

## Lesson Three

### Let Go, and Use It: The Parable of the Unjust Steward Luke 16:1-15

Although the NIV leaves out the word, the text begins with an “also” as if this parable is an addendum to the parables Jesus told in Luke 15 (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy). Those parables were directed, at least in part, toward the Pharisees (Luke 15:12). Interestingly—and confirming this point—Jesus’ application of this parable is directed toward the Pharisees as well (16:14-15).

While the Pharisees scoffed at the parable and many believers have wondered about the propriety of the parable (it uses a dishonest servant as a model!), Jesus is very clear and decisive about the point of the story (16:9): “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” The NIV actually softens the language here a bit—the text reads “unrighteous wealth” rather than merely “worldly wealth.”

Money is viewed in this text as “unrighteous” and as a god that competes with the Lordship of God.

At one level Jesus advises his disciples (“people of light”) to use their money shrewdly (wisely, intelligently) as this dishonest servant did. As disciples we neither waste nor hoard money. Rather, we see money as a resource for eternal benefit; we see it as a way to further the kingdom of God. In particular, the children of light use their money to serve the kingdom of light which has eternal consequences for others as well as ourselves.

At another level Jesus critiques the idolatrous nature of loving money. The Pharisees loved money and served it. When we love money we bow before it and it controls us. Instead, we are called to serve God without our money—and to serve him shrewdly (wisely).

James A. Harding (1848-1922), co-founder of Lipscomb University, constantly emphasized these two principles. For example, he applied them to whoever operates their “business, whatever that may be, solely for the advancement of God's kingdom; if [everyone] should consider [themselves] as being in the world simply and solely for that purpose, what a wonderful change we would have in the world!”<sup>1</sup> “I believe,” Harding wrote, “that Christians should use their surplus promptly for the poor, the sick and the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The wise manager of their money, Jesus seems to say, will shrewdly devote to the interests of the kingdom of God rather than hoard it as a lover of money or waste it through self-indulgence. Even “unrighteous wealth” may serve the kingdom and the disciples of Jesus do not use it for the sake of the kingdom of light they may find themselves worshipping mammon rather than serving their master.

The deceitfulness of this mammon means that we often find ourselves in a self-justifying and defensive mode. Jesus reorients us to the use of money, a shrewd and wise use, for the sake of the kingdom of God as a way to invest in God’s eternal kingdom

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<sup>1</sup>Harding, “Three Contradictory Theories,” *The Way* 3 (4 April 1901), 4.

<sup>2</sup>Harding, “Reflections Suggested by My Trip to Odessa, MO,” *The Christian Leader and the Way* 22.8 (25 February 1908), 8.

project. Here is where discipleship lies when the choice is between mammon and the master.

***Questions:***

1. What was it about the Pharisees that moved them to scoff at the parable and its meaning?
2. What is that Jesus commends about “shrewdness”? What would contrast with “shrewdness” in the use of money?
3. What do you think about the sentiments of James A. Harding? In what ways do they resonate with you or not?
4. What is the propriety of using “unrighteous wealth” for making “friends”? Does something about that run against your values?
5. What are some “shrewd” or “wise” ways to use money for the benefit of the kingdom of God?