

# PHARISEES & PUBLICANS

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## ABSTRACT

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager in Luke 16, is a rather difficult parable which stands out as the most stunning example of how the corrupt and dishonest are moved to conversion, while the self-righteous remain unmoved. The author believes that our Lord used the terms ‘children of this world’ and ‘children of the light’ deliberately to target two prominent groups of people among the audience. They are identified respectively as the worldly Publicans (taxmen) who were brazenly corrupt and the Pharisees who fanatically kept the Law, believing it to be the ‘Light of Life’. Our Lord is impartial and equally appreciates their good ways but frowns upon their bad ways. He gives the two groups a crisp insight of each others' good so that they may learn from each other and also try to break-free from their common weakness. Surprisingly, it is the detested Publicans who were moved to conversion while the highly honored Pharisees mockingly rejected Jesus' teaching. An analysis is attempted here with the sole purpose of gaining useful insights.

## Excerpted texts

- The entire article is an enrichment of excerpts taken from this book by the author — THE NARROW WAY: A COMMON MAN’S ROADMAP TO DIVINITY (2015, ISBN 978-1-4828-4756-7)
- Scripture quotations are taken from The World English Bible, [www.ebible.org](http://www.ebible.org)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Tamil Nadu, voluntarily engaged in the spiritual formation of youth in the Catholic Diocese of Dharmapuri. He took to spiritual writing in 2005 under the pen-name **Pitcharan** and has since written six books, all on spiritual theology.

## **The Parable of the Dishonest Manager**

*He also said to his disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had a manager. An accusation was made to him that this man was wasting his possessions. He called him, and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’*

*“The manager said within himself, ‘What will I do, seeing that my lord is taking away the management position from me? I don’t have strength to dig. I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from management, they may receive me into their houses.’ Calling each one of his lord’s debtors to him, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe to my lord?’ He said, ‘A hundred batos of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred cors of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’*

*“His lord commended the dishonest manager because he had done wisely, for the children of this world are, in their own generation, wiser than the children of the light. I tell you, make for yourselves friends by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when you fail, they may receive you into the eternal tents. He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. He who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? If you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You aren’t able to serve God and Mammon.” (Lk 16:1-13)*

This parable is addressed particularly to the Pharisees and Publicans (taxmen) who shared this common love— money. The taxmen had no qualms about adopting dishonest means but were known for their liberal spending habits and for using ill-gotten wealth freely to gain favors and friends. They are commended for their worldly shrewdness and wooed to give up dishonest ways and receive their own heavenly treasures by proving trustworthy with what belongs to others. The Pharisees amassed wealth through legally right ways but were known to be tightfisted with their hard-earned money. They are commended for their honesty and advised to freely use money to gain the friendship of saints who would welcome them into ‘eternal dwellings’, when their legalistic righteousness fails to gain them salvation. Both are exhorted to break free from the love of money and seek God with an undivided heart.

*The Pharisees who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they scoffed at him (Lk 16:14). Though there is no mention of how the taxmen responded, we have reasons to believe that the likes of Levi (also called Matthew) and Zacchaeus, were indeed converted by this teaching.*

*After these things he went out, and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and said to him, “Follow me!” He left everything, and rose up and followed him. (Lk 5:27– 28)*

*When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and saw him, and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” He hurried, came down, and received him joyfully. Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Lk 19:5–6, 9–10).*

How were the corrupt and dishonest taxmen moved by Jesus' teaching while the honored Pharisees chose to simply mock? An analysis:

The corrupt and dishonest taxmen also possessed streaks of humanism despite their worldliness. They found joy in sharing pleasures and spent money freely to gain friends and favors. This only suggests that they were not really attached to money but loved its capability. They were naturally fond of the many pleasures that money could buy. Apparently, what they abhorred was the miserly and unproductive accumulation of money because of which they were ruthless and maybe even unfair in their job as tax collectors. This made them most unpopular with the miserly Pharisees who in turn used their own social status and clout to denounce, defame and brand them as corrupt traitors working for the Roman rulers. Were the Publicans really as bad as they were made out to be or were they actually nice guys who could easily be won over completely to the side of truth with some enlightening? This is what Jesus did and this is how he accomplished their conversion:

- He surprised the taxmen by saying that heavenly treasures belonged to them and they could receive that which is their own only if they prove trustworthy with what belongs to others.
- He exposed the fallacy of trying to love both God and money by drawing a parallel with 'a servant who serves two masters'. In stating this, He acknowledged the fact that, even dishonest and corrupt people loved God. But then He clarified most firmly that, undivided Love alone is acceptable to God.

The righteousness of the law-abiding Pharisees was really a hypocritical mask. They manipulated Mosaic laws to suit their own convenience and made evil use of this perverted and subverted law to browbeat, harass and rule over the common majority. Their honesty and love for God were merely love for the worldly vainglory associated with godliness and honesty; there is nothing to suggest that they were on the side of truth. Their fondness of amassing wealth was not because of any normal and natural attraction for worldly pleasures that can be bought with money. They were abnormally fond of money and even denied themselves many licit pleasures as they did not have a heart to spend money. This miserly self-denial was probably even masqueraded as piety. Here is what Jesus offered and why the Pharisees failed to be converted but remained hardhearted:

- Jesus glorified the joy of sharing and helping one another and did not hesitate to appreciate this good trait even among the corrupt and dishonest. His mild dig at the so called 'children of light' for lacking in this virtue, must have irked the Pharisees and hurt their self-righteous pride.
- Jesus offered this beautiful spiritual advice: by freely using *unrighteous mammon* to provide for dire needs of righteous persons, anyone can gain true friends who will plead their cause with God to take them into Heaven for gratitude's sake. Heavenly treasures were never cherished by the Pharisees who were overconfident about their salvation and took it for granted. They were more in awe of worldly vainglory, always clinging to their money as it gave them a sense of being very powerful and therefore rejected any suggestion to part with money.