

Unjust Steward

Bible stories sometimes seem designed to tie us in knots, leading us in unexpected and alarming directions. Here's an example: the story of the Unjust Steward in Luke chapter 16. It's one of Jesus' own stories so the fact that it leaves us flummoxed is all the more puzzling. Why would Jesus want to confuse us?

The gist of the story is this: a wealthy landowner relies on a trusted steward to manage his estate. Much of the land is farmed by tenants, who are answerable to the steward for all their produce. Tenants pay rent in the form of produce; they pay either a proportion of their total yield, or a fixed amount of produce – which can be very tough in hard times. The steward, too, is accountable to the landowner, but the charges he levies on the tenant farmers and the amount he is due to pay the landowner are commercial confidences. Left hand – right hand! In fact the Steward has discretion over the rental charges and can set the margins to suit himself. Maybe he'll have to offset a good year against a bad one so he can meet his obligations to the landowner, but basically he's sitting pretty.

The day comes when rumours of the Steward's greedy practices reach the ears of the landowner, who sets a date for the Steward to give a full account of himself. The Steward quickly realises the game's up. Something must be done. His canny scheme is this. I've been charging the tenants over the odds for years without them knowing anything about it. The best plan for me is to now bring the charges down to the level that my master expects me to pay him. The Tenants will fall over themselves to celebrate their good fortune, and my master will see that the books are in good order. Furthermore the Tenants will imagine that the boss is responsible for the changes, so, for once, they'll be able to give him a sincere and enthusiastic round of applause. Cheers all round! As for me, even if the worst comes to the worst, I'm now such a popular chap that I'll find it easy to get another job! Result: everybody's happy.

Jesus then invites his listeners to contemplate the thought that the Unjust Steward was in fact behaving commendably. At first sight it seems that Jesus is commending the Steward for his dishonesty, both in exaggerating the tenants' debt and in cooking the books to enhance his image among them. But Jesus invites us to admire and imitate the Steward's canny and urgent response to the crisis that threatens him. For once in his life he is actually behaving in his own genuine best interests rather than thinking only in monetary terms. After all, he knows his boss is in fact a good employer: rather than cheating him or otherwise taking advantage of him, the Steward has decided to give him the treat of knowing that all his tenants love him. What follows from that is not predictable with any certainty, but the Steward has decided that his best course of action is to put his trust in what he has very good reason to believe, that his master is at heart a merciful man.

Jesus is inviting his listeners and his much later readers to understand and live by the truth that God is merciful – and that compared with that truth nothing,

no advantage that can be imagined, is totally worthless. Other attractions, other blessings, may have their place and their value, but this one thing surpasses them all.

So don't forget it. It is the touchstone for your life, your guide, your strength, your ultimate peace