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Unrighteous Stewards in Biblical and Modern Times

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Recent accounting scandals have shaken the U.S. stock market and faith in the ethics of the capitalist system. We show that these accounting scandals and the parable of the unrighteous steward given in Luke 16 shed light on each other. We argue that the morals derived from the parable of the unrighteous steward include (1) that we should give alms; (2) that we should not be like the Pharisees who replaced God's requirements with legalism; and (3) that, when placed in stewardship positions, we should be cautious that we do not allow our shrewdness to govern and, in so doing, ignore God's requirements.

Introduction

Recent accounting scandals have destroyed major corporations and severely shaken our confidence in the ethics of capitalist systems. Those that argue that capitalism is the best type of economic system assume that everyone has perfect information. These recent scandals challenge the validity of this assumption and suggest that capitalism is subject to abuse by those with superior information. The central figures in these accounting scandals were rich people who shrewdly multiplied their riches.

There are at least five types of rich people in the Bible. There is the rare example of the righteous person, such as Job, who is also rich. Second, there is the rich person who gets rich by defrauding his workers (see James 5:1–4). Third, there is the rich person who foolishly trusts in his riches instead of in God (Luke 12:16–21). Fourth, there is the rich person who ends up in hell because he ignored the plight of the poor (Luke 16:19–31). Fifth, there is the rich person who is rich because of his shrewdness. The unrighteous steward is such a rich person. The fact that the unrighteous steward may have been a slave (Beavis 1992) does not change the fact that he was well off. Joseph was also a slave-steward who was the second most powerful person in Egypt (Gen. 37–41). The unrighteous steward's musings that he was not strong enough for manual labor and that begging was beneath him (Luke 16:3) indicate that he was well off.

In this article, we argue that the biblical parable of the unrighteous steward and the recent accounting scandals illuminate each other. We know of only one other scholarly article that links the unrighteous steward to modern-day crooks. Kane (1990) compares the managers of the Savings and Loans insurance fund to the unrighteous steward.

The next section of our article provides the *New American Standard*'s translation of Luke 16:1–18, which contains the parable of the unrighteous steward followed by a brief literature survey of what has been written about this parable. New insights into the parable are then put forward, followed by examples of recent unrighteous stewards and concluding remarks.

The Unrighteous Steward

Luke 16:1–18 (NASB)

1 Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions.

2 "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.

4 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'

5 "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'

7 "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

8 "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.

[9] "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

[10] "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.

[11] "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?

[12] "And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

[13] "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other You cannot serve God and wealth."

[14] Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

[15] And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

[16] "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

[17] "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.

[18] "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery."

Literature Survey

"Almost every article or book section devoted to the so-called parable of the unrighteous steward begins by noting that it is the most difficult of the parables" (Landry and May 2000, 287). This difficulty centers on how Jesus and/or the rich master could possibly praise the unrighteous steward who squanders his master's wealth and then facilitates the stealing from his master by enticing his master's debtors into becoming thieves. Two principal approaches have been taken to this quandary: (1) whitewash the steward or (2) argue that the Lord praised the steward's cleverness, not his lack of ethics.

Three types of whitewash have been applied to the unrighteous steward. Some point out that charging interest to fellow Jews was illegal (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 23:19). This prohibition was sometimes circumvented by writing the interest into the original principal, thus hiding it from view (Hughes 1998, see also survey in Landry and May 2000). When the unrighteous steward decreased the bills of the debtors, he was merely eliminating this illegal, but hidden, interest charge. By so doing, he was actually making his own master more moral than before. Major problems with this view include the following: (1) the steward's asking each debtor how much they owed his master seems to indicate that the steward did not even know the amounts of the debts, much less the amount of interest added, (2) different bills were decreased by different percents (50 percent and 20 percent), and (3) this view is reading into the text ideas that are not given in the text but that drastically change the meaning of the text.

Other whitewashers argue that the steward was just eliminating his own commission, and, thus was not stealing from his master when he decreased the bills. Again this view is problematic because (1) the percents reduced do not fit with standard commissions as shown by other historical records, (2) no reason is given why the commissions would vary from 100 percent (50/50) to 25 percent (20/80) for different items, and (3) again this is reading into the text ideas that are not in the text but that drastically change the meaning of the text (see survey by Landry and May 2000).

Landry and May (2000) offer a third type of whitewash. They argue that honor was more important than money. A master who is not in control of his servants is dishonored. Therefore, when it became clear that the steward had wasted his master's goods, the master's honor was tarnished. To rectify this situation, the master decided to fire the steward. However, the steward's writing down the debts owed his master, gave the master the reputation of being a generous man—restoring his honor. Thus, the steward cleverly restored what was most important, his master's honor, and the money was inconsequential. However, the parable repeatedly mentions the amounts owed the master but never mentions the master's honor. This type of whitewash, like the other whitewashes, reads into the text ideas that are not there but that drastically change the text's meaning. Furthermore, the amounts forgiven are not inconsequential. Bock (1996) says that the oil debt was more than eight hundred gallons, worth slightly more than what an average wage earner could earn in three years. The amount of grain owed was what could be grown on one hundred acres in Jesus' time and was worth between eight and nine-and-a-half years of wages.

Instead of whitewashing the steward, the authors of this article prefer to join the long list of scholars who argue that Jesus and/or the master praised the steward's shrewdness, not his lack of ethics (see survey by Landry and May 2000). Culpepper (1995) even pointed out that the shrewd unrighteous steward was like Jacob (Gen. 25–30). Jacob took advantage of his brother's state of starvation, lied to his father, stole the birthright from his brother, and used selective breeding to take advantage of his father-in-law. Jacob was a trickster, who God preferred over his less-shrewd brother, Esau (Mal. 1:2–3). In Matthew 10:16, Jesus instructs his disciples to be as "wise as serpents, but as harmless as doves." Finally, notice that Luke says that the master and/or Jesus commended the unrighteous steward's shrewdness; Luke does not say that the steward was rehired.

The strongest criticism of the "Jesus was praising the shrewdness of the steward, not his ethics" view is that the beneficiaries of the steward's dishonesty would have little reason to welcome the steward into their homes because they would fear that the steward would cheat them as well (Donahue 1988). Consider several responses to Donahue's point. First, many of the charismatic thieves described later in this article did not have trouble being welcomed into homes, in spite of their dishonesty. Second, as the master's legal representative, the steward could *legally* write down the debts owned his master, but it was not *ethical*. Indeed, from an ethical point of view, the steward was making it possible for his master's debtors to legally steal from his master. By so doing, he was making his master's debtors partners in his crime. Guilt and mutual self-interest could lead to the debtors' welcoming in the former steward. The debtors probably would not want to find out what the former steward would do if he was faced with the horrible choice of begging or blackmailing the debtors with a threatened revelation of what they had done and thus a destruction of their honor.

Finally, it should be noted that most scholarly works on the parable of the unrighteous steward focus exclusively on just the parable in Luke 16:1–8a. Landry and May (2000) say that it is relatively rare for a scholar to examine even the six verses that follow the parable (Luke 16:8b–13). We know of no other scholars who consider Luke 16:17–18 in their interpretation, but we will in the next section. Bock (1996) does mention that the Greek word used for "squandering" in Luke 16:1 is the same word used in Luke 15:13 for the acts of the Prodigal Son in the passage that immediately precedes the parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 15:11–32). Thus, the unrighteous steward is painted as wasting his master's goods in riotous living, just as the Prodigal Son wasted his father's wealth. By focusing on verses 8 and 9, Williams (1964) and Hiers (1970) argue that an exhortation to give alms is the moral of the parable of the unrighteous steward. They link the parable of the unrighteous steward to the parable that follows it on the rich man and Lazarus. They point out that the rich man's only crime, which landed him in hell, was ignoring the poor. Williams (1964) interprets verse 8b to mean, "If even the worldlings are shrewd enough to recognize the value of handing out their master's money, should not the servants of God realize the value of almsgiving [i.e., handing out God's money]" (295)?

A Contribution to the Literature on the Unrighteous Steward

If, as Williams (1964) and Hiers (1970) argue, the parables of the unrighteous steward and the rich man and Lazarus are linked, then the verses between these two parables should be relevant to their interpretation. As reviewed above, several scholars have used Luke 16:9–13 in their discussion of the parable of the unrighteous steward. However, we know of no one who has used Luke 16:17–18 in their interpretation.

Luke 16:1 indicates that Jesus told the parable of the unrighteous steward to his disciples. However, Luke 15:2 indicates that Jesus told the three parables before the unrighteous steward (the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son) to the Pharisees and scribes. Furthermore, Luke 16:14 indicates that the Pharisees were still listening after Jesus finished the parable of the unrighteous steward. Clearly, Jesus had two different audiences for the telling of the unrighteous steward—his disciples and the Pharisees. Furthermore, we believe that there are at least two major morals to the parable of the unrighteous steward: (1) the moral elucidated by Williams (1964) and Hiers (1970) that Jesus' followers should give alms and (2) a strong warning not to be like the Pharisees.

The parable of the unrighteous steward ends either with verse 7 or 8a. Williams (1964) and Hiers (1970) use a positive reading of verses 8 and 9 in their interpretation that Jesus' followers should give alms. In contrast, Fletcher (1963) believes that verse 9 is Jesus' using irony to condemn the Pharisees. Fletcher (1963, 29) paraphrases verse 9 as

> "Make friends for yourselves," he seems to taunt; "imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?"

Fletcher (1963) points out that Jesus used irony on several occasions. When the Pharisees grumbled about Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). Because the Pharisees were also sinners, but saw themselves as righteous, Jesus' response was ironic. When the Pharisees again grumble about Jesus' eating with sinners in Luke 15:2, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. The conclusion to the parable of the lost sheep is ironic again: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7)—the Pharisees are like the ninety-nine sheep who think they need no repentance, but actually they do. The Pharisees who grumbled before the parable of the lost sheep are the same Pharisees who scoff at Jesus immediately after the parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16:14).

Given that Jesus had two different audiences for the parable of the unrighteous steward, we believe that Jesus may have intended his disciples to hear verse 9 as an injunction to give alms and the Pharisees to hear an ironic condemnation of their approach to life. In other words, we do not see the Williams-Hiers and Fletcher interpretations as mutually exclusive—they were just meant for two different groups of listeners.

Likewise, verses 10–12, heard by the disciples, are an encouragement to be faithful in the little things; heard by the Pharisees, these verses are a condemnation of their current lack of faithfulness. Verse 13 directly attacks the Pharisees who claimed to be the most religious and righteous group while still being "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). In verse 13, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they cannot serve both God and money. The fact that the Pharisees scoff at Jesus in verse 14 indicates that they heard verse 13 (and probably the verses before it) as a condemnation of them personally. In verse 15, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they may be able to fool men, but they cannot fool God, and their actions are "detestable in the sight of God."

Verse 16a mentions the Law and the Prophets—on which the Pharisees rely for their righteousness. Culpepper (1995, 313) comments that verse 16b is difficult to interpret. He interprets 16b to mean "[Since John], the good news is being proclaimed … and everyone is pressed to enter it." Culpepper notes that the emphasis in verse 16b is on everyone. *Everyone* would include the tax collectors and sinners with whom the Pharisees think Jesus should not associate (Luke 15:2). Indeed the current confrontation with the Pharisees started with Jesus justifying his association with tax collectors and sinners. Thus, it is appropriate for those same tax collectors and sinners to be alluded to in the middle of the confrontation (Luke 16:16). *Everyone* would also include the Pharisees. Jesus would be thrilled if the Pharisees would see the error of their ways, repent, and enter the kingdom.

The Pharisees are guilty and in need of repentance because they are "lovers of money" (v. 14) and because they, like the unrighteous steward, have inappropriately reduced the debt that mankind owes God (vv. 17–18). The specific example that Jesus uses of the Pharisees' reducing the debt that mankind owes God is in their allowing divorce (v. 18). In Matthew 19:3–9, the Pharisees asked Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus said no. The Pharisees then asked why Moses allowed divorce. Jesus replied, "because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives" but that was contrary to God's intent and those who violate God's intent are guilty. Hopefully, the Pharisees, remembering this earlier confrontation with Jesus over divorce, would see how they (like the unrighteous steward) had written down the debt that mankind owes God.

The Pharisees had a reputation for binding huge legalistic burdens on people (Luke 11:46). However, which is harder—following many legalistic rules or loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37–40)? By replacing God's requirement of love with legalistic acts, the Pharisees had written down mankind's debt to God (see Luke 11:42; Matt. 15:3–9). A major moral from the parable of the unrighteous steward is that we should not reduce God's requirements. Remember, Luke says that the master, Jesus, commended the unrighteous steward's shrewdness; Luke did not say that the unrighteous steward was rehired. In other words, the Pharisees may be shrewd in their replacing God's law with mankind's legalism (Matt. 15:7–9), but they are still fired as God's stewards. Indeed, within a hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion, the Jewish nation (at least temporarily) was fired as God's primary steward, as the age of the Gentiles began (Rom. 11:11–15). The unrighteous steward is not the only parable of Jesus that threatens the Jewish religious leaders and nation with being fired (see Matt. 21:33–45).

Modern Day Unrighteous Stewards

The unrighteous steward is in an agency position and, as such, has been entrusted to manage the wealth of the master. Even in biblical times, it seems that those who were selected as managers and admired for their management skills were those who were shrewd. Consequently, cleverness and intelligence were likely characteristics that were commonly found in those placed in stewardship functions. This is consistently the case in contemporary times as well. Many of the most popular and successful—albeit in some instances infamous—senior executives of our time are typically lauded for their cleverness, intelligence, and ambition. Unfortunately, sometimes the very managers who were once acclaimed as heroes to their stockholders (masters) and role models or mentors for their employees have fallen from grace by their own hand as a result of the same shrewdness that spiraled them to the top.

This is especially notable in the wave of recent accounting failures that have dominated the financial news in the early years of the new millennium. Failed stewards in these recent scandals fall into three key categories: (1) the chief executive officer (CEO) or chief financial officer (CFO) of the failed organizations; (2) the parties who partnered with senior management of the failed companies;

and (3) those in oversight positions, both internal and external. All were in stewardship positions; many entrusted as stewards because of their cleverness and superior intelligence. What is interesting to speculate is the cause of their faithlessness and dishonesty. Was it indeed the same talents that gained them their position that also wrought their eventual downfall as well as the downfall of the corporations they managed?

Many of the first group of unrighteous stewards perpetrated outrageous deceits while being placed in charge of incredible wealth—wealth owned by the investing public, which included, in many cases, the employees of their own firms. Often, these CEOs and CFOs were heralded for their amazing business acuity and were held in high esteem by shareholders, employees, and the business world.

Kenneth Lay (Citizen Works 2004) and Jeff Skilling, both CEOs at Enron, were frequently described as amazingly, even frighteningly intelligent, and ambitious. Both men have been portrayed as men with innovative business ideas who were singular in their intellectual abilities. Andrew Fastow, CFO at Enron, was also bright; however, it was his remarkable skill and creativity in accounting that propelled his rise to the top of the organization. His value to Enron was in facilitating cash securement schemes that applied complex accounting rules to the precise letter—even though the schemes themselves violated the intent of the rules. These schemes allowed Enron to acquire large amounts of borrowed cash, remove underperforming assets from their balance sheet, and, at the same time, significantly lower the debt on its financial statements (McLean and Elkind 2003).

Bernard (Bernie) Ebbers, CEO at WorldCom, was also a gifted businessman and an "amazing wheeler dealer" (Tran 2002). Along with CFO Scott Sullivan, Ebbers masterminded an $11 billion accounting fraud that resulted in the company's Chapter 11, $107 billion bankruptcy, the largest ever in U.S. history (Beltran 2002). Their deceptive financial reporting schemes inflated profits of WorldCom and overstated company assets. Once the true financial health of the company was revealed, stock prices plummeted.

While the shrewdness of the financial schemes of the senior executives at both Enron and WorldCom wreaked similar devastating results on the investing public and on the economy, the motivation of their actions may have differed somewhat. The top Enron echelon demonstrated an egotistical boldness and an overweening pride regarding the success of Enron. According to Harvard Business School professor Robert Simons, "a sense of hubris … develops among managers that they are these great heroic figures, and that they are almost invincible" (McCafferty 2002). The audacious actions of Lay, Skilling, and Fastow as they continued to build elaborate schemes that perpetuated Enron's inflated growth and fictitious earnings are evidence of their fearless arrogance. Similarly, the unrighteous steward knows he is clever, and he is bold about it. Even in the face of confrontation by his master regarding his dishonesty by which he has presumably improved himself financially, he does not flinch but instead takes further advantage of his position as his master's agent. Like the managers at Enron, the unrighteous steward does not abandon his shrewdness when it threatens to undo him but rather applies it yet again to the newly presented challenge with undaunted confidence that his latest ploys will yield successful results.

At WorldCom, Ebbers actions suggest a stronger desire to protect his personal fortune, primarily rooted in WorldCom stock, than an ego-driven inclination to cleverly doctor WorldCom's financial statements in order to receive recognition as the accomplished manager of an amazing company. In fact, his key defense when tried for his involvement in the WorldCom debacle was that he knew nothing of WorldCom's shady accounting strategy—a claim that he had hoped would exonerate him, perhaps, but that also portrays him as an incompetent CEO who was so "mindless that it's a case of malfeasance" according to Warren Bennis, a management professor at the University of Southern California (Hopkins 2002). Clearly, all along, Ebbers objectives seem to have been entirely aimed at protecting his personal wealth, and himself, rather than at perpetuating a vision of building the greatest company in the world, a goal shared by Lay and Skilling (McLean and Elkind 2003, 2006). Additionally, Ebbers had borrowed more that $400 million in corporate loans from WorldCom when the telecommunications industry entered a downturn that thwarted WorldCom's growth strategy and caused the company's stock to decline. He needed the money to cover margin calls on his own WorldCom stock that he had used to finance other business interests. This is yet another indicator of Ebbers intention to salvage his own financial position and is not indicative of any intention to turn WorldCom's performance around (Crawford 2005a).

Scott Sullivan, CFO at WorldCom, also had a personal interest in producing deceptive accounting statements. He had received a $10 million retention bonus at WorldCom in 2000, a time during which it has since been determined he was actively engaged in implementing accounting irregularities that overstated the company's financial position to mask the impact of the industry downturn. Additionally, Sullivan had personally accumulated over $30 million in profits from his own trading in WorldCom stock during his 1999–2002 tenure as the company's CFO (McCafferty 2002). Clearly, maintaining an appearance of WorldCom's financial health was significantly beneficial to Sullivan's personal wealth and likely had little to do with his aspirations for the company.

Other senior executives who have also been caught with their hand in the till include John Rigas of Adelphia and Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco. These CEOs were indeed shrewd businessmen, but greed appeared to be the primary driver of their actions. Reflecting on actions of the Enron senior executives, one is left with the impression that some part of what drove their unfaithfulness in their fiduciary function was a desire to be associated with the extraordinary success of the company. Not only was an association necessary, but they wanted the company's success to be attributed to them. Of course, they were interested in great personal wealth, but that had long been achieved and had become an almost secondary goal to Lay and Skilling, at least. To some extent even Ebbers and Sullivan may have enjoyed their moment in the sun, basking in the success of WorldCom in the marketplace even as they were scrambling to secure their own personal wealth. Rigas and Kozlowski, however, seemed to have used their shrewd business sense merely to execute the common crime of stealing from their companies. Perhaps they are most like the unrighteous steward—out for themselves from the very beginning. There seems to be no evidence of an empire building strategy implemented by either of these CEOs but rather a calculated intent to devise schemes to remove money from the corporate coffers for personal use. Their accounting manipulations were implemented to cover their tracks more so than to manipulate the value of their company's stock. These CEOs were clearly focused on their own self-interest as they looted the companies that they had been entrusted to manage.

John Rigas ("SEC Charges Adelphia" 2002) and his sons stole hundreds of millions of dollars from Adelphia, a cable company they founded, took public, and then managed. Through their domination and control at the management helm, their corporate looting caused investors to lose more than $60 billion. In addition to personal borrowings in excess of $3 billion, the Rigases routinely used Adelphia money to finance personal activities—an elaborate wedding, rent-free apartments on Manhattan's swank Upper East Side, and a $13 million golf course to name a few. Their looting continued to the bitter end. As Adelphia's stock price fell once their fraudulent shenanigans sent the company into a tailspin, they even boldly pulled another $252 million out of the company to cover margin calls on their personal investment portfolio (Lieberman and Farrell 2002). Rigas has been characterized as having an oversized ambition that apparently was focused on building his personal wealth, not on the company's behalf.

Former Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski (Crawford 2005b) and his CFO, Mark Swartz, like the Rigases seemed only intent on robbing the company they were entrusted to manage as well. They were found guilty of taking unapproved bonuses of more than $120 million, abusing an employee loan program, and misrepresenting the company's financial condition to investors. Their misrepresentations seemed intentionally directed at boosting the stock price in order to sell $575 million of their own holdings in Tyco. Their trial uncovered more instances of lavish spending on the company's bankroll including a $2 million birthday party for Kozlowski's wife. Their improper use of company funds was the foundation of all charges against Kozlowski and Swartz who were not charged with accounting fraud like the senior executives of Enron and WorldCom. Like the unrighteous steward, they allowed their greed to motivate them and their intellect to facilitate satisfaction of their greed.

Each of these players in the first group of unrighteous stewards distinguishes himself in his boldness just as the one in Jesus' parable. While they may each have used their cleverness to satisfy different appetites—ego, pride, money—they had in common a belief that they were too clever to get caught. Even more surprising, their boldness demonstrates a fearlessness of consequences even if their deceits were discovered—almost as if they had some misaligned belief that what they were doing was not all that wrong or was, in some way, excusable because of who they were.

The second group of unrighteous stewards is comprised of those who became parties to the cleverness of the firsthand perpetrators. In this way, they are like the master's debtors, who the unrighteous steward recruits in a bold attempt to steal even more from his master. This guilt by complicity makes them equally unworthy stewards.

Arthur Andersen in the Enron scandal is the perfect example of this complicity. Not only did they fail to reveal the unscrupulous financial reporting of Enron, they were even found guilty of obstruction of justice by trying to conceal the fraudulent activities that were making the senior executives wealthy and, simultaneously, making Enron worthless. Citigroup and JP Morgan Chase (U.S. Securities 2003) were also drawn into the financial manipulations and misrepresentations and, as stewards of their respective stockholders wealth, introduced a threat to the stability and financial viability of their organizations. They created sham transactions that allowed Enron to hide nearly $4 billion in debt. GE Corporation ("General Electric" 2007) was also investigated because of their dealings with Citigroup and JP Morgan. For GE Corporation, as for many of these companies, misaligned stewardship breaches a fiduciary duty to those inside and outside the corporation because a significant amount (e.g., 77 percent for GE) of employees' 401K plan is often invested in company stock. GE also partnered with JP Morgan and Citigroup in lending to WorldCom whose eventual debt of over $40 billion drove them to bankruptcy. What caused these stewards to acquiesce to business transactions that have since been dubbed as "shady" with these financial giants? Was it fear of retaliation? Was it a desire for wealth? Was it a desire to be considered favorably in other business dealings? Whatever the reasons for their complicity, perhaps their behavior has the same underlying motives as those of the master's debtors.

Included in this second category are also the people who worked under the direction and leadership of the CEOs and the CFOs. They were not idea people, but they were pulled into the fraudulent schemes and became participants in the deceptions. These were primarily the accountants in the firms who naturally had to be involved in making the accounting transactions work or who had to be aware that something inappropriate may have been being wrought. Most notably in this category was David Myers of WorldCom who assisted Scott Sullivan ("SEC Charges" 2004) in the preparation of the accounting entries that inflated the profits of the giant in the telecommunications industry. Myers is characterized as an accomplice who "knew about it, didn't report it, (and) was involved in the middle of it, but it wasn't his idea. He just did what he was told" (quote by incoming WorldCom CEO John Sidgmore in Backover and Woodyard 2002). A loyal WorldCom employee, Myers knowingly participated in the accounting misdeeds that had no justification in the accounting standards to support them even though he admits to feeling "uncomfortable" about them but also unable to control them (O'Donnell and Backover, 2002).

The third group of unrighteous stewards consists of the overseers. The key players in this category are the financial statement auditors. Arthur Andersen repeatedly, and almost doggedly it seems, ignored their fiduciary duty to the investing public with its involvement of financial statement misstatements for Enron, WorldCom, Sunbeam, Waste Management, Boston Market, and many others. The lack of faithful stewardship seems to have become a part of Arthur Andersen's corporate culture. This is in line with Aristotle's premise that virtuous or ethical conduct is a product of environment. While intelligence (or capacity according to Aristotle) is something man is provided by nature (God's gift), whether we use our capacities to behave in a moral fashion is a result of habit or is according to custom, not by nature. Thus, many clever and intelligent auditors who made up the Arthur Andersen Corporation had to have been influenced by the corporate culture. Other audit firms who were also persuaded to facilitate crooks and who perhaps learned to comply by custom to be unfaithful stewards (believing that the praise and recognition of their profession would laud their sharp business acuity) were Price Waterhouse (Pharmor) and KPMG (Xerox and Rite-Aid).

To a lesser degree, but also included in this category were the members of the boards of directors for these large firms. They were in an oversight position but wanted the CEOs to keep making them money and agreed to support the schemes or, at the very least, turned a blind eye. In this regard, they were also participants, and as the representative voice of the stockholders, can rightly be categorized as unrighteous stewards. In fact, in the WorldCom case, members of the board of directors were nearly brought to trial ("Enron Board" 2002). It is no accident that part of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (Lander 2004) includes an entire section that now mandates the qualifications and responsibilities of members of the boards of directors for publicly held companies. They are like the friends of the masters' debtors when they become involved, not unwittingly, in a scheme to defraud the owners of their companies. While their involvement may have been reluctant, much like those in the second group of unrighteous stewards, their failure to perform their fiduciary responsibilities as overseers portrays them either as too weak to carry out their duty for fear of personal consequences or as simply greedy opportunists.

What these modern stories of unrighteous stewards show is that shrewdness can spiral out of control. Successful shrewd managers can find ingenious ways to enrich themselves and their friends and can even recruit to their case those who should be auditing their actions. Unethical cleverness is like a disease that spreads through a corporate culture.

The biblical unrighteous steward relied upon his shrewdness to get him out of a tight spot just like modern day unrighteous stewards rely upon their shrewdness not to get caught. When contrite repentance is appropriate, both modern day and biblical unrighteous stewards act with cocky audacity and boldness in creating new ingenious ways to steal even more. Like the Pharisees, these stewards do not know that they need to be saved. They continue to assume that their cleverness will save them.

These stories provide us with a strong warning: Be cautious that you do not allow your shrewdness to govern you and, in so doing, ignore God's requirements. Even if given unrighteous wealth (Luke 16:10–11), manage it faithfully or you are not being faithful in your stewardship function to man. If you are unfaithful in your dealings with man (less), then you are also being unfaithful in your dealings with God (more). Do not be like the Pharisees who were very good at justifying themselves to others but whom God despised.

Conclusion

There are at least three major morals for the parable of the unrighteous steward. First, there is the moral that Williams (1964) and Hiers (1970) give that Jesus' followers should give alms. Second, there is the moral not to be like the Pharisees, who decreased mankind's debt to God (to love God and neighbor) by replacing it with a set of legalistic rules. Third, when put into a stewardship position (and we all are) do not allow your shrewdness to govern you and, in so doing, ignore God's requirements. Both modern day and biblical unrighteous stewards show that our own shrewdness can become a false idol that will prevent us from (1) a Christian relationship with other men, (2) a God-fearing relationship with God, and (3) appropriate repentance when caught in our sins. Remember, the unrighteous steward was fired. The master (Jesus) recognized his cleverness, but the unrighteous steward was still fired. Unfortunately the biblical unrighteous steward will not be alone in the flames of eternity—he will be joined by many unrighteous stewards of our past, present, and future.

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