The Perplexing Parable of the Shrewd Steward
Rediscovering Luke 16:1-8a Through the Lens of Context

Key Questions
Does context really matter? When engaging God’s Word, is it important to approach a passage through the eyes and ears of a Middle Eastern villager? These questions are emphatically answered “yes” in the parable of the Shrewd Steward.

If ever there was a parable of Jesus that has been considered “notoriously difficult” and culturally intricate to interpret, it is this parable of the Shrewd Steward. On the surface, Jesus seems to be commending dishonesty and misrepresentation. How could that possibly be? With the help of Kenneth Bailey, this Reflection will attempt to distill his cultural analysis of this parable as found in Poet and Peasant, pages 86-110, and later summarized in Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, pages 332-342. There is probably no one more knowledgeable when it comes to the cultural and linguistic context of Luke’s parables than Bailey. See if you agree.

A Helpful Backdrop
More and more material has been forthcoming in recent years on the sociology of Palestine in the First Century, much of it helpful in setting the stage for Jesus’ agrarian parables. In their book Palestine in the Time of Jesus, K. C. Hanson and Douglass Oakman observe that 80-90% of the people in Palestine in the First Century were peasants, i.e., indebted tenant farmers, living on the edge of poverty. Almost all the land in Palestine was owned and controlled by elite absentee landowners who heavily taxed the crops as rental for the land. Rents of 25-33% of the grain yield and 50% of the fruit yield were not unusual.

If you were a peasant farmer in the First Century, your reality was that you were but one crop failure/drought removed from financial ruin and debtor’s prison. Thus when Jesus told his disciples about a landowner reducing peasant rental payment obligations, He immediately got their undivided attention.

Some General Context
With Bailey’s help, we can put some helpful context in place as regards the first-century Palestinian agrarian scene:

- The Steward is an agent – a paid position of the Estate Owner (EO). The Greek text suggests he is the Estate Manager (EM).
- There are three kinds of tenant farmers. The renter that best fits this parable seems to be a tenant who pays a fixed portion of the crop to the EO.
- Accounts are not due until harvest is complete, but the obligation is a legal debt from the moment the land rental agreement is entered into.
- The community is a part of this story even though that is not explicitly stated. In the Middle East (ME) the nature of the community figures into all the actions of an individual. Thus it follows that issues of honor and shame as well as social reciprocity are operative in this parable.
The Estate Owner seems to be of noble character. If he were not so regarded, none of the villagers would have “squealed” on his EM.

**A Window of Opportunity** Once aware of the EM’s shenanigans, the EO promptly fires the EM so no additional embezzlement might occur. However, his dismissal is still not final because he has not yet been summoned to produce the books as his last official act. Thus the EM still has some time to maneuver since the word of his dismissal is not yet public.

In ME culture a multi-day negotiation (debate) would be expected to commence immediately between the EO and the EM with the EM passionately protesting his innocence and asserting his continued loyalty. Since no such protestation is forthcoming, it would strongly suggest the EM knows he has been caught red-handed and is silently admitting his guilt.

The EO is very (and surprisingly) merciful toward the EM. The EM is not immediately jailed. In fact, he is not even scolded in the story! Even though the EO expects obedience, he demonstrates unusual mercy toward this soon to be ex-EM.

**Quickly Building a New Image** The EM’s immediate crisis is so bad that he even considers digging as a new career. What is remarkable about this is that no educated man in the ME is expected to contemplate manual labor. This crisis also necessitates that the EM maintain an acceptable image in the community because if he is reputed to be a wasteful steward, it will be difficult to find future employment. While people in the community will always value a shrewd EM and can be expected to find work for him, a steward with a wasteful reputation will be shunned.

So the EM quickly concocts a plan. It is based on the quality of mercy he has just experienced. The EM decides to risk everything on the premise that the EO will continue to be extremely merciful. If his premise is wrong, he goes to jail and his reputation is ruined. If his premise holds up, he will be a hero in the community for both his shrewdness and the creative way he quickly established reciprocal relationships with others. These new obligatory relationships will allow him to “land on his feet” and find future work. The EM’s plan hinges on the fact that no one in the community yet knows of his predicament. Since they will find out soon enough, he needs to move quickly before he turns over the estate financial records of the rental agreements to the EO.

**A Creative “Exit” Strategy** The renters are summoned one at a time because the ex-EM does not want them talking to each other or asking too many questions about the current proceedings. It’s a divide-and-conquer strategy. In this patron/debtor culture, their assumption is that the EO has an important message for them, so of course they come. Note that the ex-EM does not even address them with a standard salutation. He must work very quickly before the EO finds out what’s happening.

As Bailey observes, the renters may have some concerns about all this, perhaps even some suspicions, but because they have not been notified of anything out of the ordinary by the EO, if something turns out to be strange or irregular with these rental debt reductions, they would not have broken faith with the EO. This is an important issue since the EO would likely no longer rent his land to them.

It is clear that the renters assume all this is legit. They rightfully assume that the EM is still in authority and his master has approved these financial changes. Otherwise they would not cooperate and put their ability to continue to work the land at risk. Note that Jesus does not criticize the renters in the story. To make this contemporary, it is as if the ex-EM positions himself as the manager who arranges great holiday bonuses for his workers. In so doing, he sets himself up for deserving substantial credit.

**Preserving Honor in the Eye’s of the Community** When the EO (the master) sees the accounting records and recognizes what the ex-EM has just done, he quickly realizes he has only two options. The EO
knows the village is already celebrating his being the most generous EO in the village’s history and praising him as a very noble man with a beneficent nature. Thus he can

1) go back to the renters and explain how this is all a mistake and the action just taken to reduce their rental debt is null and void. If he does that, the village’s joy turns to anger.
2) Or he can keep silent, accept the praise and let this clever ex-EM ride his newfound popularity.

The EO is obviously generous and merciful to his ex-EM. After all, he did not immediately jail the EM; but rather, commends the ex-EM for acting wisely. According to Bailey, one of the OT definitions of “wisdom” is a knack for self-preservation. Because the EO was indeed a generous and merciful person, he chooses to pay (absorb) the full financial consequences (price) for his ex-EM’s “salvation.”

**Observations** The ME peasant finds this parable a pure delight. To them, it is David outwitting Goliath. Yet in this story, the EM does not get praised for any integrity; rather he gets criticized as “unrighteous.” The Western reader is surprised at the outcome of a dishonest steward emerging as a hero. The ME listener is surprised that the hero (the ex-EM) is even criticized.

It helps to remember that Jesus tells this parable in Luke’s sequencing immediately after the parable of “The Prodigal Son.” With no chapter breaks in Luke’s scroll, the intentionality of this sequencing and obvious parallels between the two stories would not have been lost on ME readers.

- Each has a noble master who demonstrates extraordinary mercy (and grace) to a wayward underling.
- Both feature an ignoble son/steward who wastes the master’s resources.
- In each, the one doing the wasting reaches a crisis moment of truth.
- Both the son and the steward throw themselves on the mercy of the father and the master.
- Both parables deal with a trust that has been broken and the issues that result.

For these reasons (and others), one commentator considered the parable of the Shrewd Steward as an appendix to the parable of the “Prodigal Son.” Contextually that is good interpretive guidance.

**Teaching Like a Rabbi** Another key contextual insight to this parable is that Jesus is a rabbi and He is teaching like a rabbi. A very standard rabbinic way of making a point is for the rabbi to argue from “the light to the heavy.” Or we might say from the “lesser to the greater.” Other examples of Jesus using this teaching technique would include

- **Luke 18:1-9** The Unjust Judge: If the widow can get justice from an unjust judge, how much more will the believer get justice from God.
- **Luke 11:5-7** Visitor at Midnight: If a man gets bread at midnight from his neighbor, how much more will the believer receive from your Father in Heaven who cares about him.

**Central Point** If this dishonest EM solved his crisis by relying on the mercy of his master, how much more will God mercifully help you in your (sin) crisis when you avail yourself of (throw yourself upon) His mercy. The steward is praised for his self-preservation – for his wisdom in knowing where his salvation lay, not for his dishonesty. He recognizes the hopelessness of his situation. This now ex-steward is keenly aware of the one and only source of his “salvation,” namely the generosity of his master, and risks everything to avail himself of it.

God (the master) is a God of judgment and mercy. Because of its sinful nature, humanity (the steward) is caught in a crisis of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Excuses for one’s sinful condition will avail nothing. Mankind’s only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of his generous master confident that his master will pay (absorb) the price for man’s salvation. This clever steward was wise
enough to realize he needed to place his total trust in the quality of mercy experienced at the beginning of the story (he was not immediately thrown into prison by the EO). That trust was vindicated. Christ’s disciples need this same kind of wisdom. Remember, they came out of observant Judaism where “mercy is missing.”

In this parable, Jesus provides unforgettable insight into the nature of God, the predicament of humanity, and the grounds for salvation. To summarize Bailey:

- God is revealed as a God of justice, mercy and great personal honor. In God’s salvation plan, He is willing to pay the price for the servant’s salvation.
- The coming of God’s Kingdom brings with it a crisis. All sin will be exposed. Excuses are worthless and the label “unrighteous” is totally justified.
- In the human condition, sin can only beget sin. Once the steward is “caught” in his deception, rather than repent on the spot, he continues to deceive more.
- The steward is commended because he comes to understand the master’s nature (merciful) and decides to risk everything on that attribute of his master. Jesus longs for his disciples to have the same understanding of God’s mercy.
- The steward had the courage to act upon his deepest perceptions of his master’s merciful nature. It was a huge risk, but one that was validated.

Reflections

- When was the first time that you realized your only hope was to admit your guilt before the Master and throw yourself upon His mercy and let Him absorb your just penalty?
- Well, does context matter? It surely does! This parable is another one of those consummate examples that not only does context always matter, sometimes it is absolutely crucial to interpreting the passage. What are the implications of this contextual reality for your church, Bible study group, home fellowship group, Sunday School class, and your devotional time?
- Does this parable challenge your paradigm of what it means to be diligent to present yourself approved of God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth?
- Do you agree or disagree with the following:

  *The Bible does not yield its meaning to lazy people.*  
  A. W. Pink

  *When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know but do not know what we see.*  
  Unknown

  *Those of us who know the Bible well can suffer from knowing it well.*  
  Alistarr Begg

  *The trouble with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along.*  
  Arnold Glasow

  *Context rescues truth from the familiar.*  
  Kenneth Bailey

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Notes and Sources

5*Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, p. 114.
6For more on this “mercy is missing” theme, see Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus’ Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*, Chapter Three, “The Rescuer Has Come” (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, second edition, 2007), pp. 37-44.
7II Timothy 2:15