

THE LORD AND HIS MERCY!

17th Sunday after Pentecost (09-19-10)

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Luke 16:1–15

Jesus also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ And 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, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ 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?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And 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 he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

I. THE PARABLE OF THE STEWARD

If you think this parable is about the steward, you’re going to get it wrong.

What sorts of lessons do we learn from this steward? For one thing, if you waste your boss’s time or goods, don’t get caught. If you do get caught, be too proud to do anything menial for a living. Use your boss’s business to gain friends by losing more of your boss’s money. Would you really want to teach your children such lessons? Are these the habits of highly effective people? Not at all! No, if you think this parable is about the doing the things of the unrighteous steward, you’re heading for trouble.

Although there is one thing to learn from the steward, there’s one thing that the steward does that all of us ought to do; but we’ll get back to that later. Right now, let’s get to what the parable is really about, “the steward’s lord”.

The steward’s lord is a just man who runs a good business, and he employs the steward to look after things. When he finds that the steward is wasting his goods, he tells the steward that he’s fired. He tells the steward that the day of reckoning is coming. That part makes sense, but here’s the part that doesn’t: the lord leaves the steward in charge of his business until that future day of reckoning. He certainly gets high marks for mercy, but Donald Trump isn’t going to approve of running a business this way. It’s almost like the lord wants the unrighteous steward to misuse his goods some more. So the lord waits to call his unrighteous steward to account and continues to give him access to everything. The steward makes the most of it by taking the lord’s profits and giving it to others. He’s cutting bills in half so that customers owe only half as much, and he’s putting his lord in an awkward situation. If the lord goes back and demands what is really owed, his clients will be angry. If the lord lets the steward get away with his mischief, then his clients will love and trust the Lord all the more.

How does it all end? The lord commends the unrighteous steward for taking his goods and giving them to others. Kind of a strange story from our Lord, yes? This obviously isn’t a real-time message about how to succeed in business. Nope. It’s not about profit-making and business management. This parable is about mercy.

II. THE MEANING OF MERCY

The English calls the steward “dishonest” or “unjust.” The Greek says “unrighteous,” which tips us off that this is a lesson about sin and forgiveness. Your Lord has created you and all creatures. He has given you your body and soul, eyes, ears and all your members, your reason and all your senses, and still preserves them. That makes you the steward to whom the Lord has entrusted His “business” of loving Him and your neighbor. You know what comes next: all that you are and do by nature is tainted by sin, and none of you or what you do is righteous before God. The Lord gives you all your possessions with which you are to serve others, but instead aren’t you tempted to keep more for yourself. The Lord gives you a mouth to sing His praise, but do you use it to use for gossip or deceit or malice. The Lord gives health and fitness, but instead are you tempted to gluttony or vanity. You’re the unrighteous steward, wasting the things the Lord has entrusted to you. So the Lord declares that the day of reckoning is coming. It’s only fair. It’s only just!

But your Lord isn’t only JUST. He’s also merciful, and here’s the part of the story that doesn’t get mentioned in the parable: The Lord has sent His Son to be your Savior. From conception and all throughout His life, Jesus went about His Father’s business (Luke 2:49). He kept God’s Law perfectly, fulfilling every requirement without sin. He loved His neighbor and served His Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus was the perfect steward as He went about His Father’s business. And then what? He was crucified in your place. He was made to be sin for you, in order to suffer the judgment you should have suffered, all because of your sin.

In other words, at the cross Jesus was credited as the unrighteous steward of the world. Good Friday was the day of reckoning where the Lord condemned His Son for the sin of all His stewards. Those stewards are you and me!

Christ is risen from the dead! And risen, He continues to be of service to you. In fact, since you are now His people by His grace, He entrusts you with His most precious treasures. He entrusts to His Church the means of grace by which sins are forgiven, salvation is bestowed and disciples are made. He gives them to you, personally, that you might have life in His name. He has placed His name upon you in Holy Baptism, giving you His kingdom forever. He continues to speak His forgiving Word of Holy Absolution to you, to cleanse you of your sin. He gives you His body and blood in Holy Communion, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. By these means, He has brought you into His house and keeps you in His house. By these means, He strengthens your faith and sets you free to serve with all that He has given you.

So now, as His gathered and forgiven stewards, how do you do in your stewardship? Our Lord gives us a few statements against which to measure ourselves. He says, “*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth (mammon), so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings*”(Luke 16:9). Mammon—money—is unrighteous, unholy, because it has no forgiveness to give. It’s only for this world. Do you make use of what you have in service to others, particularly for the spreading of the Gospel so that others might be friends in an everlasting home of heaven for the sake of Jesus? Or do you find yourself tempted to hoard it, still wanting to use it in service of self?

The Lord says, “*If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?*” (Luke 16:11). How well do you make use of true, everlasting riches? Do you begin each day remembering your Baptism, giving thanks to the Lord that you have already died the second death and have eternal life? Or do you regard it as just a point of history that has little relevance to you now - something done way back when you were just a wee little babe – when you had no choice? Do you eagerly hear the Absolution, knowing that it is only by the Lord’s forgiveness that you have the hope of salvation? Maybe! Or perhaps you regard His grace only as a safety net, as you decide each week which sins will be useful to you. Maybe you think that you’ve heard enough of forgiveness to last a while, and no longer desire to hear of the Lord’s love for you. Do you take the time to prepare for the Lord’s Supper, marveling that the Lord God of Sabbath visits you, to serve you, to give you His very own body and blood? Or do you interrupt thinking about your to-do list long

enough during the distribution to come forward and kneel, lest someone think that you've been daydreaming about your to-do list? Do you take seriously the truth that those who are unprepared will receive this Communion to their judgment, or do you set aside that Word of God for the sake of appearing more agreeable to the world?

Among us and the entire world, there is not one righteous—not even one. We are far from being faithful stewards of all that our Lord has entrusted to us. And sadly, we are probably more careful with gifts like unrighteous mammon than we are with the Word and Sacraments that bestow righteousness and life. Even now, as the baptized people of God, you and I are still unrighteous stewards who waste what our Lord commends to our use. The day of reckoning is still deserved.

But once again, look how our merciful Lord treats us. Although we often take His means of grace for granted and treat them poorly, He does not relieve us of our stewardship. From now until the Last Day of eternal reckoning, He keeps us as His stewards. He wills that we continue to make use of His means of grace, so that through them He might forgive us for the sake of Jesus. Furthermore, He wills that we use them to erase (completely—not just half!) the debt of others. As we encounter sinners who are burdened with a load of killing sin, we do not tell them to erase half the debt and go from there. No, we proclaim to them the Word. We tell them that Christ has died for all of their sins—not just half, not just most, but all. We give our Lord's grace out to all who will receive it. Does our Lord grow angry that we give out His grace so freely? Not at all! He commends this as the mission of the Church. ***“Freely you have received,” He declares; “freely give”*** (Matthew 10:8).

How abundant and undeserved is the Lord's mercy for you! Because His Law demanded a level of righteousness you could not achieve, So (†) He became flesh, He (†) gave the accounting and suffered the judgment for your sin. So that you might be forgiven, He continues to pour out His grace upon you by His Word and Sacrament, proclaiming you righteous for His sake—by His work and not by your own. ***His work, not your own!***

I mentioned a while back that, while this parable is about the lord and his mercy, there is one thing for us to learn from the steward. Here it is: the steward's entire scheme rested on his lord's mercy. If the lord was not merciful, he would have the steward thrown out right away, imprisoned or killed for using his goods to his own advantage; but the steward used the lord's things to make friends, trusting that the lord would commend, not punish, him. By the grace of God, we trust in the Lord's mercy. We confess our sin and unrighteousness to Him, trusting that He who gave His own life to redeem us will continue to save us even now. And so He does. Your Lord commends you today with these words, “You are saved by My mercy, because Christ has accounted for all your sin at His cross. So I declare you righteous, because you are forgiven for all of your sins”. And all your sins are forgiven, In the name of the Father and the (†) Son and the Holy Spirit, for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, Amen and amen!

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN!

BEHOLD MERCY MADE MANIFEST!