

**BACKGROUND - 18 September 2016**  
**(Reading: Luke 16:1-13)**

I found the key to interpretation of this difficult passage in its wider Jewish context of the first century Mediterranean world. Let me explain:

In the immediate context of Jesus, He and the rest were all Jews, meaning that they all shared a common culture, value system and religious law. In their world everyone owned the same as everyone else. They all shared in the “limited goods” that were available to them all. Everyone was supposed to have the same amount of land and goods. If you had more, it meant only one thing! You either inherited it or you stole it. Rich landowners were despised for the fact that they “stole” the properties of poor landowners. No one expected any good of them. In Galilee absentee landlords were common phenomena.

It was also not allowed for any Jew to ask any interest on debts from a fellow Jew. As a matter of fact every seventh year they had to write off any debt. But as always there were ways of charging interest, like adding on the interest on the final sum of debt in the form of goods. So, let’s say someone owned 80 bags of wheat they could add 25% of interest making the total figure of debt 100 bags of wheat.

In our reading the culturally despised landowner wants to fire his steward for “squandering his possessions”. The Greek word for steward *oikonomos*, can mean a house-distributor or manager, or overseer, a fiscal agent (treasurer), chamberlain, or governor. The steward had general charge of the business of the house, and was also responsible for the care of the heir. The honorable position of the steward is seen in the fact that he was considered to be ruler over the household. Many well-to-do landowners had managers to oversee their estates; these managers, or stewards, could be slaves or, as here, free persons. Squandering another’s possessions was considered a particularly despicable crime. It meant that he did not act as a proper steward, taking good care of his master’s household.

So the master orders him to give an account of his management which of course meant “debt management/debt consolidation”. So, the manager/steward has all our sympathy, as the poor victim who could not even defend himself against the accusations of his master. Did he do anything wrong?

To be honest: I wonder about the intentions of this man. One scenario would be that he acted “justly” by not adding any interest but what they really owed. Through this act he could have gained three things namely:

- The respect of the debtors which could help in future;
- The silence of his master because, if he complained, his own injustice would become apparent;
- His integrity for following the law and not charging the interest.

But if he really was innocent of any money squandering, if he really took good care of his master’s affairs, why would he ask each of the debtors what they owed? He must have known the exact figures if he really was in charge or he was playing a game. If he was innocent and renowned as an honourable man, he would not have been worried about finding another job. In that society it was all about honour and shame. If you were regarded as honourable, people would have respect for you!

I think the steward was indeed a worldly man who acted according to the worldly laws. In the beginning we almost feel sorry for him, but then, when he starts speaking we get a glimpse of his personality. He does not want to do hard labour. He only thinks of himself. Then he plays a card that must have been quite a blow to the landowner – that the manager would dare to expose his dealings with the debtors?

It is no wonder the land owner praised him. He had no other option, otherwise his unjust dealings with his debtors would come to light. Therefore he says: “you acted wisely...” Although we expected him to be angry, he was quite calm, revealing the slyness of his character, saying that the steward acted just as he would have acted! Both of them were guilty of acting unjustly although our initial sympathy was with the poor manager!

No wonder Jesus said: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Amen.

## **SERMON**

Text verse: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

What does it mean?

I guess Jesus was saying that there are different values, namely, that of the world and that of being a follower of him.

Jesus was actually saying that “children of the light” must be different and do things differently. In this parable it is all about acquiring wealth and riches from other people. It is an example of “good first century business practice”. But it is not supposed to be the general practice of the children of the light!

The children of the light must never be under any suspicion of unjust and immoral behaviour, even today amidst our “good business practice” of acquiring wealth and material things. Children of God can never compromise the values of the Kingdom. In the heavenly Kingdom there is just ONE God and ONE master. To follow Him means that He will get first priority in everything. He knows the hearts of people.

The message of our parable fits in well after last Sunday’s parable in the sense that Jesus is now making a further urgent appeal on the lives of His followers. He is spelling out the radical choice and change that is required for following Him. No-one can serve two masters.

God is the seeker and He will make sure His followers are part of His heavenly banquet. He will do everything in His loving power to **include** rather than to exclude. But He wants them to know that in order to

inherit His kingdom they must know that there are values that need to be followed, values of love, fairness, justice and truth.

We are the messengers of God, we have a responsibility to actively seek out those who are lost and discriminated against. We have a responsibility to see to it that each and every one on this earth is treated justly. We have to act out the values of God's love in everything we do, say and think. We need to love in such a way that people will see God's love shining through our actions.

I am sure all of you have seen the movie "Schindler's List". It tells the true story of Oskar Schindler who was a Nazi officer and quite a "shrewd" businessman in the Second World War. He turned his life and shrewd business sense into good by saving hundreds of Jews through his canny practise of bribing other Nazi officers. When he died, the Israeli government allowed him to be buried on Mount Zion as a token of their appreciation of his work.

Jesus found you and me. He saved us from sin, death and hell. He made sure you and I will inherit His kingdom. He even gave us His Holy Spirit to guide and help us to live and act according to His values of love, justice and truth. So let's hold on to HIS hand.

May we never ever compromise the fact that in life and death we belong to God and with his help we do not need the world to tell us otherwise!

Amen