables with this class, emphasizing the importance of choosing early in life to serve the Lord instead of self and of sticking to this choice from day to day.

Today we have two parables. The first is called the parable of the unjust steward. A steward is a man who takes care of another's property for him.

What did the master learn about his steward?

What did he threaten to do?

What did the steward say he could not do?

What was he ashamed to do?

What did he decide to do to save himself?

Would we consider this a good action?

What did his lord say of his action?

Notice that his lord did not say that he had been a good man, but only that he had acted wisely in collecting as much as he could of his master's debts. We must see that this is not a case of a man who has always done right, but of one who suddenly realizes that he has done wrong. We are all like this steward very often in our

lives. We get into careless habits, and suddenly realize that we are in trouble. What is the best thing to do? We can never wholly undo the wrong we have done. Shall we merely say, “I know that I have done wrong and I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do about it”? Or shall we look around and see how much we can do to make up for our misdeeds?

Why do we not always do this? It is because we do not like to admit to others that we have been wrong. We care more about what other people think of us than we do about what the Lord thinks of us. This is what the Lord means when He says, “No servant can serve two masters . . . Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” *Mammon* is from an Aramaic word meaning “riches,” but it is used in the Bible to mean any of the things we want selfishly.

In the other parable “Abraham’s bosom” means heaven, because the people venerated Abraham as the founder of their nation and looked forward to seeing him when they died. The rich man in the parable is sometimes referred to as *Dives*, which is from a Latin word meaning “rich.” There is nothing in the first part of the story which tells us that *Dives* was a bad man and Lazarus a good one, but we know that the Lord does not mean that one went to hell because he was rich and the other to heaven because he was poor, although people have sometimes thought it meant that. By the poor the Lord always means the “poor in spirit,” the humble; and by the rich He means those who are rich in their own self-esteem, as the Pharisees were. Our outward condition in this world does not determine our state in the other life. We are told that the Lord “looketh upon the heart.” The rich man in the parable went to hell because he had cared only for his worldly possessions and had not learned to love heavenly things. Lazarus evidently had been a good man even though he had been a beggar. The great gulf that was fixed between them was fixed by the lives they had chosen in the world.

What did the rich man first ask of Abraham?

What did he ask next?

What did Abraham tell him?

The Lord tells us in the Word how we should live, and He wants us to read the Word and see its truth and choose freely to obey Him. This is the only way in which we can learn to love goodness, which is what everyone in heaven does. If a selfish person, who did not want to believe in the Lord and the future life, should see a vision, do you think he would believe it was true? No, he would explain it away as a dream or a hallucination.

Both the parables in our chapter teach us plainly that just as early in life as possible we must make the choice between selfishness and love to the Lord and the neighbor, because we cannot serve self and the Lord at the same time, and our eternal happiness depends upon our choosing to love the Lord and the neighbor.

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### Intermediate

The general meaning of the two parables offers enough material for the teacher this time without too much attention to the particular correspondences, although some of these have been given.

The two parables of our lesson today both teach the truth of the Lord's words, "No man can serve two masters . . . Ye cannot serve God and mammon." *Mammon* means "riches" and is used to cover all the things we want selfishly.

The parable of the unjust steward has puzzled many people because in it the master commends the steward for doing what seems to us dishonest. But we see it in a different light when we realize that each one of us in the Lord's sight is an unjust steward who has wasted his Lord's goods, for everything we have comes from the Lord and is really His, given us to use in His service, and many times we have tried to serve self as well as the Lord, and we owe the Lord more than we can ever pay. What shall we do? We cannot live without what the Lord gives us, and we should be ashamed merely to beg the Lord to forgive us without trying to do anything ourselves about our debt. The Lord tells us in the parable that we act wisely if we do the best we can, once we recognize and acknowledge our shortcomings. The hundred measures of oil and

of wheat mean all we owe the Lord of love and good deeds. The fifty and the fourscore (eighty) measures picture the fullest possible payment that we can actually make. The lesson is that when we have done wrong, we should admit it, undo as much of the wrong as possible, and go on from there, determined to do better in the future.

In the second parable the rich man—often referred to as *Dives*, from a Latin word meaning “rich”—represents those who have plenty of knowledge of goodness and truth but are satisfied with themselves and make no good use of their riches. The beggar Lazarus represents those who have little true knowledge and who may consequently live outwardly unlovely lives, but who are open-minded and eagerly receive even crumbs of truth from the Lord’s table, making use of every bit they do receive. Dogs usually have a bad correspondence in the Word, because they represent our natural desires, which are usually selfish. Here, however, they are used in a good sense, and picture such natural tendencies to kindness and helpfulness as we may have, which can go some way toward making up for the evils we commit through ignorance.

In the other world, where we live inside out, the self-satisfaction and worldliness of the rich man led him to his place in the hells, where his selfishness appeared as a consuming fire—this is hell-fire. But the humility and desire for truth of the beggar led him to find his happiness in heaven. The great gulf is a very real one. It is fixed not by the Lord but by the great difference in the quality of the life each has learned to enjoy.

The essential qualities of a good life are humility and willingness to believe and obey the Lord. We cannot serve ourselves first and serve the Lord at the same time. If we want to think of ourselves first, no miracle or heavenly vision will cause us to change, because we will merely explain it away.

*Basic Correspondences*

wheat = goodness  
one hundred = full measure

dogs = natural affections without  
knowledge of self

hell-fire = love of self

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### Senior

The idea of stewardship is important for young people of this age, as is the necessity of making the choice between serving God and serving self. Also discuss the reason why the selfish will not choose to go to heaven when they come into the other world.

On the face of it there seems little relation between the two parables of our chapter; yet the Lord expresses the principal lesson of both in verse 13: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” *Mammon* is from an Aramaic word meaning riches, and it sums up all forms of self-aggrandizement.

All we have of goodness and truth, as well as all we have of natural ability and worldly opportunity comes from the Lord. We are His stewards. If we recognize this and use our talents in His service, we are good stewards. If we think of our talents as our own and use them primarily to advance ourselves in the world, we serve mammon. There is no middle course.

In the first parable the steward had used his master’s goods for his own ends. But like the prodigal son he finally came to himself and realized the danger of his position. We are all, in one degree or another, guilty of this same sin. We often serve self rather than the Lord. When we realize it, what shall we do? We have nothing in ourselves which will enable us to pay our debt to the Lord—we cannot purchase salvation by our own merit. And we should be ashamed merely to throw ourselves on the Lord’s mercy without making some effort of our own. The steward’s solution was to call together his master’s debtors—who represent our various faculties—and collect from each one as much as he could. We see in the debts of oil and wheat the full measure of love and obedience which we owe to the Lord, and in the fifty and fourscore (eighty) the measure of our limited ability to pay. We do wisely when we pay to the extent of our ability.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man represents those who have the truth but use it to serve themselves. Lazarus represents those who are lacking in truth but who receive eagerly every crumb of it which comes their way. In other words the rich man served mammon and the beggar served God.

The vivid picture of the eternal results of these two opposite states is also presented. The fires of hell are the burning lusts of self-love, no longer checked by the considerations of outward expediency which were felt in the world. While we are in this world there is always the possibility that we may “come to ourselves.” We may do right for the sake of appearance and so come to see that we are happier in doing right and learn to love it. But when the body is laid aside, the ultimates of action which influence our decisions here are gone. Our souls stand forth in the form we have chosen to give them. The great gulf between heaven and hell is fixed by our own life’s choice.

The last few verses of the chapter are especially interesting. People who are unwilling to believe in anything but themselves and what they see around them in the world will sometimes say that they would believe if someone from the other world showed himself to them. But this is not so. Once the vision was over, their only thought would be to explain it away. We believe what we want to believe.

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### Adult

The effort has been made in the Adult notes to give a constructive basis for the discussion of the first parable, which bothers many people. There are three current falsities which the chapter exposes clearly: (1) that man is inherently good and can shift the responsibility for his misdeeds to his environment and to other people; (2) that, since man can claim no merit for anything he does, all he can do is acknowledge the Lord as his savior, and therefore that he can throw himself on the divine mercy without living a good life; (3) that the Lord will somehow be able to save everyone eventually no matter how he has used his life in the world.

There are two well-known parables in our chapter for today.

The first is spoken to the disciples and the second to the Pharisees, but both teach the same lesson: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” The emphasis in the two is different. In the first it is on what we may do while we are still in this world when we find that we have been serving mammon. In the other it is a stern warning that we must make our choice of master here, for the results are eternal. We might note that verse 13—as well as Matthew 6:24—should read “two lords” instead of “two masters.” The Greek word is the same as that translated “lord” in John 13:13, where both *master* and *lord* are used, and Swedenborg tells us (AC 9167<sup>2</sup>) that *master* is predicated of truth and *lord* of good. So the verse really means *not* “Ye cannot serve truth and falsity” but “Ye cannot serve good and evil.”

Good people have often been puzzled and troubled by the parable of the unjust steward. The master in the parable commends what seems to be rank dishonesty, and the Lord advises the “children of light” to take a lesson in this instance from the “children of this world,” and to make themselves friends of the “mammon of unrighteousness.” *Mammon* is from an Aramaic word meaning “riches.” It is used in the Bible to cover all forms of possessions—money, learning, social position—which men may acquire and which so commonly lead them into self-satisfaction and contempt for others.

In giving this parable the Lord was speaking to all of us who claim to be His disciples. For every one of us is His steward. All our possessions, all our abilities, our knowledge, our responsibilities and opportunities are given us by the Lord to use in His service. And we know that every one of us is in some degree an unfaithful steward who has wasted his Lord’s goods, using them selfishly instead of for the advancement of the Lord’s kingdom on earth. From time to time, like the steward in the parable, we are brought up short and faced with our own unworthiness. The steward’s words to himself in verse 3 are an interesting condemnation of the two “ways out”—both wrong—upon which Christian people have sometimes relied for salvation. “I cannot dig”—the idea that man

is inherently good is false. “To beg I am ashamed”—it is unworthy of our human endowment to fall back on the Lord’s mercy and think there is nothing we need do toward repaying our debt to Him. The steward’s decision is—under the circumstances of the misuse we have already made of our Lord’s goods—the only wise one. His lord’s debtors, whom he called in, represent all our abilities which should serve the Lord. The hundred measures of oil and wheat which they owe represent the full amount of love and goodness which in the beginning might have been produced by their means. The fifty and fourscore (eighty) measures represent all that we now find ourselves able to procure with them. In other words, our duty is to recognize and acknowledge that we owe everything we have to the Lord, and to determine from this time forth to do all we can to correct our past shortcomings and serve the Lord wholly. We cannot go on trying to serve God and mammon.

This is not an easy decision to make, but the second parable teaches us that it is a decision which must not be put off. We have seen that there are various kinds of riches—worldly possessions, natural learning, knowledges of spiritual things. All these may be used in the Lord’s service or in the service of self. The Pharisees and scribes had all three kinds and used them all for the service of self. They thought of themselves as rich and better than others because of their knowledge of the Scriptures as well as because of their worldly riches. It was of them and of all like them that the Lord said: “How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:24). To these are opposed the “poor in spirit,” those who recognize their own lack of knowledge and goodness and look to the Lord for help. In the second parable the rich man represents the Pharisees and all who, like them, feel that they do not need to be forgiven and taught by the Lord. The beggar Lazarus, whose name means “whom God helps,” represents all those who feel themselves spiritually poor and weak and who “hunger and thirst after righteousness.” The purple and fine linen in which the rich man was clothed picture the knowledges of good and truth which he possessed. The sores of Lazarus are the external

evils into which we fall for lack of knowledge of what is right, the dogs which licked his sores the efforts of the merely natural good impulses to correct our outward conduct. There are many passages in the writings which explain these details. See AC 9231<sup>3</sup>, 9467<sup>5</sup>; HH 365; TCR 215; SS 40.

The rich man did not go to hell because of his material riches, but because his whole enjoyment was in worldly and selfish satisfactions. Lazarus did not go to heaven because of his material poverty, but because he longed for even a little knowledge of how to be good—the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. The great gulf that was fixed between the two in the other world was a spiritual gulf. In AC 10187 we are told that those in evils cannot stand the sphere of good. The Lord does not fix the great gulf. We fix it ourselves by the kind of life we have cultivated in this world. If we so live here that our whole delight comes to be in the satisfactions which we can get for ourselves, we shall find no more delight in heaven than we found in unselfish goodness here. If we have ever tried to speak of the Lord and the Word or even to give a little friendly advice to one bent upon having his own selfish way in some matter, we know how impossible it would have been for Lazarus to carry even a drop of pure water across the gulf to the rich man in hell. When we tell someone that in the other life people can go where they want to go, the immediate response is, “But then, of course, everyone will go to heaven.” But the evil will not want to go to heaven any more there than they do here. They would not enjoy the company of angels any more than they enjoy the company of heavenly people in this world. The gulf is fixed in them. They have formed in themselves no capacity for enjoying the things of heaven. The only delights they enjoy are those they find in hell.

Many people think, as did the rich man in the parable, that we could be shown by miracles the realities of the other life, and that the Lord should so convince us. Swedenborg tells us very plainly in AC 7290, as well as in other places, both the reason why miracles were performed in the Lord’s time and the reason why they are

not orderly today. The Lord has given us the Word. Anyone who goes to it with the sincere desire to be instructed will learn from it the way to heaven. If we do not learn from the Word, it is because we do not choose to have our selfish desires crossed by the Lord's laws, because we want to go our own way. And if this selfish desire is in our hearts, we shall reject everything which opposes it.

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### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Divine Providence*, n. 250<sup>5</sup>: "In the spiritual sense 'the mammon of unrighteousness' means the knowledges of truth and good possessed by the evil, which they employ solely in acquiring for themselves dignities and wealth; out of these knowledges the good, or 'the sons of light,' must make to themselves friends; and these are what will receive them into the eternal tabernacles."

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. To whom did the Lord speak the parable of the unjust steward? *His disciples*
- P. What had the steward done? *wasted his master's goods*
- J. With what was he threatened? *loss of his job*
- P. What did he say he could not do? *dig*
- P. What was he ashamed to do? *beg*
- J. What did he decide to do? *take less than what debtors owed*
- J. What did his lord think of the course he chose? *commended him*
- I. What does this parable teach us? *recognize our shortcomings, do our best*
- P. What does the Lord say about serving two masters? *cannot do it*
- J. What is meant by *mammon*? *riches, things wanted selfishly*
- J. What did the Pharisees think of this parable? *laughed at it*
- J. What other parable did the Lord give them? *rich man and Lazarus*
- P. Where did the beggar go when he died? *Abraham's bosom (heaven)*
- P. Where did the rich man go? *hell*
- J. What did the rich man first ask Abraham to do? *send Lazarus with water*
- J. Why could not Abraham do it? *great gulf between*
- J. What did the rich man then ask? *warn my brothers*
- J. What did Abraham tell him? *they have Moses and the prophets*
- J. What did the rich man think would convince his brothers? *if one went from the dead*
- J. What did Abraham say to this? *this would not persuade them*

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THE UNJUST STEWARD

- I. What does this parable teach us? *we decide here what we will be to eternity*
- S. How can a course of action which in the letter seems dishonest be called “wise”? *wrong to feel oneself inherently good, unworthy to ask for “pure” mercy, thus the only course left is to serve the Lord as best we can*
- S. In the second parable who are meant by (1) the rich man, and (2) the beggar?
  - (1) *those who think they are spiritually rich*
  - (2) *those who recognize their spiritual poverty and long for righteousness*