



"Labor is God's education."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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The Peter Principle (Part Four)

Over the past three essays, we have been distinguishing between the Physical Peter Principle—a person rises to the level of his incompetence—and the Spiritual Peter Principle—[God](#) provides His children with undeserved gifts, talents, and blessings, which Christians must manage properly. [Luke 16:1-2](#), the first verses of the [Parable of the Unjust Steward](#), contain additional teaching from [Jesus](#) on the subject:

He 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.'"

In verse 1, "steward" is our old friend *oikonomos*. In verse 2, though, the Greek word translated "stewardship" is *oikonomia*, meaning "the administration (of a household or estate), the management, oversight, and administration of another's property." It appears eight times in the New Testament and describes the position itself as opposed to *oikonomos*, which identifies the person holding the position. In English, it would be similar to saying, "*The manager, John Smith, was a department manager.*"

Interestingly, the English word *economics*, defined as "the study of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services," comes from this Greek word, *oikonomia*.

We can grasp these two verses better from an alternative translation:

Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a servant who managed his property. The rich man was told that the manager was wasting his master's money, so he called him in and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Turn in a complete account of your handling of my property, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'" [*Good News Translation® (Today's English Version, Second Edition)* Copyright © 1992 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.]

This rich man, a type of Christ, entrusted his manager or steward with his goods. Recall the earlier quotation from Adam Clarke on *oikonomos* in [I Peter 4:10](#): "Whatever gifts or endowments any man may possess, they are properly speaking, not his own; they are the Lord's property." So, Christ gave His manager—a type of a Christian—gifts, and later, He wants an accounting of those gifts. How were they used? Did the Christian improve by using those gifts in service to God and others?

In the parable in Luke 16, the manager is called into account, just as we will be ([Romans 14:10](#)). We have accepted this position with all its responsibilities. We have free will and can walk away at any time. Of course, if we do so, we forfeit our chance at the tremendous reward God has offered us, and we face certain, eternal death. Nonetheless, God is not forcing us to live this life. He is certainly leading us, guiding us, caring for us, and generally overseeing our lives, but He has not bound us hand and foot, nor does He stand over us with a whip in hand! Instead, He has given us certain gifts and the space to use them. He expects us to use them properly.

[Luke 12:45-48](#) allows us to contrast the Faithful Servant with the Evil Servant:

But if that servant says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming," and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to

eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

These four verses teach us four lessons:

1. Verse 45: The manager becomes puffed up, begins to mistreat those in his charge, lets himself go, eats too much, and drinks too much. We can imagine that he also let his prayer and Bible study fall off as well. He begins to think that *he* has achieved his station in life and that *his* efforts have gained him this knowledge and ability. Yet Jesus teaches, "Without Me you can do nothing" ([John 15:5](#)).
2. Verse 46: The evil servant has begun to coast, to watch the clock rather than handle his business. A good manager gets the job done. For him, it is not a 9-to-5 job. He is always on call. It does not matter if the boss is around or not. His character is such that the work gets done regardless.
3. Verse 47: When the boss calls us into the office for our performance assessment, we have no one to blame but ourselves for a poor review. We knew the "lord's will." We knew what the boss expected and what we agreed to do. At [baptism](#), we agreed to this life. We accepted it—even made a covenant with God to dedicate our lives to Him. We knew to pray and study every day, to tithe, to fast, to give, to help, and so on. If we have not done these things, who is to blame?
4. Verse 48: "What about John Doe next door? Why is he not in trouble with the boss? He is a slob; he does nothing but sit around all day. Why are you holding me to account when I do more than he does?" we might complain. But the answer is that God did not give John Doe the gifts He gave us. We cannot help it if the government employs poor managers who squander our tax dollars at every turn. Will thieving politicians be

held accountable someday? We do not know, and it really has nothing to do with us. We do not control those things. It might make us angry, but it is out of our hands.

What *is* within our control, however, is what God has given us to use and increase. Our gifts may be a little bit or quite a lot, but whatever the amount, we are to grow it. As a good manager, we will produce results. God has given us so much, so from us much is required.

We read about the Spiritual Peter Principle in [I Peter 4:10](#), but notice what leads to it:

Everything will soon come to an end. So be serious and be sensible enough to pray. Most important of all, you must sincerely love each other, because love wipes away many sins. Welcome people into your home and don't grumble about it. (I Peter 4:7-9; *Contemporary English Version*® Copyright © 1995 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.)

Then comes the Spiritual Peter Principle: "Each of you has been blessed with one of God's many wonderful gifts to be used in the service of others. So use your gift well."

- Mike Ford (1955-2021)

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