

## IS ALMSGIVING THE POINT OF THE "UNJUST STEWARD"?

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IN a recent issue of this journal, Professor Donald R. Fletcher put forward the suggestion that the parable of the Unjust Steward may be ironical in intent, and incidentally remarked that exegetical grounds are lacking for that interpretation of the parable which sees in it an exhortation to almsgiving.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to re-examine the possible grounds for such an interpretation, and to inquire into the explicability, on this basis, of the problems of the passage.

If the parable is intended to encourage almsgiving, its appeal is to a motive which we may call "eschatological self-interest"; that is, the hearer is urged to do without certain worldly advantages, in the expectation of obtaining reward in an eschatological future. Whatever Jesus' own attitude toward eschatology may have been, the synoptic tradition as it has come down to us, is certainly full of such appeals; thus Mark 10 30 promises "eternal life in the world to come" to those who abandon worldly possessions, Mark 9 43-48 urges that the loss of hand, foot, or eye is preferable to an eternity of hell-fire, and so on.

Those synoptic passages which unmistakably teach almsgiving make frequent use of this type of motivation. The example which perhaps springs most readily to mind is the saying concerning "treasure in heaven" (Matt 6 19 ff. = Luke 12 33 ff.). It is true that both forms of this saying mitigate the baldness of the appeal to self-interest, by adding the codicil, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"; but in the pericope of the Rich Young Man, the instruction, "Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven," is given without modification (Mark 10 21 = Matt 19 21 = Luke 18 22).

Luke 14 13 ff. is germane to this point: "When you give entertainment, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you shall be blessed, for they have no means to repay you; for repayment shall be made to you in the resurrection of the righteous." In less obvious form, the same type of appeal occurs in Luke 6 38: "Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over shall they give into your bosom." Here the eschatological nature of the

<sup>1</sup> "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" in *JBL*, 82, 1 (March 1963), pp. 15-30.

reward is not specified, but it is difficult to see what else the passage can have in mind; certainly we should not expect it to refer to worldly advantage.

The motif of financial generosity now, in order to gain a supernatural reward later, seems to occur incidentally in the parable of Dives and Lazarus; even though charity is not the main point here, it seems hard to escape the implication that Dives is damned precisely for his neglect of the poor. The pericope of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25 31-46) promises an eschatological reward to those who have performed the corporal works of mercy, though in this case no particular stress is laid upon previous renunciation of temporal goods.

The parable of the Unjust Steward, if it belongs to this class of teachings, would counsel the believer to give away as much money as possible here, in order to obtain eternal shelter in the world to come. Underlying its symbolism is the idea, familiar to Jewish piety, that a man in practicing almsgiving distributes, not his own property, but property which is already God's. This thought may be illustrated from Pirque Aboth 3, 7: "R. Eleazar of Bartota says: Give to him from that which is his, for you, and that which is yours, are his. And this (we learn from) David, who says, 'For from thee are all things, and from thy hand have we given to thee'" (I Chron 29 14).<sup>2</sup> If this viewpoint be presupposed, the parable's illustration of the steward who gives away his master's possessions is aptly chosen for its purpose. Nor should we be surprised that the master commends the steward. Jewish parables often turn upon apparently paradoxical behavior on the part of a king or property owner; and we have Christian representatives of this genre in the parables of the Laborers in the Vineyard and The Great Supper.

But is not the immoral character of the steward's action still a stumbling block to our interpretation? This difficulty disappears, once it is realized that we are dealing here with a sort of *a fortiori* argument. In two other passages of the third gospel, the behavior of evil persons is treated as relevant to some issue under discussion. In neither of these cases is the wicked man held up as an ideal; rather, the thought is: "If such-and-such a principle applies even in the relationships between evil men, will it not apply all the more in the relationship between God and the faithful?" In Luke 11 13 we read: "If you then, though evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (=Matt 7 11). Here, obviously, the behavior of human fathers toward their

<sup>2</sup> As Eleazar of Bartota flourished half a century or more after the destruction of the temple, we may assume the reference is to almsgiving, rather than to cultic offerings. Jewish tradition, consistently interpreting in this manner, makes of him a model of generosity to the poor.

sons is not the point. The passage concerns God's attitude toward prayer, and is based upon *a fortiori* reasoning. The parable of the Unjust Judge utilizes the same type of argument, its climax being: "Hear what (even) the unjust judge says! And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him night and day . . .?" (Luke 18 6 f.).

Similar reasoning may be presumed to lie behind "The sons of this world are more prudent in their generation than the sons of light" (Luke 16 8b). If stated in full, the author's thought would run somewhat as follows: "If even worldlings are shrewd enough to recognize the value of handing out their masters' money, should not the servants of God realize the value of almsgiving? Unfortunately, they do not act as though they did — the children of this world are wiser, in their way, than the children of light." But such a statement in full would not be necessary, given an audience who understood the terms of the parable; the homiletic sarcasm of vs. 8b would be sufficient to make the point. The author then hurries on to his real conclusion, "And I say to you, make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness . . ." (Luke 16 9). This is indeed an exhortation to imitate the steward, but not in his dishonesty; the auditors are being urged to be like the steward in the point at which he is rightly imitable, namely, in the distribution of their master's property.<sup>3</sup>

Any interpretation of the Unjust Steward, to be counted satisfactory, must explain the identity of the mysterious "friends" of Luke 16 9, who "receive" the righteous into "eternal habitations." On the analogy of certain Jewish metaphors, I would suggest that these "friends" are a personification of the almsdeeds which are performed with the "mammon of unrighteousness." Rabbinic sayings attributed to authorities of the second century A.D. can be cited, which term almsdeeds, or other good works פּרְקָלִיטִין — an Hebraized form of *παράκλητοι*, meaning "advocates," or "intercessors."

The simplest of these sayings, in point of form, comes from Pirque Aboth 4, 11: "R. Eliezer ben Jacob said: He who performs one commandment gets himself one advocate; he who commits one sin gets himself one accuser. Repentance and good works are like a shield in the face of retribution." A somewhat more colorful saying of this kind, specifically identifying the פּרְקָלִיטִין as "works of charity," is quoted in Baba Batra 10a as the saying of a second-century rabbi: "R. Eleazar the son of R. Jose said: Every almsdeed (צדקה) and work of mercy (חסד) which Israelites perform in this world, these are peace and great

<sup>3</sup> It seems natural to interpret the master of the parable as one of the "children of this world," along with the unjust judge, the "fathers" of Luke 11 11 ff., and the "king of flesh and blood," who is a stock figure in Jewish parables. But the identification of the master as a "child of light" would not disturb the interpretation proposed.

intercessors between Israel and their Father in heaven. . . ." Finally, an anonymous baraita quoted in Shabbat 32a shows how vividly this metaphor might be used: "If anyone who ascends a scaffold to be punished has great intercessors, he is delivered; if not, he is not delivered. And these are a man's great intercessors: repentance and good works." It is noteworthy that the context of this particular aphorism is a discussion of the meaning of death, to which the ascent of the scaffold is likened; thus the metaphor is used in an eschatological context similar to that of Luke 16 9.<sup>4</sup>

From "advocates" or "intercessors" to "friends" seems only a short step; and to speak of one's personified good works as "receiving him into eternal habitations" would appear to be a legitimate extension of the metaphor. Or alternatively, the third person plural *δέξονται* of vs. 9b might be treated as equivalent to the passive "that you may be received" (cf. *δοθήσεται* and *δώσουσιν* in Luke 6 38) without disturbing the identification of the "friends" with the almsdeeds themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Our parable, then, is of a Semitic type, and would have originated, either with Jesus himself, or in Christian circles under strong Jewish influence; its original conclusion would have been Luke 16 9. Difficulty would have arisen as soon as it reached Christian communities unaccustomed to interpreting this sort of symbolism. The gentile auditor (let us say) would tend to fix upon the steward's immorality, rather than upon the act *per se* of giving away money, as the story's focus, and would try from this point of view to draw the moral. Vss. 10-13 are a commentary attempting, with some difficulty, to do this.

Luke 16 10, "He who is faithful in the least is faithful in much also . . ." is so similar to Matt 25 21, 23 = Luke 19 17, that it is difficult not to see the first half of this verse as a floating saying, which early interpreters felt would provide the key to the parable of the Unjust

<sup>4</sup> It is also worth noting that John 5 36 personifies "works" (*ἔργα*) in a somewhat similar, though less colorful, fashion: "The works which the Father has given me to perform, the very works which I do, testify concerning me . . ." (cf. John 10 25).

<sup>5</sup> A difficult problem, though not one directly affecting our interpretation, is the question why Luke 16 9, 11 term money as such "unrighteous." I would tentatively suggest that this is an extreme expression of that suspicious attitude toward wealth which is found in all the synoptic gospels, and is particularly characteristic of Luke. Passages of this nature peculiar to the third Gospel are: "He hath put down the mighty from their seat . . ." (1 52 f.); John the Baptist's warnings against extortion (3 13 f.); the blessing of the poor and the cursing of the rich (6 20, 24); the parable of the Rich Fool (12 16-21); the parable of Dives and Lazarus (16 19-31); the manner in which Zacchaeus attains salvation (19 8 f.). If we were to press the expression *μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας* as far as the meaning "money unjustly gotten," we might wonder whether the parable of the Unjust Steward is aimed at the reform of publicans, and has in mind persons like Zacchaeus. But this would be precarious.

Steward. If this saying was known in a form already fixed, this would explain the awkwardness with which it is subjoined to the story — surely Luke 16 10 ought to mention unfaithfulness first, not faithfulness, since the steward was faithful in nothing either small or great. May we suppose that the interpreter knew a saying consisting only of vs. 10<sup>a</sup>, and that, in order to render this saying relevant to the parable, he coined 10<sup>b</sup> himself, on the ground that the converse of 10<sup>a</sup> must surely be true? In any case vs. 11 *f.* would be the interpreter's amplification of vs. 10, applying the principle specifically to money matters, and deliberately employing terminology drawn from the parable. Finally Luke 16 13 — an obvious floating saying — was added in order to give the pericope a suitably emphatic conclusion. It will be noted that this verse fits neither the story itself, nor with the appendix of vs. 10 *f.*, since nothing in these twelve verses has suggested the case of a man trying to serve two masters at once. But the saying was condemnatory, and mentioned the word *μαμωνᾶς*, which the steward certainly could be said to have served; hence it was felt apropos to the warning against dishonesty which early commentators saw in the parable.

I would conclude then, that the parable of the Unjust Steward was intended to recommend a positive course of action, and that with regard to a specific matter, almsgiving. The alternative explanation — that the whole story is irony — would come closer to the view of the earliest interpreters. The Unjust Steward certainly can be read in this way, and one might indeed cite the parable of the Rich Fool as a parallel. The difficulty with this interpretation, as it seems to me, is that the steward is not somehow shown to be ridiculous, as the rich fool is. If the parable of the Unjust Steward were irony, would it not be a somewhat more subtle type of irony than we should expect to find in a piece of popular preaching?