

“Stewards and also Sons of God”
Faith and Prejudice sermon 8
St. John Henry Newman
Eight Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 1870

1 The Parable of the Unjust Steward which is the subject of today's Gospel is more
2 difficult to understand than most of our Lord's Parables—but there are some points in its
3 teaching which it is impossible to mistake.

4 First in its literal sense it presents us with a view of human society, as it is, which is true
5 in all ages, now as much as when our Lord spoke. Nothing is more common now in the
6 world than that sort of dishonesty which is instanced in the Unjust Steward. He was in
7 trust with his master's property; he treated it as if it were his own; he wasted it either by
8 carelessness or by spending it on himself. He forgot his duty to his employer, as men do
9 now, and as men now borrow money without rational expectations of repaying it, and
10 thus involve themselves and are unable to meet the claims made on them. Such was
11 the case of the Steward: he was called upon to make his account good, and he could
12 not do so. Under these circumstances he was led on to commit a second sin in order to
13 conceal the first. He took his master's creditors into his counsel, and formed with them a
14 plan of fraudulent returns with the purpose of making his books right. This, I say, is the
15 first picture presented to us in this Parable, and it impresses on us by an instance St.
16 Paul's warning, "The love of money is the root of all evil."

17 But a larger sense of the Parable, and one on which I shall rather insist is this: the view
18 which it gives us of our duties to God and our conduct under those duties. It is plain that
19 the Master spoken of by our Lord is Almighty God Himself; and by the Steward is meant
20 each of His creatures, His rational creatures, who have goods, or, as is sometimes said,
21 talents committed to them, by Him. He does not give these goods to us, but He lends
22 them to us in order that we return them to Him, when our time is ended, with fruit or
23 interest. Men in trade by means of money make money; and as at the end of a certain
24 time capital is thus increased, so by using God's gifts well during the years of this mortal
25 life, we are able to render in to Him a good account and return His gifts with interest.
26 This is the meaning of the Parable of the Talents.

27 And so as regards the Parable of the Steward, on which I am now remarking, fields and
28 market-gardens and woods yield a produce, and are the means of wealth; such are hay,
29 wheat and other kinds of corn, and various fruits and vegetables in this country; such
30 are olive yards, vineyards, sugar canes, and other produce of the land abroad. As then
31 money creates money, as the land bears bread, wine and oil, so our souls should yield
32 the due return to God for the many gifts which He has bestowed upon us.

33 I am speaking of those gifts which belong to our nature, our birth, or our circumstances;
34 gifts of this world. He has given us the means of worshipping Him and doing Him
35 service. He has given us reason, and a certain measure of abilities, more or less. He
36 has given us health, more or less. He has placed us in a certain station of life, high or
37 low. He has given us a certain power of influencing others. He has given us a certain

38 circle of persons, larger or smaller, who depend on us, whom our words and our actions
39 affect for good or for evil, and ought to affect for good. He has given us our share of
40 opportunities of doing good to others. All these are God's gifts to us, and they are given
41 us, not to be wasted, but to be used, to be turned to account. The Steward in the
42 Parable wasted them; and was made responsible for his waste. And so in our own case,
43 we may waste them, as most men waste them; nay worse, we may not only squander
44 them away, we do not know how; but we may actually misapply them, we may use them
45 actually to the injury of Him who has given them to us; but whether we do nothing with
46 them for God, or actually go on to use them to His dishonour and against the interests
47 of truth and religion, (and the latter is more likely than the former, for not to do good with
48 them is in fact to do evil,) anyhow we shall have one day to answer for our use of them.

49 Thus the Parable before us applies to all of us, as having certain goods committed to us
50 by our Divine Master with a day of reckoning for them in prospect. But this is not all.
51 Charges were brought against the Steward, and his employer called on him to answer
52 them, or rather examined them, and found them well-founded. And so it is sometimes
53 with us, that our conscience, which is the voice of God in the soul, upbraids us, brings
54 before us our neglect of duty, the careless, the irreligious, the evil life which we are
55 leading, our disregard of God's commands, glory, and worship; and anticipates that
56 judgement which is to come. Now sometimes this self-accusation leads us to true
57 repentance and change of life—certainly, praise be to God, this is sometimes the case;
58 but more frequently, instead of turning us into the right path, it has the effect of making
59 us go more wrong than we were before. When the Steward found he could not make
60 good what his Lord had a right to demand of him, he had three courses before him
61 besides that which he adopted; he might have made his debts good by extra work;
62 again he might have got friends to have supplied the deficiency; or, he might have
63 thrown himself on his Lord's mercy. He might have begged, or he might have begged;
64 but he rejected both means. "I cannot dig," he said, "to beg I am ashamed." So he went
65 off into a further act of dishonesty to the disadvantage of his master. And in like manner,
66 we, when we have been unfaithful to our good God and feel compunction for that
67 unfaithfulness, have two modes of recovery: we might dig, that is, we might do works of
68 penance; we might vigorously change our life; we might fight with our bad habits; we
69 might redeem the time; that is, we might dig. But we cannot make up our minds to this
70 laborious course; it is too great a sacrifice; it is above us; we cannot dig. And secondly
71 we might beg; that is, we might pray God to forgive us and to change us; we might go to
72 confess our sin and beg for absolution; we might beg the prayers of others, the prayers
73 of the Saints; but to many men, especially to those who are not Catholics, this is more
74 difficult even than labour: "to beg we are ashamed." Begging seems something
75 inconsistent with what they call the dignity of human nature; they think it unmanly,
76 cowardly, slavish; it wounds their pride to confess themselves miserable sinners, to
77 come to a priest, to say the Rosary, to give themselves to certain devotions, day after
78 day; they think such a course as much beneath them as a valiant effort to overcome
79 themselves is above them. They cannot dig, to beg they are ashamed; and therefore
80 they attempt to destroy the sense of their sins, which has fallen upon them by some
81 means worse than those sins themselves—I mean, such as denying perhaps that there
82 is any such thing as sin, saying that it is a bugbear invented by priests, nay perhaps

83 going so far as to say that there is no judgement to come, no God above who will see
84 and will judge what they say or do.

85 Such is the repentance of men of the world, when conscience reproaches them. It is not
86 a true turning from sin, but a turning to worse sin—they go on to *deny* the Holy
87 Commandment because they have *transgressed* it; they explain away the sinfulness of
88 sin because they have sinned. St. Paul speaks of this evil repentance, if it may be called
89 by that name, in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, when he says to them the words
90 of 2 Cor. vii. 10. Such is the state of mankind as we see it realized on a large scale on
91 the face of human society in the world at large. When they do evil, act against their
92 conscience and clear duty, there is this opposition between what they know and what
93 they do; light becomes darkness, and instead of the light within them destroying their
94 tendencies to sin, their sins dim or stifle that light, and they become worse than they
95 were, because they were bad already.

96 This lesson I draw from today's Gospel. Now let us turn to today's Epistle, which carries
97 on the lesson farther, and that both for our warning, and for our encouragement and
98 comfort. It is taken from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and begins thus: "Brethren:
99 We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh; for if you live according to
100 the flesh, you shall die." Now here first we must see what is the meaning of the flesh. At
101 first sight it may seem to mean human nature, but that is not its exact meaning. To
102 explain it, I will turn to the 40th chapter of Isaias. In it is the great promise of the coming
103 of Christ, the preaching of His forerunner, St. John Baptist, and the gifts of the Gospel.
104 The Prophet begins, "Be comforted, be comforted, my people," and he speaks of the
105 voice crying in the wilderness ... Then he says, (which is the passage to which I
106 especially refer), "All flesh is grass, and its goodness is like the flower of the field ... "
107 Now is not the grass, and are not the flowers of the field in themselves good? Does not
108 our Lord say that they are more beautiful than Solomon in all his glory? Certainly. But
109 what is their defect? They fade—our Lord says that today they are and tomorrow are
110 cast into the oven. That is the case with the human soul. Of course it cannot die as the
111 flowers of the field; but its first estate dies. Whatever there is of good in it, whatever of
112 virtue, dies out of the soul as life goes on, as the flowers die, as the human body dies;
113 and as the flowers are at length (as our Lord says) cast into the oven, as fuel, fair as
114 they once were, so much more does the moral excellence of man die, as time goes on;
115 and the longer he lives, the harder, the colder, the uglier in God's sight, the deader, I
116 may say, he becomes.

117 Now we shall see what St. Paul's meaning is. When he speaks of the flesh, he means
118 human nature in its state of decay, in that state into which he is sure to fall, as times
119 goes on; and he says, "If ye live according to the flesh, ye shall die." If, like the Unjust
120 Steward, we live in the mere way of nature, we shall soon lose all the little good that
121 nature has on starting; and become worse and worse, as time goes on, just as the
122 Steward went from one sin to another, till we reach a state of spiritual death. For all
123 flesh is grass; and this is the beginning and end of the matter; this is the end of all our
124 hopes, all our aspirations, as far as nature is concerned—utter, desperate ruin.

125 And now I come to the light which dawns upon this darkness, the light which rises over
126 against it, illuminating this solemn history; a light by which a lesson which is so painful,
127 so depressing, becomes a consolation and an encouragement. Blessed be God, that
128 though such is the state of nature, God has not left us in a mere state of nature, but has
129 come to our relief, and brought us into a state higher than our own nature, and thereby
130 destroyed this tangle, this web, this bond, in which mankind lies. He has sent to us His
131 dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to give us the gifts of grace, which is a divine power
132 above nature, or what is called supernatural, by which we are able to do what nature of
133 itself cannot do. Isaias says, "All flesh is grass"; but St. Peter in his first Epistle (1 Pet. 1,
134 24) takes up the word, draws out the happy contrast between nature and grace, and
135 reminds us that by means of the power of grace, what was flesh is flesh no longer, but
136 is spirit; that is, the grace of the Holy Ghost changes our hearts, according to our Lord's
137 words in St. John, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the
138 Spirit is spirit."

139 This great and blessed announcement is made again and again in the New Testament
140 by our Lord and His Apostles; but let me confine myself to what is told us in the Epistle
141 for this day. St. Paul says, "Brethren: we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according
142 to the flesh." That is, we owe nothing to the flesh. What has the flesh done for us? It is
143 nothing else than the corruption of our nature; the flesh is pride, wrath, hatred, malice,
144 impurity, intemperance, craft, guile; or as St. Paul expressly says himself to the
145 Galatians: "The works of the flesh are manifest, which are ..." (Gal. 5, 19). What then do
146 we owe to the flesh? We owe sin, misery, a bad conscience, displeasure, spiritual
147 death, future punishment. It has done nothing good for us, and cannot—"for if (he
148 continues) you live according to the flesh, you shall die"; and after saying this, he goes
149 on in wonderful words to enlarge on the contrast of our state, if we have, and if we profit
150 by, the gift of the Spirit.

151 It is by this gift of the Spirit, that is, by the unmerited supernatural grace of God, that we
152 are set free from that law of sin and death, the law of the flesh, which is the state in
153 which we are born. That tangle of the mind by which our best faculties are kept from
154 rising to Almighty God and seeking their true end and doing their duty, and growing in
155 all good, is a bondage, a slavery, and the grace of God sets us free of it, so that we may
156 (as it were) rise on our feet, and become in St. Peter's words good stewards of the
157 manifold gifts of God. Again this grace not only sets us free, so that instead of being
158 slaves we are able to serve God, but it does something more for us. It would be a great
159 thing, if we were allowed to be faithful servants of God, as the Unjust Steward ought to
160 have been, but grace makes us that and something more; we become not merely
161 servants but even Sons of God. What a second wonderful privilege is this! Though we
162 were slaves of sin and the evil one, He not only sets us free from that slavery, and takes
163 us into His house and His service; but, more than that, He adopts us to be His children.
164 This is a second wonderful gift of grace. But there is a third: sons are heirs of their
165 Father, and in like manner He gives us an inheritance; and an inheritance as far above
166 any thing which our nature, even though it were ever so perfect, could merit, viz., the
167 sight of Him hereafter, and eternal life. As paradise is beyond any thing which our sin

168 could inherit, as sin never can merit God's mercy, but simply merits punishment, so
169 human nature, though ever so pure and perfect, could never merit heaven.

170 These are the great mercies of God which have reversed the state in which we were
171 born, and enabled us to give a good account of our stewardship. He has fortified nature
172 by means of grace; He has overcome the flesh in us by His supernatural aid, and that
173 by three wonderful gifts: first, He has made us faithful servants, whereas without His aid
174 we can be but Unjust Stewards; secondly He makes us not only faithful servants, but
175 dear sons; and thirdly He not only blesses us in this life, but He promises us life
176 everlasting, according to St. Paul's account in today's Epistle, which I will read again ...

177 What a view this opens on us both of consolation and of solemn thought! Nothing can
178 harm us, the Sons of God, while we remain in our Father's house. Nothing can deprive
179 us of our hope of heaven. But on the other hand how little we understand our privileges;
180 how little we understand the words of the sacred writers about them. May God enlighten
181 our eyes to see what the privileges are—"that you may know what the hope is of His
182 calling, and what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1, 18).