

WORK FOR OTHERS AS IF SELF-EMPLOYED!

Today's Text: Lk 16: 1-13

Extracts:

[Jesus] also said to His disciples” “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him, and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship for you can no longer be steward.’ Then the steward said within himself, ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.’ ... And I say to you ... ‘He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore ... *if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?*’” [Lk 16: 1-4, 9-10, 12]

*A major private sector organization in Lagos (Nigeria) that I am quite familiar with derives the bulk of its income from training and consultancy services, apart from annual dues from its member-companies. An officer working there had the responsibility of ensuring that invoices sent to clients (for fees or dues) were promptly paid. However, while doing quarterly performance reviews, the CEO noticed that collections were falling while the officer’s mileage claims and excuses for non-collection kept rising. Rather than sack him, the CEO devised a simple solution. He asked the accountant to pay him the following month’s salary with a “special cheque.” When the officer took his pay cheque to the bank, the teller told him that it could not be honoured because there was an error on it. When the officer looked at it more closely, what he saw shocked him. The cheque read, “Pay xxx the sum of xxx thousand **Excuses.**” The following month, his performance improved dramatically!*

*That story illustrates the attitude that most of us have when we work for others. We grab every opportunity to work less or cheat the system but hardly worry about the damage we are doing to our employers or ourselves. In this week’s Bible text, Jesus tells the story of a steward that was about to lose his job for wasting his master’s goods. Our Lord’s concluding remark is the focus of our study. He said, “If you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?” In other words, **if you want success from your job, do it as if working for yourself.** How can you do that? That is the question we shall attempt to answer in this week’s study.*

1. Background: A manager is asked to resign!

If you are favoured to still have a job in the face of the current global economic crisis, you should thank God. Yet, the way that some of us handle their jobs is cause for concern. They treat them as if they do not care to lose them and yet they have no alternatives should they be sacked. They may be too inexperienced or too old or too unskilled to get another job. Also, many of us are not cut out to set up their own businesses because they may not be risk-takers, nor do they have the financial, technical or managerial knowhow to start or run one successfully. Therefore, you cannot afford to toy with a great opportunity that God has given you to manage another person's resources. The word of God says, "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will reap" [Gal. 6: 7]. As you currently work for others, what are you sowing and do you know why your harvest has been less than satisfactory? That is why you need to sit up this moment and pay attention to this week's study.

Jesus used the Parable of the Unjust Steward to teach us principles on employer-employee relations that are beneficial to both parties. Let us follow the story as follows:

a) *The employer received the employee's unacceptable performance report*

The employer in the story was "a certain rich man" and the employee was called "a steward." An accusation was brought to the employer that that employee "was wasting" his employer's "goods." The employer sent for him and said to him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward" [Lk 16: 1-2].

Many employees get away with misconduct for a long time. It may be due to poor management or favouritism or other reasons. However, sooner than later, the day of reckoning comes. It may be due to the organization's poor performance (such as dropping revenues or rising deficits) or the poor performance of individual employees picked up through the periodic performance appraisal process. When such an occasion comes, the employer can say to you, as the rich man in the parable said to his steward, "You are fired!"

In your relationship with God, a time may also come when He tells you that your cup of wickedness is full and that He can no longer tolerate your waywardness. For example, after the children of Israel had believed the evil report of ten out of the twelve spies sent by Moses to spy on the Promised Land, God said to them (through Moses), "Because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have *put Me to the test now these ten times*, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it" [Num. 14: 22-

23]. That is a form of termination of an employment relationship and it was based on their performance record.

b) *But the employee had his own ideas!*

We are told that the steward said within himself, “What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg” [Lk 16: 3]. If he could not dig, that suggests that he was too old to do it or too unskilled to do anything else. If he was too ashamed to beg, that suggests that he had no savings and investments to fall back on with an unexpected loss of job. Does that ring a familiar bell to you?

All these years, you have vegetated on your job, so to speak, without upgrading your skills. You have squandered your wages on pools betting or alcohol or immoral pastimes. You have neglected your family and your God. Now, without a job or steady income, you find yourself naked and vulnerable: old, unskilled and alone.

What did the steward decide to do? He opted to cheat his employer by going into criminal collusion with his debtors. Using his position (before leaving the job finally), the steward reduced the debt of one customer by 50% [from a hundred measures of oil to fifty] and that of another by 20% [from a hundred measures of wheat to eighty]. He did all that with the hope that those customers that he had favoured would receive him into their homes after he had been put out of his stewardship [vv. 4-7].

You may be familiar with some employees in your office who reportedly get involved in corrupt practices with their employer’s clients, such as suppliers and customers. They assist suppliers to over invoice for less quantity or lower quality. They bill customers less for actual quantity of products released to them. They do such things because they hope to get their reward (through kickbacks) from those that they have helped. But does it always work out well for such employees? Not for long!

c) *Was that a smart or stupid move?*

The master did discover the sacked steward’s moves and he “commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly” [v. 8]. That is a satire, that is, sarcasm or ridicule to criticize faults. Was the steward smart (as his master satirized) or stupid (as he actually meant)? The steward could not win both ways. We do not know the details of why he was about to be sacked but he compounded it by doing things to show that he did not deserve his employer’s mercy in the first place. He was a thief “for God gives wisdom and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God” [Eccl. 2: 26]. His employer discovered his plans

and recovered his goods, while the sacked steward went into retirement penniless and broken-hearted.

The lesson that Jesus wants us to learn from that parable is summarized in His following words [Lk 16: 10-12]:

*He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. **Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?***

The unrighteous mammon refers to ill-gotten gains while the true riches apply to heavenly treasures. Jesus is warning that how you currently work for others is a barometer of your attitude to heavenly treasures. Therefore, if you are unfaithful to your employer, that is, if you work for less than what you are paid or steal and cheat your employer, God cannot give you what treasures (earthly and heavenly) are due to you. Let us audit your current work habits in your place of work so as to know where you stand.

2. How are you currently doing on your job?

It is quite easy to play the ostrich and claim that you are a saint. Wait until the end of this section! Here are types of behaviours that one can easily come across in a typical organization:

a) *The habitual absentee*

Some people just love being absent from work. We are not referring to those on approved absences, such as annual leave/vacation, training leave or genuine sick leave, including maternity leave. We are referring to some people who will be absent on the flimsiest of excuses. For example, in one organization, an employee phoned in to say his mother had just died and he was the only surviving son. What he forgot was that he had used that same excuse in the past! Another one sent in a medical report that she was very sick only for a report to reach her employer the following morning that she had been arrested at the airport on suspicion of drug trafficking. She was boarding a plane to travel abroad!

The danger of being absent when you are expected to be present is that you are holding up the work of others and, in deed, the work of the whole organization. You may ultimately hurt yourself because it is possible that you could be absent on the day that rewards will be distributed. For example, the five foolish virgins were absent (to go and buy oil that they were required to bring along with them in the first place) when the

bridegroom came and received into the banquet hall the five wise virgins. When they came back later, they were rejected [**Matt. 25: 10-12**].

In these days of ICT flexibility, your *absence from the office* should not mean your *absence from work*. You can work from home or from another location by phone or video conferencing or by Intranet. More importantly, you may need to realize that inexcusable absenteeism is a sin because if you know what to do and you do not do it, it is sin [**Jam. 4:17**]. The soul that sins shall die [**Ezek. 18: 4**].

b) *The incurable presentee*

A worse practice is called presenteeism where people actually come to work but do not work.¹ They come late and close early. In the office, they are more on the phone gossiping than working. Such people sustain their unacceptable conduct through political clout (special informal relationship with higher management or union membership). When it comes to reward distribution, presentees are among the most vocal on the need to respect seniority over performance!

Again, those who rely on presenteeism cannot go far. If the organization runs into economic difficulties, such employees are among the first to be fired. Having put in nothing, they take away nothing! Even if some manage to work to retirement, they are not missed when they leave.

c) *The consuming locust*

Many employees even without realizing it deplete the organization's resources for their personal gains. For example, as in the case of the steward in our study, some employees enrich themselves through kickbacks or pen robbery practices. Even those little things that we do, such as using official stationery, equipment and other resources for private ends, can cost our employers a great deal. We are behaving like consuming locusts depleting our employers' valuable resources. The word of God is clear that any such acts of wickedness put us at risk and we are on slippery slope. Even if we are smart enough to avoid detection by the employer or the police, in the end, God casts such wicked people down to destruction [**Ps. 73: 18**]

d) *The intrapreneur*

Neither the habitual absentee nor the incurable presentee nor the consuming locust can be said to be working for their employers as if self-employed. A person who works for himself/herself is called an

¹ Daniel Sitter, "Presenteeism: The Hidden Costs of Business," <http://ezinearticles.com/?Presenteeism:-The-Hidden-Costs-of-Business&id=40408> ; June 1, 2005

entrepreneur or a risk-taker. Entrepreneurs hardly go on leave and they can work 24/7, that is, for twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week. When an entrepreneur cannot set up his/her business and chooses to work for another person for pay, s(he) is called an *intrapreneur*.

Jesus expects us to work as intrapreneurs if we cannot be entrepreneurs. That way, whether in the public or private sector, you are working for others as if for yourself. You work competently and with integrity for others and God will give you what is your own. He will give you the rich treasures of heaven because you have been a faithful servant or employee. That is the message of the Parable of the Unjust Steward.

3. Conclusion: God is looking for faithful workers in His vineyard!

Elisha worked faithfully for Elijah and he was rewarded with a double portion of his master's spiritual power [2 Kgs 2: 9-11]. On the other hand, Gehazi worked unfaithfully with his master, Elisha, and he was rewarded with leprosy [2 Kgs 5: 15-27]! God is looking for faithful workers in His vineyard, that is, believers who will worship and serve Him in spirit and in truth [Jn 4: 23-24]. Do you want a double portion of His power and blessings or the leprosy of disgrace, shame or hell fire [Matt. 25: 41-46]?

Therefore, work for others as if self-employed.