

CHAPTER XI

The Marks of Discipleship (IV)

RESOURCEFULNESS AND FORESIGHT

THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

"And he said also unto the disciples, There was a certain rich man, who had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward. And the steward said within himself, What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship they may receive me into their houses. And calling to him each one of his lord's debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore. And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely: for the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles."

(Luke 16:1-9)

*Allegory - a metaphor
or a comparison
apostate - forsaker of faith
astute - being cunning and shrewd*

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Did this master "commend" a servant who had defrauded him? Did Jesus use the rogue "to point a moral and adorn a tale"? Many commentators have felt that to give this parable a straightforward meaning is to cast a cloud, if not on the radiant name, then certainly on the good judgment of Jesus.¹ The Emperor Julian, becoming apostate from the Christian faith, made capital of this story as being contrary to high morality. To escape the seeming impasse the critics have coined interpretations which are miracles of ingenuity. Some have regarded the Unjust Steward as a symbol of Jesus, and others have found in him a representation of Satan—two views which ought to be mutually destructive! This versatile character has been made the type also of Paul, Pilate, and Judas.² He has been allegorized by opposing schools of thought, as on the one hand, Christ's warning to the Pharisees and, on the other, an example suggested by Him for their imitation!³ The different expositions offered would comprise a considerable and very self-contradictory library.

The story is a parable and not an allegory. It is as far from allegory as any of the parables—a fact which cuts the ground away from a multitude of mistaken renderings. We need not ask who is intended by the steward or who by the "Lord"; or what esoteric meaning is hidden in the drama of "dismissal." We need not search for finespun analogies. The story is its own best evidence—as bold and challenging a story as Jesus ever told.

¹ Thus Keim cited by Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 357, as believing that such "gross morality of prudence" could not come from the lips of Jesus.

² See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

³ Tertullian thinks the story is aimed not solely at the Pharisees, but at the whole Jewish nation.

But did this lord commend the deceitful underling? Verily, but not for his deceit! He commended him for his astuteness.⁴ Every one at times singles from an unprincipled character some trait for admiration. If a man comes to our door with a "hard luck story" and persuades us by his plausibility to a foolish charity, and if we find the next day that he is a rank impostor, we are apt to say ruefully: "Why doesn't he earn an honest living? He is shrewd enough!" Or if we see a criminal in the dock, his misdeeds proved to the red hilt, facing sentence of death without a tremor, we pay tribute to his courage though we stand in horror at his crimes. This parable approves not the fraudulence of the Unjust Steward, but his foresight. Its language is quite explicit—"because he had done shrewdly." The *thievery* was visited, we are left to surmise, with summary dismissal.

Then did Jesus use such a man as an example? Yes—as an example in resource, not as an example in point of corruption. It is not reverence, but merely stiltedness, which bestows on Jesus an unnatural halo and robs Him of keen-humored interest in the chequered interplay of human life. Admittedly Jesus could have chosen a more respectable character to grace a parable, but not one more piquant and striking. He crowded His canvas with a motley array of types, not all of them unsmirched. An earthly story even for the purpose of a heavenly meaning must use earthly people, and earthly people are not paragons:

". . . not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food."⁵

Jesus told another story of a heartless judge⁶ before whom a widow pleaded her cause with ceaseless importunings. He let her go, not for the sake of either justice or mercy, but to be rid of her, and because he was weary of her pestering. Jesus pointed the moral: If a heartless judge forgave that woman because of her importunity, you may trust a Fatherly God to vindicate His elect if they offer ceaseless prayers. But a

⁴ Thus an older Latin version seems to have had "*astutiores*" ("wiser") in v. 8. See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 442, footnote.

⁵ William Wordsworth, "She was a phantom of delight."

⁶ Luke 18: 1-8. See p. 167 of this book.

heartless judge, one might think, is not particularly appropriate in the rôle of God. But he is appropriate in an argument from little to great, from bad to good,⁷ and he can be counted on to grip and hold the attention of the hearers. The mind once gripped can be trusted to separate the wheat of the story from its chaff. The Parable of the Unjust Steward must have electrified those who first heard it. The theme is daring, the dramatic turns sudden and surprising, and the final challenge leaves the soul without defence.

This steward was the trusted overseer⁸ of his master's estate, but he betrayed the trust. The nature of the perfidy we are not told. Perhaps he enjoyed hilarious evenings with his cronies while his master's money paid the bills. Soon the betrayal came to the master's ears. "Why do I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship." There was no convincing account to be given, and a rascal faced the threatened ruin of his career. He took counsel with himself: "What shall I do? My master is about to take away my stewardship. I cannot dig; I have been in my cups too often, my flesh is too soft for manual labor. I cannot beg; my pride rebels at the thought of whimpering at thresholds. What shall I do? I have it!⁹ I know what I will do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me unto their houses."

Into whose "houses"? What will he do? Mark the clever scheme! Precautions had probably been taken to forestall any attempt by the steward to decamp with a bag of gold. So he called one of his master's debtors.

"How much do you owe?"

"A hundred measures of oil."

This debtor held the tenancy of an olive grove, and paid rent in kind—one measure of oil for every ten the grove produced.

"Take thy voucher¹⁰ and sit down quickly and write fifty."

⁷ Jesus was very fond, as many instances in His teaching plainly show, of the *a fortiori* argument.

⁸ Like the Scotch bailiff or factor; a position similar to that described in Genesis 39: 5, 6.

⁹ The Greek (*egnon*) has the force of an exclamation, and expresses the sudden birth of the idea.

¹⁰ Literally, "writing"—the bond or deed declaring the terms of the tenancy, and, possible, the indebtedness paid or due.

Note the word "quickly." The steward was not flustered (he was too cool a customer!) but simply prompt. Another debtor was called: "How much do you owe?" He owed a hundred measures of wheat—a tenth of the thousand measures which the land had yielded. "Write eighty" was the instruction. Did the percentage of reduction vary because our inspiring hero knew each man's price, or was the variation simply a flair, part of the splendid highhandedness of the plan? But the scheme was not clever enough to elude his master's ears and eyes, and once more he was hailed into the condemning presence. "And his master"—imagine the gasp of surprise as Jesus spoke the words; for the disciples¹¹ were sure, as the story reached its climax, that the steward would be consigned to outer darkness—"and his master commended the unjust steward because he had done shrewdly!"

This "commendation" does not mean that the "master" pronounced any formal eulogies. (When will we concede the glow and tang of the human in the speech of Jesus?) The "master" had suffered the pangs of a man deceived; he was not surprised or unduly hurt at news of further fraud. Himself a man of the world, he was probably curious to know how his steward would wriggle out of a corner from which there seemed to be no escape. He pronounced no formal eulogies (he was not in the mood!), but his admiration was won in spite of himself. He knew deftness, quick thinking, unflustered action when he saw them. "You rogue!" he exclaimed; "of all the impudent coolness! I'm bound to admit you're clever. There's something almost magnificent about you!"

While the disciples were chuckling over the surprising issue of the story, Jesus turned on them—humor in His eyes, and love, and holy purpose—and drove home the sharp truth: "For the sons of this age are wiser toward their generation than the children of light."¹²

¹¹ Luke says the story was told to the disciples. "Disciples" does not necessarily mean only the twelve disciples.

¹² There is an alternative interpretation which deserves careful consideration, namely, that based on the idea that the steward had been extortionate with his master's debtors, and was now squaring with them, bringing forth fruits of repentance. The "commendation" bestowed by the "master" is thus justified, and the moral becomes clear. Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 439 footnote, takes note of this

It is a challenge to resourceful zeal. The worldling in pursuit of money shows a consuming eagerness. He labors early and late. He allows himself few vacations. When the hard day is ended, he gives himself with the fervor of a saint to the study of "the psychology of salesmanship." Barriers do not daunt him; they are erected to be overcome. His devotion to the quest of wealth is all-absorbing. But what of the quest of "the enlightened ones" for God? The "sons of this age" in pursuit of *pleasure* show no lack of ardor. They will tax body and mind to their limit to win the goal. Is golf their pleasure? They will stint no money for clubs or instruction. They will study the mysteries of stance, grip, swing, "follow." They will recite the incantations of the game ("Keep your eye on the ball") with a faith as of celebrants of some high ritual. Disappointment must not conquer them. If they fail a hundred times, they return with courage renewed, resolved to achieve. But what of the "enlightened ones," who are the children of eternal tidings, in their quest for truth?

These have received the truth of a new age. They have become disciples, for example, to the immemorial insight of the Bible. But do they pursue the truth of the scriptures as the "sons of this age" pursue business or pleasure? That the Book is supremely worth studying admits of no question. If a book can maintain itself in public regard for a century it has worth; not many of the books of to-day are likely to stand that test. If a book lives for several centuries it has claim to greatness. But what of a Book which lasts thousands of years, crosses oceans and mountains, is translated into several hundred languages, and overleaps every obstacle of caste and color?—a Book which Ruskin confessed to be "the one essential part" of his education; of which Carlyle declared, that "for thousands of years the spirit of man has found light and

interpretation as advanced by Schulz in 1821. Recently Latham ("Pastor Pastorum," pp. 386-398) has revived the view in slightly different form. His exegesis is written with charm and persuasiveness. The steward, he said, had been extortionate in his master's interests, and the reduction of indebtedness was a token that he finally recognized the rights of (poor) tenants. The parable is thus a warning against that holy zeal which forgets human kindness. But will the parable abide any such construction? The steward is described as "unrighteous." The motive of the reduction of the indebtedness seems to be made clear: "that they may receive me into their houses." He was feathering his nest against the approaching storm! Furthermore, the whole mood and tempo of the story seem to us in keeping with the interpretation I have suggested.

nourishment" in its pages? Yet this is the Book which in the homes of the "enlightened" lies unopened! They do not steep themselves in its radiant verities as another man steeps himself in the barrenness of stock exchange quotations! It is treasured indeed, but only as a sacred horseshoe—in the vague hope that it will bring good luck. "For the children of this age" are more zealously resourceful towards their generation, than "the children of light" towards God.

The parable is a challenge to reality. The Unjust Steward took stock of his situation and faced facts. He refused to live in a fool's paradise. He reckoned assets and liabilities with frank and fearless eyes. Rogue that he was, he was at least honest with himself: "To dig I have no strength. To beg I am ashamed." The "sons of this age" are in their own way the sons of reality.

But are the "enlightened ones" similarly real? How many hoary lies in theology have endured because the should-be "children of light" have stubbornly closed their eyes to new discoveries of truth? And what of unreality in the wider realm of the art of living? Do the "illumined of God" insist on findings of fact, and do they order life according to the findings? Fame is a bubble, money a gilded hollowness, and comfort a stagnation. There is enough of history to prove and doubly prove that indictment; the logic of human experience is on that score irrefutable. But are "Christians" characterized in their manner of life by the frank facing of this data? Do they take honest stock of their life-situation? John Masefield has enumerated his sources of joy!

"London has been my prison,
But my books, hills and great waters, laboring men and brooks,
Ships and deep friendships, and remembered days
Which even now set all the mind ablaze . . ." ¹³

Others have garnered similar insight from the fields of human joy and tears, and have counselled with their fellows regarding the shadow and the substance of our peace. The vast calm of nature—the distilled wisdom of great books—the handclasp of a friend—a few unshadowed pleasures—a spirit sensitive to

¹³ John Masefield, "Biography." ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Co., 1921.)

beauty in music and all art, and more sensitive to human cheer and courage—the rapture and the loyalty of human love—a soul kept clean to serve the common good—the printing of the radiant image of Jesus on the retina of our eyes so that we see all things through Him—the daily linking of our mortal pool with God's ocean by the simplicity of prayer; these are "the things which belong unto our peace." Ages of human travail supply the evidence. Then why evade the facts? (A business man does not blink business facts!) Why succumb to the unenlightened standards of the world? Why surrender the quest when driven into a corner of difficulty? But "the children of this world" are more real in matters that pertain to "their generation" than the "children of light" in matters that pertain to life.

The parable is a challenge to foresight. The Unjust Steward considered his future. He resisted the temptation to thrust from his mind his imminent dismissal. "When the blow falls," he said, "I still must live, and I must decide now how I shall live." But what of the "children of light"? Do they so plan that they may be received "into their houses"? ¹⁴ There is a world beyond this world,—or, rather, a world holding this world in its spiritual ether as the universe holds a planet. Jesus assumed this wide realm of immortality: "If it were not so I would have told you." ¹⁵ In our liberated hours we also assume it. It is hard to believe that a child of ours born in travail and reared in love will one day, soon or late, become a white powder in the ground. Our refusal to believe in extinction may be in face of the facts of sight, but it keeps faith with facts deeper than sight. The idea that compassion is a mere titillation of the flesh, or that Jesus is long ago indistinguishable from Syrian dust, evokes from the soul an instant challenge and rebuttal. The soul's scorn for the doctrine of

¹⁴ There is obviously a transition in the parable beginning with v. 9. The emphasis up to that point has been on the contrast between the "wisdom" of the world and the "wisdom" of the enlightened. Then the emphasis shifts from "wisdom" (resource) to "faithfulness." V. 9 has a point of definite connection with the parable, as the interpretation above given attempts to show; but its mood is different. Some commentators think the parable originally ended with v. 8. If so, vv. 9 ff., it would seem, are in themselves supplied from teaching of Jesus given on other occasions; or are a direct reflection of His message. As such, and because of their similarity of theme, their conjunction with this parable is justified.

¹⁵ John 14:2.

annihilation is comparable with the scorn of science for the doctrine that the universe is chaos; it has the same validity for it moves in the same realm of faith; either doctrine makes life a farrago of nonsense. There is a future, we invincibly surmise, beyond the bounds of mortality. Do the "children of light" prepare for it, with a foresight as clear as that which marks the dealings of the world?

"Make friends to yourself by the mammon of unrighteousness."¹⁶ Is money unrighteous? Verily, since no human wealth is without blemish. What a story a coin could tell, if it had speech! How do we know that the clothes we wear were not made by sweated labor, or woven by dishonest hands? How do we know that our houses did not involve some sharp practice, or that the printing of our Bible did not implicate some unfaithfulness in employer or employee? We are "bound up in the bundle of life," and the taint in one life tinges us all. But the mammon of unrighteousness can, nevertheless, be dedicated to the cause of friendship. Our substance of earth may be compelled into molds of pity and love. It may be enlisted in the service of world peace. It may provide enlightenment for dark minds, healing for broken bodies, and shelter for the fatherless. If we make *such* use of "the unrighteous mammon" the future will be homelike; "that they may receive you into eternal tents."¹⁷

"Eternal tents"—what a description of heaven! A tent is a symbol of impermanence: "My dwelling is removed, and is carried away from me as a shepherd's tent . . ." ¹⁸ "I know that if this earthly tent of mine is taken down . . ." ¹⁹ A tent is pitched at sunset and struck again at dawn. But "eternal" involves, as one of its meanings, "that which endures." "Eter-

¹⁶ We cannot say if Jesus meant more by this phrase than that money is a snare: "the deceitfulness of riches." The above suggestions are at any rate in keeping with the facts of experience.

¹⁷ This must not be construed as an appeal to selfishness. The reasoning is again *a fortiori* as v. 11 shows. It is an argument from an unjust steward to the children of light, from "unrighteous mammon" to "genuine wealth," from a selfish feathering of one's own nest to the instinctive and serviceable joy of friendship human and divine.

¹⁸ Isaiah 38: 12.

¹⁹ II Corinthians 5: 1 as Dr. Moffatt beautifully and accurately translates it. The verse contrasts the impermanence of a tent with the permanence of a home. The influence of the tented wanderings of Israel strongly persists in Biblical metaphor and simile. Two especially lovely references may be found in Hebrews 9: 11 (see Moffatt's translation) and Revelation 21: 3.

nal tents" is a contradiction of terms, or, rather, a communion of opposites. Heaven is a "tent" because its peace is not idleness, its rest is not stagnation; it has the hope of the unattained, the zest of the ongoing. Heaven is "eternal" because its energies bring no poison of fatigue, its journeys no disappointment; because its hope is always brimming eagerness. Heaven's progress is still an abiding; its tents *are* a home. "Eternal tents"—surely it is Jesus' gracious word!

Heaven becomes homelike as earth becomes homelike—the glow and confidence of love. "They shall receive you"—who are "they"? The poor who have been succored, the sorrowing who have been comforted, the little children who have been won to laughter! "They shall receive you into their houses."

Are the "children of this world" really wise? No, for their wisdom is only "towards their generation"! They draw the "circle premature." They have no horizon city. They do not see "the king in his beauty" or "the land that reacheth afar."²⁰ But there are elect souls (Jesus is their Captain) who pursue God with as consuming a zeal, as fearless a reality, as resourceful a foresight, as a miser pursues wealth, or a worldling his world. We look into their faces—these "sons of light"—and we know they are rich in "genuine wealth." Even now, in the frail canvas of this flesh, they are dwelling in "eternal tents."

²⁰ Isaiah 33: 17.