

ARTICLE II.

THE UNJUST STEWARD.

Luke xvi: 1, 12 verses.

[by the Rev. J.A. Stanfield]

No one of the parables of our Lord has presented greater difficulties to the general reader of the Scriptures. Neither has any met with a greater variety of interpretations. It has particularly perplexed that class of interpreters who delight in particularizing, making every incident mentioned in the parable represent some distinct truth. "In this," says Calvin, we perceive that they philosophize foolishly, who in the parables scrupulously follow out (excutiunt) all the parts." Such are compelled to say who is represented by the rich man—who by the steward—who by the debtors? Also, what the accusation teaches—what the reckoning—what the altering of the accounts—what the commendation? Many of these interpretations are extremely fanciful, and often they indicate great ingenuity in their authors. Our object however, is not to give a history of opinions, but rather to present to the reader the true interpretation of this parable.

In attempting to do this we shall aim not at originality, but at a brief statement and vindication of what appears to be the design of our Saviour in the use of the passage before us.

We believe that the doctrine of the parable is, that we should so use the gifts which God has committed to us, as to secure our own everlasting welfare, or, if this appear too general, that we should use our **temperal** possessions, which we hold as stewards of God, so that when we die we may have friends in Heaven who shall welcome us to their habitations. "The sum of this parable is, that we should act humanely and kindly towards our fellows, so that when we come before the tribunal of God we may receive the fruit of our liberality."

It is to be observed, that this parable is spoken to His disciples. In the preceding chapter we have three, all

of which were spoken to the Pharisees, and whose design was to vindicate his own conduct. "*The Pharisees and Scribes murmured saying, this man receiveth sinners and eateth with them, and he spake this parable unto them saying.*" Then follow three parables in which his own conduct is most triumphantly vindicated, and the murmerers placed in a most unenviable light. Having finished these, the historian adds, *And he said unto his disciples.* The audience was the same; but he now ceased to direct his conversation to the Pharisees, and turned to his disciples, thus indicating that what was to follow was for their especial direction.

The case drawn is that of a man who finds himself in a position desirable in itself; but he is soon to leave it. He has been *accused unto his Lord*, and he has said, *Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward.* He looks immediately to the period which is to succeed his dismissal. He asks, *What shall I do, for my Lord taketh away from me the stewardship. I cannot dig. To beg I am ashamed?* He has no wealth of his own. He has never been accustomed to labor. He cannot consent to become a beggar. His case is truly perplexing. He quickly falls upon a device. He resolves so to use the time allowed him for rendering his accounts, and to take such advantage of his position, as to make the debtors of his Lord his own obliged friends, *So that when I am put out of the stewardship they may receive me into their houses.* He then proceeded to call up the different debtors—how many we know not—gave them back their bills, (or notes of obligation,) and permitted them to return new ones. Instead of *one hundred measures of oil*, one gave his note for fifty. Instead of an hundred measures of wheat, another gave his note for eighty. The conclusion of the matter seems to have been, that the steward was removed, and afterwards entertained at the expense of the debtors of his Lord.

These facts afterwards came to the ears of the rich man, and (he, the rich man, not Christ.) *The Lord commended the unjust steward because he had acted (wisely,) prudently.* The translation of this record we regard as very unfortunate. The terms wisdom, wise,

and wisely, are so repeatedly and unqualifiedly used in the sacred Scriptures in a good sense, that the English reader is always perplexed at the application of the term *wise* to the conduct of the unjust steward. He acted with *worldly prudence*, with policy and cunning, and it was for these qualities that his former lord commended him. “*For,*” adds the Saviour, “*the children of this world,*” by whom he means, those who live for the world, and are ruled by its unholy precepts and maxims, *are wiser*, more prudent; study more closely the means adapted to secure the end, and use them more diligently *in their generation*, or perhaps towards their generation,—towards those upon whom their success depends—than the *children of the light*. Men of the world show more energy, skill, and consistency in the pursuit of their chosen ends, than *the children of the light*, the regenerate, do in the securing of heavenly rewards.

Then follows the application. *Make to yourselves friends of—by means of—the mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye fail, die, or surrender your stewardship, they, the friends, may receive you into everlasting habitations.* *The mammon of unrighteousness* is the same thing as *unrighteous mammon*.—Verse 11. Many pious readers have here, been greatly perplexed, because they supposed that, by unrighteous mammon was meant gain unlawfully gotten, and that Christ inculcated the use of unlawful acquisitions to further our eternal happiness. The enemies of Christianity, in searching for proof that the religion of Jesus encouraged vice, have rung the changes upon this passage again and again. Romanists too, have countenanced the idea that eleemosynary gifts at the end of life, would make atonement for years of transgression. None of these ideas, however, are really countenanced by the text. Christ never encouraged fraud, and God says, I hate robbery for burnt offering. Unlawfully gotten gain is to be *given back* to its real owners, if possible! So did Zaccheus, the Publican. We believe, and it is a significant and pregnant thought, that Christ uses the expressions *mammon of unrighteousness* and *unrighteous mammon*, just as he does the deceitfulness of riches, and as applicable to all earthly possessions. “He calls them the mammon of

unrighteousness, because he wishes to render them suspected to us, since they for the most part, involve their possessions in iniquity. And although they are not evil in themselves, still they are rarely acquired without fraud or violence, or other immoral acts. They are rarely possessed without pride, luxury, and other depraved affections, and the force of the exhortation is in this, that Christ urges us to use these things, so often the source of evil, for ensuring to ourselves the Divine favor.”

The remainder of the passage is an argument urging faithfulness in the use of our temporal gifts, first by the application of a common maxim to the matter in hand. *He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also, in much, and he that is unjust in the least, is unjust also, in much. If then, we prove ourselves unfaithful in the use of the least, the (unrighteous mammon,) who will commit unto us true riches or heavenly habitations?*

*And if we have not been faithful in that which is another's, (God's,) the gifts which have been committed to us as stewards, who shall give us that which is our own, that is, the blessings of Heaven which will be finally and permanently bestowed?*

The point of the parable we make to be this, that Christ inculcates the prudent, faithful, liberal use of our earthly possessions, to the end that when we are called upon to leave these, we may have friends in Heaven who will joyfully welcome us to partake of their everlasting blessings.

We are aware that this interpretation is embarrassed with several difficulties, to the consideration, and as far as we are able, the removal of these, we now invite the attention of the reader:

1. Many persons find great difficulty in the fact, that in the wicked conduct of the steward is found an example for the imitation of the saints.

Here we remark, that in drawing his parables, Christ took pictures from real life, not wholly good, but in which there were always mingled shades of good and evil. In each parable there is some grand doctrine illustrated, and the particular application of the parable is indicated by the context, or by the explanation of its

Divine author. There may be some quality in an evil course of conduct, which those who are in the pursuit of good ends may emulate,—for example,—energy, determination, perseverance, or patience. Just as in the parable of the “Hidden Treasure,” Christ says, “The kingdom of Heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field, which, when a man hath found he hideth, and for joy thereof, goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field.” What we are to learn here is, that the kingdom of Heaven is to be sought with all earnestness, at every sacrifice. The honesty of the man is not presented for our consideration, but his anxiety to possess the field; his willingness to make every sacrifice to attain it. He doubtless did wrong in concealing from the owner the fact that the treasure was hidden there, but this fact but heightens our view of his eagerness to possess it. As that man sought an earthly possession with energy, promptness, and by surrendering all his previous possessions, let us so esteem and so pursue the kingdom of Heaven. The festive scene at the return of the prodigal son does not teach that dancing is right, or that they dance in Heaven, but it is a part of the description of real life in the east, and indicates the joy of the family at the return of the son. So, here it is not the duplicity or injustice of the steward, *but his prudence*. He saw the difficulties of his position, he lived for the world; he was regardless of right; the question with him was, “how shall I avoid the suffering which will follow my removal from office?” He solved the question, and acted promptly. He secured the end. Like him we are stewards. Like him we are soon to surrender our places. Let us look to the future; let us ask what we shall do when our Lord takes away the stewardship? Let us have resources beyond that point. Like him, let us have friends to whom we may look, and on whom we dare depend. Let us make to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when we fail they may receive us. Those friends are not secured by wickedness, but by goodness. By faithfulness in that which is least, in the unrighteous mammon, we shall receive the true riches. By the honest and upright use of what has been lent for a time, (*another’s*.) we may hope to ob-

tain what is *our own*, in the sense that it shall be perpetual.

2. Another, and perhaps a greater difficulty, is the apparent countenance to the doctrine that Heaven may be purchased by money, which is found in this place.

In reference to this, we remark in the first place, that the difficulty is not with our interpretation, but attaches inseparably to the passage. Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye fail they may receive you into their houses.

There is no fair interpretation of the parable and its application, which does not leave us to grapple with this difficulty. How is it to be met? Is it intended to establish the doctrine of justification by the merit of works, or are we to look upon this as contradicting those passages which teach us that salvation is by grace? We answer, there are two classes of passages in the Bible, each having reference to the great question of salvation, but to different aspects of that question. The questions are, what is the ground of justification? What is the character of those who are justified?

The just shall live by faith. By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified.

“Whosoever believeth on me hath everlasting life.”

In reference to the method of salvation, it is clear as the noonday sun that we are saved by grace through faith.

Still, in reference to the character of the saved, the Scriptures no less clearly teach, that their conduct is a matter of infinite importance, and has direct **connexion** with their eternal state.

The great design of God in the gift of his Son, was to redeem us from iniquity, and purify unto himself, a peculiar people, zealous of good works. The Saints are created unto good works, that they should walk in them. Holiness is salvation. We approach the New Jerusalem as we become like its inhabitants.

Again, obedience is not only the end to which we are called, but it is proof of our justification. Hence, when the Psalmist declares who are the “blessed,” he describes not the ground of their acceptance or religion in its vital principle, but in its external manifestation. “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the

law of the Lord. Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners.” And Christ says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

Still further, we remark, that the works of the Saints will be brought into judgment, and these will be the measure of their happiness. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting. See also, the parable of the talents.

Once more we add, so numerous and so strong are the passages which show the connection between our conduct here and our happiness hereafter, that if they were taken by themselves they would teach that there is a procuring merit in works, especially in works of benevolence. “Blessed is the man that bath mercy on the poor. He that giveth to a disciple a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, shall not lose a disciple’s reward. Go sell all that thou hast and give unto the poor and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Come ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was a hungered and ye gave me meat; I was athirst and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and ye clothed me, for “inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto me.”

These passages are the counterparts of that on which we are commenting, and when we consider it in **connex-ion** with them, and remember that it is spoken to the “Disciples,” those who acknowledge Christ as the Saviour, we conclude that to “make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness” is, *first*, to “evidence our discipleship by our present faithfulness; and second, to honour Christ in the person of his saints, so that we may be welcomed to Heaven by both him and them, saying, come ye blessed of my Father.

3. The sense which we have aimed to establish may be objected to, on the ground that it seems to encourage selfishness. The doctrine is, that we use our present ad-

vantages to secure our highest everlasting welfare. Our answer is, that this is the selfishness everywhere inculcated in the sacred Scriptures. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever, and this is secured by one and the same course of conduct. The confusion of ideas here, arises out of the nature of a stewardship. In earthly affairs, the steward is bound to consider the interest of his lord. In the parable the guilt of the steward was, in violating his lord's rights,—his prudence in providing for his own. Their interests were not identical, and though "wise," he was unjust. But, in our case, there is no such division of interests. Our stewardship is of such a nature, that our Lord is most honoured when our own interests are best secured, and we do not incur his guilt when we emulate his prudence. The wisdom of the Divine economy is still further illustrated when we consider that our own ultimate happiness is intimately connected with our seeking the friendship of others. The highest policy is the most extended benevolence. The liberal soul is made fat, and they that water others, are themselves watered.

**"This above all, to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow as the night the day;  
Thou canst not then be false to any man."**

"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Religion thus comes in to bind mankind together in one universal brotherhood.

We have gone too far now, to enter upon a discussion of the metaphysical question here involved, *i.e.*, whether the essence of virtue is that we lose sight of our own happiness. The Bible teaches otherwise, and while it condemns all those acts of selfishness into which men are led by the deceitfulness of riches, and the love of unrighteous mammon, it teaches that uprightness, benevolence, love, will not only be remembered in the present high enjoyment of those who cultivate these feelings, but that we shall reap in eternity the benefits of a faithful use of our Lord's money.

The fatherhood of God; the brotherhood of men, is the great idea of the Gospel.

4. The last point on which we shall remark is, the question who are the friends that are to receive us into their eternal habitations. We have made them the persons for whose benefit we have used our possessions. Some have said God, and Christ, and the Angels, who look with favor upon our benevolent deeds, and who alone, have habitations into which to receive us.

This destroys the unity of the parable. It was to the persons for whose benefit he conferred his lord's goods, that the unjust steward looked for a reception into their houses, and it seems to us, *that the friends* whom we are to make by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, are our brethren in tribulation. Many of the saints whom we have it in our power to bless, will go before us. They will enter into the everlasting habitations. These will be "their own." And it is a pleasing thought that they will *receive*, not by authority, but by permission, and with joyful welcome, those that follow after. *In my Father's house are many mansions.* There is room in Heaven for all that shall come, and we believe that the friendships of earth shall not be forgotten there.

When the Christian pilgrim comes to the end of his journey he stands on the confines of two worlds, in each of which, he has friends. The friends of earth stand round him, they minister to the suffering body, they weep around the dying bed, they wrap the cold and stiffened body in its shroud of white, and deposit in the grave. Meanwhile the spirit has launched away. In an instant it finds itself in new society. The loved and the lost are there. Happy spirits beckon him upward, and as the returning brother is welcomed and greeted at home, so the stranger from earth finds himself at home in Heaven. The Pastor there meets the lambs of his flock; the Missionary those whom he has gathered from among the heathen, and every one who has used in faithfulness his earthly stewardship, will find he has there, some friends to welcome him to their everlasting habitations.