
**The Mystery of the Cunning and Shrewd Administrator,
Eighth book of the collection
The Most Extraordinary Man of All History**

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Religion Book.

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Translated by Rolando Olivo.

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I. INTRODUCTION

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When I wrote the previous book of this collection, The Great Teachings of Jesus, in which the Sermon on the Mount and various parables of the Master are analyzed, I realized that the analysis of the story of the cunning and shrewd administrator (Luke 16:1-12) required further explanations. I also remembered the comment of a Catholic priest, the Father Eduardo, who in a mass, referring to this brief story, said: “This is the most difficult passage in the Gospels.”

Even writing this book forced me to reflect on the love, goodness and perfection of the Lord, exposed by Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, and also to consider these questions:

How is it possible that there is a parable, different from all the others, in which unethical actions are praised?

Why is an example contrary to Christian ethics given?

This matter is so difficult that the referred parable can be considered as a mystery or an almost unexplainable issue.

Obviously, Jesus, who demonstrated how is the Father's perfection (fulfilling the Law in a more perfect way than the Pharisees, avoiding spiritual adultery and divorce, not swearing by sacred things neither personally, turning the other cheek, giving the mantle, give to the one who asks, love enemies and pray for them, be discreet with good works and when praying, always accept the Father's will, forgive all those who harm us, not be ostentatious neither live solely to accumulate riches, etc.), cannot praise or justify a bad example.

And even the complexity of this parable requires a careful examination of its background and evaluation from different perspectives, standing out that it contains relevant details (possibly the administrator, who wasn't a young man, was unfairly dismissed, the employer learned about the waste of money by others, and didn't even review first the accounts, the administrator served during a notice period, again the employer learned of the unethical actions of his former employee by others, and could not claim about his conduct or reinstate him to work).

The excellent reflections of Jesus also prevail at the end of this story (Luke 16:8-12), aimed at taking advantage of opportunities, maintaining the same attitude of fidelity, honesty and loyalty, knowing how to win the trust of others and God, and using the best skills.

However, this unpublished and controversial story leads to asking this question:

Why does Jesus, the exponent of God's goodness, love, and perfection, presents in a parable the example of dishonesty, neglect, and abuse of the cunning and shrewd administrator (who is responsible of a conflict of interests)?

Although there are no totally satisfactory answers, in this publication several approaches are proposed to glimpse part of this mystery or almost unexplainable issue.

In this sense, this book is divided into the following main chapters: a) II. The Perfection of the Lord (How was this exposed by the Master?), b) III. An Almost Unexplainable Issue (Why is this parable inconsistent with Christian ethics?), c) IV. The Parable of the Cunning and Shrewd Administrator (What is its background?), d) V. Another Interpretation of the Parable of the Cunning and Shrewd Administrator (Can this tale be interpreted according to the historical context?), and e) VI. Conclusions (How far can we go searching answers to this mystery?).

Finally, it should be noted that when examining this parable we can go further, which forces to reflect on the harsh realities of life, the existential problem of human suffering, and act in a proactive way, in order to face and overcome problems.

II. THE PERFECTION OF THE LORD

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As mentioned in previous books of this collection, Jesus, undoubtedly the most extraordinary man in all of history, stood out for his works, teachings, and legacy; which include:

- a) the return of monotheism,
- b) the origin and development of science,
- c) the constitution of a new religious, political, social and economic system,
- d) the defense of human rights,
- e) the definitive rejection of violence,
- f) the universal sense of human justice,
- g) the dignity of work,
- h) the non-deification of rulers,
- i) expanding the Jewish belief about the existence of a One True God throughout the world,
- j) dividing the history into two eras,
- k) creating celebrations such as Easter and Christmas,
- l) rescuing principles and moral values,
- m) promoting many processes of transculturization, modernization, progress and human development.

So much so that the contemporary Western culture is fundamentally Christian and Greco-Roman, and Christianity constitutes the most relevant social and religious movement in human history.

In addition to this, in his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized in love and spiritual perfection. In this sense, among many messages, the Lord stated that:

- a) the disciples must fulfill the Law in a more perfect way than the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20),
- b) he who looks at a woman with impure desires has already committed adultery (Matthew 5:28),
- c) the man who divorces, for a reason different from infidelity, is responsible for sending the woman to adultery, while the one who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:32),
- d) no oath should be sworn to sacred things neither personally (Matthew 5:34-36),
- e) grant the other cheek, if the right has been hit (Matthew 5:39),
- f) deliver the cloak, if the shirt has been claimed (Matthew 5:40),
- g) carry twice the load that is asked, even further (Matthew 5:41),
- h) give to the one who asks and lend money to the person who requests it (Matthew 5:42),

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- i) love enemies and pray for them, in order to be true children of the Father (Matthew 5:44-45),
 - j) be discreet with good works (Matthew 6:1-4),
 - k) not flaunt of our prayers in temples and public places (Matthew 6:5-6),
 - l) not pray with long speeches (Matthew 6:7-8),
 - m) ask the will of God to be always fulfilled (Matthew 6:10),
 - n) request for forgiveness to the Father, with the commitment to forgive those who have hurt us (Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4),
 - o) not be ostentatious when fasting (Matthew 6:16-18),
 - p) don't live to accumulate wealth (Matthew 6:19),
 - q) don't serve two patrons at the same time: the Lord and the money (Matthew 6:24),
 - r) don't worry about material needs, such as food and clothing (Matthew 6:25-30),
 - s) don't help those who really don't deserve it (Matthew 7:6),
 - t) not everyone who recognizes Him will obtain eternal life (Matthew 7:21).

Certainly, Jesus, who knows the Father very well (Luke 10:22 and John 7:29, 10:30, 10:38, 14:11, 17:21 and 17:25) and conquered the world (John 16:33 and 17:16), demonstrated how is the greatest perfection (that of God), which is almost impossible for any human being to achieve. Furthermore, many of these guidelines cannot always be interpreted literally, nor can they be followed in various situations.

It should be noted that in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were very strict, complying with the strict dogmas and customs of Judaism. However, they lost perspectives about the meaning and purpose of religion, and didn't understand that the love of fellow and God, and the good works are more relevant than obsolete rituals and customs.

Even more, Jesus didn't come to change the Jewish Law, rather He came to perfect it (Matthew 5:17), and the Master refers to a broader Law (that of morals and ethics, whose principles and moral values are not relative), which is not exclusive of Hebrews.

This is the conscience or the Law of Life (Sirach 17:6-11), which:

- a) exists for all human beings, Jews and Gentiles (Numbers 15:15-16),

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- b) is perfect (Psalm 19:8-9, Matthew 5:17 and James 1:25),
 - c) is always fulfilled (Sirach 34:8),
 - d) will never change (Baruch 4:1, Psalm 148:5-6, Matthew 5:18 and Luke 16:17).

In addition, it is called Moral Law or Human Nature Law by the British novelist and university professor Clive Lewis (1898-1963), in the best-seller Mere Christianity (1952).

For this reason, Jesus mentions that this Law must be fulfilled in a different and better way than that of the Pharisees.

Likewise, He indicates that adultery is not only physical, it is also spiritual (impure desires are sins), and both, men and women, can be guilty of adultery (in opposition with the patriarchal ideas of that time, which were very tolerant with men, what really prevails is true morality and ethics, which cannot give privileges to men and take away rights from women).

Regarding oaths, it is obvious that one should not swear by sacred matters (even the expression, For God's sake!, is questionable) neither personally because the Name of God must be respected (Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11 and Matthew 12:31-32), and it is not always possible to keep promises.

With respect to turning the other cheek, handing over the cloak, carrying the load twice, giving to the one who asks (even if he doesn't pay the borrowed money), it is relevant to highlight that these guidelines conclusively demonstrate what the incredible perfection of God is, who is always willing to listen, help and forgive any human being.

Likewise, these approaches lead to giving up revenge and violent actions, agree to the demands of enemies or rivals, go beyond what we are asked to do (even with the family and work environment) and help those who have financial problems.

However, on many occasions, these principles cannot be applied literally (no one will be calm under attack, no one will turn "the other cheek" to a malicious person, no one will give all his belongings to a thief, no one will produce more for an employer who doesn't recognize merits or doesn't pay, it is difficult for someone to give money to a borrower, who will not pay, it is highly unlikely that a just judge will acquit a person guilty of a serious crime, etc.).

In this regard, the main message of these guidelines (in addition to demonstrating the perfection of God) points towards love, respect and consideration for all human beings, to help and forgive them, as long as the transgressors are sorry for their faults. and ready to change their attitudes. Of course, negotiation processes are more effective than conflicts (it is better to convince adversaries in good manners instead of taking revenge and fighting against them).

This is ratified in the request to love the enemies and pray for them, since we are all human beings, unjust and sinful, and even the most wicked one have his heart and “human side”.

According to my experience, dealing with difficult bosses and conflictive neighbors, I have realized their virtues and “hidden goodness”.

And the attitude of discretion, and not helping those who do not deserve it, must also be an integral part of the conduct. Usually in this difficult world, we deal with many cocky, envious and resentful people, who are upset with our successes and don't appreciate favors received. In the same way, countless ostentatious individuals, who frequently flaunt their achievements and possessions, suffer from low self-esteem and mistakenly believe that for their exhibitionist attitudes they will be recognized by others.

Similarly, the command of not pray through long speeches refers to praying with love and sincerity. Actually, extensive prayers are not being condemned. Really, criticism is against religious hypocrisy. Even if this guideline were interpreted literally, then these Psalms should be removed from the Bible: 18, 37, 68, 69, 78, 89, 104, 105, 106, 107 and 119.

And in the Lord's Prayer (the only prayer that Jesus taught) there are two controversial requests, which include accepting that:

- a) the will of God must be always fulfilled (which may be contrary to our intentions, since perhaps our longings are inconvenient and can be harmful in the long-term, even if we don't realize this),
- b) we must forgive those who harm us (the Father can absolve us of worse things).

Regarding money, this is a controversial topic. Contrary to some popular beliefs, Christianity doesn't censure money, what it condemns is the excessive love for this medium of exchange, saving and valuation, and insists on using and managing it properly, without trusting in riches and the false god money. Therefore, this social and religious movement:

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- a) rejects the excessive love for money, which can overcome love for other human beings and God (Deuteronomy 6:3-5, Amos 5:12-15, Proverbs 15:27, 17:16, 19:1, 21:6, 23:4-5, 27:23-24, 28:6, 28:20, 28:22, 28:25 and 30:7-9, Sirach 13:24, 27:1, 31:5, 31:8-9 and 40:12, Psalm 52:9, Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 16:14-15, 1 Timothy 6:10, 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and Hebrews 13:5),
 - b) considers money as the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10) and generator of false security (Sirach 5:1),
 - c) indicates that it is unable to satisfy the true human needs (Ecclesiastes 5:9-10), related to spiritual ones or belongingness, esteem and self-actualization, mentioned by Abraham Maslow,
 - d) points out that money is a false god (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13 and Ephesians 5:5),
 - e) recommends using and managing it appropriately (Matthew 22:21 and 25:14-30, Mark 12:17 and Luke 16:11 and 20:25),
 - f) requests not to be attached to money (Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, Luke 20:25 and Colossians 3:5),
 - g) exhorts to seek meaning and purpose in life, without trusting in riches (Proverbs 11:28 and 1 Timothy 6:17).

Likewise, in several of Jesus' parables the subject of money is addressed (the one who doesn't forgive his companion, Matthew 18:23-35, the vineyard workers, Matthew 20:1-16, the ten young women, Matthew 25:1-13, the talents, Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27, the two debtors, Luke 7:40-50, the good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37, the rich man, Luke 12:16-21, the great supper, Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:15-24, the lost coin, Luke 15:8-10, the prodigal son, Luke 15:11-32, the cunning and shrewd administrator, Luke 16:1-12, and the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31).

Furthermore, Jesus confirmed that money has an influential and excessive value in people's lives and that the exceptional human being (loved by God) far exceeds money, being human life more relevant than any economic-financial instrument. Likewise, He hinted that money is extremely dangerous (capable of distorting the meaning of life and promoting rebellion against the Creator), and therefore, this powerful medium must be used and managed in an appropriate way, trying to produce and contribute with society and the Lord.

With respect to material needs, it is obvious that spiritual or developmental needs (belongingness, esteem and self-actualization) are the most relevant, and excessive concern about material aspects must be left, since they can be solved.

And when Jesus stated that not everyone who recognizes Him will obtain eternal life, He refers to false prophets (currently, some fundamentalist Christians with distorted religious beliefs fit in this profile) and “light”-Christians (those who accept the Christian religion, but don’t comply with their dogmas neither give God the relevance that He deserves).

Conclusions on the perfection of the Lord:

Undoubtedly, God, unlike human beings, is Perfect. He is also a Just Judge who administers the Divine Justice. Sensationally, Jesus gave relevant clues about the Father's nature and perfection, encouraging us to be like Him, as far as possible. Obviously, we cannot achieve the perfection of God (not even compare with Jesus) and within our sinful condition, we don't have sufficient merits to achieve eternal life. Nonetheless, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross redeems our sins, and therefore, by repenting of our grave faults and recognizing Jesus as the Savior, we reach the Grace (state of spiritual perfection), and can access eternal life. In this regard, in consistency with Christian ethics, it is essential to lead an exemplary and virtuous life of service to others and God, seeking to approach the Father's perfection. Again, Jesus gave us clues about his Essence and Perfection...

III. AN ALMOST UNEXPLAINABLE ISSUE

III. AN ALMOST UNEXPLAINABLE ISSUE

As previously mentioned, Jesus stood out for his immense love and goodness towards humanity and God, demonstrating how is the perfection of the Father. In the same way, his parables reflect the correct ways of proceeding to deal in life, help others, give good examples and please God.

Nonetheless, it is impressive how in the parable of the cunning and shrewd administrator (Luke 16:1-12) a fired employee, without professional ethics, is praised for wrongdoing,

So, why does Jesus, the exponent of God's goodness, love, and perfection, presents in a parable the example of dishonesty, negligence, and abuse of the cunning and shrewd administrator (who is responsible of a conflict of interests)?

On the one hand, there are no clear answers to this question, and perhaps this biblical passage is the most difficult of the Gospels, and on the other hand, this parable constitutes a mystery or an almost unexplainable issue.

Likewise, other questions related to this story arise:

Can the dishonest and negligent conduct of the administrator (who was possibly fired for mismanagement) be accepted?

Why is there a case of revenge in this parable (which contradicts Christian ethics and the perfection of the Father)?

Should the administrator's dishonest tactics be praised (just as his employer did)?

In some situations, is it okay to steal from others or take advantage of power for personal interests?

Is the administrator a victim?

Is the employer the villain of this story?

Or is it possible that this parable demonstrates the worst of the human condition and all its protagonists (the administrator, the employer and the debtors) are “bad”, unjust and sinful?

Conclusions on an almost unexplainable issue:

Considering the love, goodness, and perfection of God, it is amazing that Jesus told a parable, in which unethical actions (at the expense of others' patrimony, in order to achieve personal benefits) are praised. Therefore, the parable of the cunning and shrewd administrator is still a mystery and an almost unexplainable issue...

IV. THE PARABLE OF THE CUNNING AND SHREWD ADMINISTRATOR

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

And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ 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.’

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. 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.

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. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? 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?” (Luke 16:1-12).

IV. THE PARABLE OF THE CUNNING AND SHREWD ADMINISTRATOR

In this tale:

1. The administrator spent a lot of money (Was he corrupt and stealing to maintain his living standard?).
2. The employer asks the administrator for accounts, indicating that he is fired (he continues working for a short time).
3. The administrator is not young. He knows that he can't do works that requires efforts, and can't live begging on the streets.
4. He thinks about how to get a similar job.
5. Reflects and has a great idea.
6. Calls the debtors and reduces their debts. They are grateful with the administrator, and he expects that at least one of them will give him a job.
7. The employer, initially annoyed with the administrator for the waste of money, praises the cunning of his former employee.

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8. For reflection, those who don't strictly follow the principles of Christianity or manage ethics at their convenience (leaving behind principles and moral values) are used to dealing with similar people, and therefore, are cunning and skillful in handling money, and build relationships.
 9. It is advisable to use worldly riches to win friends and favors (within ethical limits), since when falling into a critical economic situation, we can receive help from others.
 10. Who is honest in administering little money will also be honest when he manages a lot.
 11. However, who isn't honest in administering material treasures isn't trustworthy of others and of the Father (he may also be unable to develop and use his best abilities).
 12. Who does not respect the property of others will not receive what he deserves in life.

This short parable is complex and extremely difficult to interpret (especially in the mentioned context of God's love, goodness, and perfection). In general terms, these aspects stand out: