

*THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD.*

THE moral question connected with this parable has troubled some interpreters. The action of the steward was fraudulent. Can we press home any lesson of duty on such a basis? Can we in any sense take the steward as an example?

The sense of this difficulty, I conclude, gave rise to one interpretation, which may plead courage and ingenuity on its behalf. The steward was not fraudulent, *i.e.* not towards his lord. His fault was not in defrauding his master, but in overcharging systematically the tenants. Having been for many years, we may suppose, an extortionate steward, he suddenly becomes honest, reduces the tenants' rents to their fair price, in the hope that by the popularity of his action, he may secure a refuge in their houses when he is dismissed from his office.

Of course this theory of the steward's conduct is based on conjecture. There is nothing *primâ facie* to suggest that the fraud was mainly against the tenants. The probability is the other way. The spirit of the parable is against the theory; and, if we adopt it, it is difficult to give proper weight to the accusation that the steward had *wasted* his master's goods. Further, it is hard to imagine the human nature which would feel gratitude for such small and tardy mercies as the tenants received.

The ordinary interpretation sees in the steward the man who, being discovered, determines to make bad worse, with the view of winning the gratitude of the tenantry. The general application commends quickness and energy in the despatch of affairs, and the cultivation of a sort of business-like capacity among Christian people in their Christian work and duty.

May I venture to draw out another and somewhat differ-

ent scheme of interpretation? I present it for what it is worth. It is one which has grown upon my own mind, and which carries with it lessons which have special value for those who hold official place in the Church of Christ. I think also that it may carry a caution not wholly needless among all classes to-day.

The man is not a house-steward. His work includes that which usually falls to those whom we term agents. The system of rent payment indicated seems to be similar to that which prevails in some places (*e.g.* Northern Italy) at the present day. No fixed rent was charged; but the landlord and the tenant received stated proportions of the land produce. In the neighbourhood of Florence, one-half of the produce is credited to the landlord; the other half belongs to the farmer. The system has a measure of fairness, as the pressure of ill times and the profit of good times are shared by both persons concerned. The work of the steward or agent would be to make himself acquainted with the yield of the crops; and to see that a fair half, or other portion, was set aside for, or credited to, his master. Such is the system; and heedlessness or fraud on the part of the steward might well be accounted waste. If he failed to look after his master's interests or to gather in his master's share, he would be wasting his master's goods. The lands were held on the condition of such shares of produce being reserved for the landlord. Want of care, want of vigilance, want of promptness, would jeopardize the landlord's profits, and be accounted fairly a wasting of his goods.

Now, who were the stewards? If we ask the question of the disciples on another occasion,—“Lord, speakest Thou this parable unto us, or even unto all?” we must expect the answer, that it is a parable for all. But nevertheless, to clergymen and religious teachers, it has its special message. For, though all men, in so far as they have influence or trust reposed in them, are stewards, yet we cannot fail to re-

member that our Lord spoke of those who were entrusted with the religious care of others as stewards who brought forth things new and old, or who gave meat to the household in due season. The Apostle, too, accepted the image as having special fitness for those who exercised ministry in the Church of God. "Let a man so account of us . . . as stewards," etc. (1 Cor. iv. 1, 2). He spoke of fidelity as their special duty. In the Epistle to Titus the same image recurs.

The parable, then, however wide and universal its application may be, sounds with special and significant import in the ears of those who are put in trust with any sacred ministry among men. The steward surrenders to his own interests his master's property. He seeks favour and friendship among his lord's debtors at the expense of his master. When pressed by circumstances, he sacrifices not only his own trust and his own honour, but his master's rights for the sake of avoiding the hard necessity of toil and poverty. There is a message and a warning for the ministers of God here.

Now, who were these in our Lord's day? Who were the stewards of such things when Christ spoke the parable?

The Scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat. The religious power of the day was wielded by Sadducee, Pharisee, Scribe, and Rabbi. At their door lay the duty to be faithful and to give meat to God's household in due season. We need not pause here. These men proved faithless in their high trust. The weightier matters of the law had been forgotten. Moral matters were set aside. Trifles were regarded as of importance. The mint, the anise, and the cummin were all important. The official spirit obtained all that priest and Levite needed. The tax, the tribute, the ceremonial which glorified the temple service and enriched the treasury were of the utmost importance. Judg-

ment, mercy, and the love of God—God's share in the religious life of the people—were disregarded.

Now, the action of the steward in the parable illustrates the conduct of those who are driven to desperate shifts to protect their own interests. In such cases expediency wins, and principle is set aside.

The action of Rulers and Pharisees in our Lord's day exemplify the same. It was an age of hollow compromises, and immoral expedients. The fear of doing wrong was not before their eyes; but the fear of losing worldly advantages was always with them. The reason for dealing with a case was expressed in the language of this fear: "If we let Him thus alone, . . . the Romans shall come and take away our place and nation." Caiaphas' saying embodied the spirit of their policy. It is expedient that one man should die for the nation. Right and wrong, justice and integrity, have no place. To do righteousness, and to dare the rest, was not a maxim among such men. The yield of the human heart to God in truthful thinking and loving action was never considered. Those which are God's corn and oil were kept back from their lawful owner. To surrender worldly advantages, prestige, honour, wealth, position, for the paltry sake of truth and mercy seemed outrageous extravagance. They knew better how to balance conflicting claims of heaven and earth. So when Christ, having spoken this parable, said, "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon," the Pharisees who were covetous derided Him.

Their derision revealed the hardening of their moral nature, which led to the supreme sacrifice of the Divine life which was among them. Christ, who was the bread of life indeed; Christ, whose grace shed the oil of gladness and holiness among men, was sacrificed by the men to whom self-interest was the chief good, and who had forgotten the rights of God in their eagerness to preserve their own.

It is not difficult to see the bearing of all this on modern life.

Every man is a steward of some power and influence. That power and influence is God's property. To use it so that the agent may gain, and the owner may lose, is to waste the Great Master's goods. Every man who uses his capacities and opportunities only for self is false to his stewardship. If he strains the sense of inward truthfulness, he tampers with the just ownership of that which is the corn of life. If he fails in sincerity, he sacrifices its oil.

Teachers of religion, the prophets of their age, have so sinned when they prophesied smooth things, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. They have robbed their Lord of the portion which was His when, for popularity's sake, they have lowered the demands of God upon man's allegiance and life. They have been fraudulent towards heaven when they have so spoken or acted as to lead men to think that freedom to sin might be connived at so long as the coffers of the Church were full, and her altars splendidly sustained. It is not difficult, alas! to lower the price of truth. Comfortable teaching, which makes formal or emotional conformity a substitute for reality and moral integrity in matters of faith, is one method of bidding the Lord's debtor to sit down quickly and write his obligations as fifty instead of a hundred.

It is not wise to press details too far; but we may remind ourselves that the oil and the corn are familiar images in Scripture. The oil is that which makes the lamps to glow with light. It is the influence of that Holy Spirit of Love without which life has no real, abiding brightness. St. Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Ten Virgins will come to our minds. Corn is the source of strength in life: it is bread which strengtheneth man's heart. Where love is wanting, and where truth fails, there God is defrauded. Take heed to thyself and to the doctrine, was

the Apostle's caution. Let the grace as well as the truth be yours. Let the oil as well as the corn be in full measure yielded up to God. In the ministry of our powers we must be salt as well as light. If we defraud truth to suit the popular taste, or if we by worldliness of demeanour lead men to think less of the imperious claim of a consecrated life, we are unfaithful in our stewardship. We tamper with the corn and the oil. The truth which makes men free, and the enlightening unction of the Holy One, become disregarded, and the Lord of Life is defrauded of the fruits of human life.

The lesson of the parable, therefore, becomes a caution against that shrewd and yet unscrupulous spirit which seeks self-interest at the cost of truth and principle.

There was one among the disciples, whose case exactly fitted the story. The character of Judas Iscariot is, I think, misunderstood. He was not so foolish and stupid a man as to be tempted by a paltry bribe of thirty pieces of silver when his position gave him the handling of much larger sums of money (see S. John xii. 6). Neither was he the subtle reader of wish and character such as philosophical apologists like De Quincey and Archbishop Whately would make him. He was a clever and self-interested schemer. There was a possibility, and a prospect, that our Lord would win the triumph of a temporal Messiah. It was politic therefore to be in a position to reap the advantages of such a triumph. But there was another contingency. It was possible that the prophet of Galilee should prove a disappointment, as other fancied Messiahs had done. With such a failure, Judas' dreams of future advancement and wealth would disappear. As time goes on, the chances of such a failure seem to be more apparent. His leader does not act as other leaders of popular movements. He shrinks back from the people's enthusiasm; He disappoints—He offends them; money

which might be used to conciliate the populace is allowed to be wasted. To the eye of Judas, it seems as though the position he had won and the hopes he had cherished are likely to be swept away. He feels too that he himself may possibly be suspected. His stewardship in one way or another may be taken away. It is the part of prudence to secure his retreat. It is essential to his self-interests that he should have the door of welcome open to him on the other side. Hence he negotiates with the party in authority. He agrees to sacrifice truth and principle for the sake of advantage. He puts his Master's foes in the way of gaining what they sought. From a worldly point of view it is an adroit scheme; for he has put the other side under an obligation, and whatever happens he has secured their favour. He is the unfaithful steward. He is the type of those who never were alive to the higher life of truth, loyalty, devotion and honour; but he goes beyond the timid selfishness of the souls whom Dante pictured; for he does not shrink from the sacrifice of life and honour so long as he can preserve his own interests. He is the type of those who for self's sake will allow any wrong or any suffering to go on, and who are content for any man or set of men to endure death or dishonour, or suffer spiritual loss rather than to forego their own safety or advantage.

The next question which presents itself is, Does such policy answer? If I understand aright our Lord's comments on the parable, He answers this question with the most emphatic negative. The attempt to serve God and Mammon is doomed to failure. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon. It is vain to try and stand well with the world and well with God. There may be times when the interests of the world coincide with the interests of righteousness; but the attempt to make both coincide is a mistake, which will be overtaken by shameful failure. Faithfulness,

down to the smallest matter of intellectual honesty and personal conscience, is essential to the mastery of those unseen conditions of life which prepare men for the possession of the true riches. Fidelity to the trust which is given us in this life leads to the throne and sovereignty over self which is an eternal inheritance. Life is an education towards true self-possession. To make self the centre now is to lose the inheritance of the true self hereafter. If ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? (S. Luke xvi. 12).

What then of the difficult verse (*v.* 9)? "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye fail (or when it shall fail) they may receive you into everlasting habitations." Are we to read these words as a counsel of the prudent use of this world's wealth? Are they not, in the light of the story, ironical? The policy which the faithless steward adopted did answer. He secured the open doors of welcome of the tenants; but such dextrous policy can never win open doors in the everlasting habitations. To tamper with a trust, and to suffer ourselves or others to think that we can defraud the Lord of all of one whit of His claim over us, may be followed by the smiles and patronage of those who dwell in sumptuous earthly mansions; but the heavenly gates are not so won. Let a man try it, and make friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness, what can such friends avail when the mansions are the eternal mansions of the imperishable and incorruptible righteousness of God?

Was not this the experience of Judas? He sought to make friends on a worldly basis. He hoped that a door of refuge would be opened to him whatever might happen. But the hour came when all his clever plotting was found vain. His self-seeking policy secured nothing. He found himself at last, as all self-seeking souls must find them-



selves, alone, with the doors of life closed on all sides against him. His miserable divided mind and self-centred soul could see no door of heaven opening to him. All the sagacity and adroitness had ended in a vain and fruitless shame. He saw no light of spiritual opportunity. Finding earth's doors and heaven's doors closed against him, he sought to hide away behind the gate of death the life which was such a miserable failure. His fate is the warning against the chimerical theory that the favour of men, won by concession of principle, can secure any permanent refuge in the time of direct and loneliest necessity. It is the lesson against endeavouring to win on both sides—on the spiritual and on the temporal.

“Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

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## THE DIFFICULT WORDS OF CHRIST.

### 1. THE CHILDREN AT PLAY.

MATT. XI. 16-19.<sup>1</sup>

THIS passage is a criticism passed by Christ upon the generation to which He belonged, in respect of their treatment of the Baptist and Himself.

Characteristically He has embodied His rebuke in a figure of speech. It is also characteristic that the image is borrowed from common life. He took the commonest incidents of everyday life, such as the mending of the rent in an old garment or the lighting of the household lamp,

<sup>1</sup> “But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”