

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 9 – July 28, 2024
Luke 16:1-13 – The Shrewd Manager
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

When people are desperate, they'll do anything to save themselves. That's what we see in the parable today of the unjust steward, the shrewd manager. His world is crashing down, he's about to lose his livelihood. And he knows it's his own fault for his mismanagement, but he isn't going down without a fight. So for a last-ditch effort, he calls in his master's debtors, and tries to win their favor by slashing down their debts.

So what, if anything, can this story teach us? It's a difficult parable, but Jesus himself explains it. He says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth" – unrighteous mammon – "So that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

Jesus is telling us to learn from the shrewdness of the sons of this world. Don't imitate their unrighteousness, of course. But chase after eternal goals with as much energy as they chase after worldly goals. Do whatever it takes. Pursue the things of God desperately. And learn from the sons of this world, how they leverage money – mammon – for their own future benefit. The unjust steward slashed down the debts, hoping the debtors would help him later. And we, as the sons of light, we should also learn to spend the gifts God has given us more shrewdly.

Of course, we can never save ourselves from sin or death, we cannot buy salvation. But we can put the earthly blessings of money and goods that we've received from God – abundant blessings – we can put them to use. And in particular, says Jesus, put them to use to make friends for yourselves, to buy eternal relationships and friendships for yourself.

Because worldly goods and possessions have no eternal value. You won't bring them with you when you die. Here in this life, they're more likely to be a temptation than a spiritual asset. So rather than letting the love of money have its way with you, learn to recognize money as a loan from God. Put it to work for his kingdom, to make friends for yourself. Win people over as your fellow Christian brothers and sisters by means possible, even by means of worldly mammon. Then when you die, when your possessions become worthless, then the Christian friends you made will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

So what are some good, commendable ways to put unrighteous mammon to work in the church?

We can spend money on establishing a school, primarily for the Christian education of the children of the church, and also for teaching the faith to children in the community. We can also spend money on supporting missionaries. Or donate to disaster relief, food and necessities, anything that supports the ministry of the church at home and abroad. Anything that builds relationships of love that reflect the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

Another very wholesome way to use money is to build relationships by giving it directly to the poor. "Sell what you possess and give to the poor," said the Master, "And you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." We could all do a better job of obeying this command. Certainly, we shouldn't abandon our God-given vocations or give so much away that those who depend on us suffer. But we can still learn to soften our grip on money and possessions, by giving it away.

So give generously to the poor, even strangers. Give secretly so your left hand doesn't know what your right hand is doing. And use it as a way to make friendships. Perhaps by your generosity unbelievers will recognize the mercy of God and be converted, to become your Christian brothers and sisters, friends in Christ.

"Give to the one who begs from you," says Jesus, "And do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." But then we come up with excuses. We make ourselves the judge, we say we shouldn't give money, because they'll just spend it on alcohol or drugs, or it will perpetuate a cycle of dependency. So we donate instead to aid organizations or church ministries, and that's all good. But if we never directly and personally give money to the poor, we're missing out on a wonderful chance to establish personal relationships and share the gospel directly.

So make it a practice to periodically give money to someone in need, even a complete stranger, so long as it's not obvious that your gift will do more harm than good. If nothing else, it's good for you. It forces you to trust Jesus, that he who commanded you to give to the poor will accomplish good through your gift, even if you never find out exactly how.

If you find yourself unable to unclench your hand and give generously, then perhaps it's time to ask yourself who you really serve – God or money. “No one can serve two masters, you cannot serve both God and money.”

In our suspicious society, a generous gift to a stranger is so rare that it might come as an overwhelming gesture of kindness. It can soften even the hardest hearts, making people wonder in amazement: Why, why did you trust me? Why did you take pity on me and help me, when no one else would? What's different about this Christian? What's the source of his love? And perhaps, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, these questions will lead them into the church, where they will encounter Christ and his word and forgiveness.

All this applies not only to individual Christians, but to the whole church. There should never be a poor man in the church. Your friends in the church, your fellow Christians, they're always here to help. It should be so appealing to be a Christian that outsiders will see our way of life and want to join us, just because they see how much we care for each other.

And the church as a whole also needs to learn to relax its grip on money. Just as each of us individually should be giving a tithe of our income to the church – ten percent has always been seen as a minimum rule of thumb – so also the church as a whole should be giving away a tithe of whatever it receives.

So I suggest that we as a congregation should set aside a tithe of whatever we receive, a percentage of whatever comes in from Sunday offerings and other gifts. Ideally, this is the purpose of a Stewardship Committee. Let's revitalize our Stewardship Committee, entrusting it with the responsibility of giving a portion of our income to support the work of the wider church. As we know, if we prove faithful in the small gifts our Lord has entrusted to us, then he will surely entrust us with the true riches of the gospel and eternal life.

Besides the gift of money and learning how to use it shrewdly for the kingdom of God, there's another theme in the parable of the unjust steward. A deeper theme of forgiveness. Debts forgiven. That's what the shrewd manager did, he forgave his master's debtors. And then the master upheld his steward's word, he accepted the loss and allowed the cancelled debts to stand.

This is precisely what we do in the church, in holy absolution. We forgive our Master's debtors. We pronounce forgiveness of sins for debts they don't even owe us. In fact, we forgive sinners the debt they owe to God, and our Master commends us for it. He lets our forgiveness stand, as if he forgave it all himself. We call this the Office of the Keys. According to the command of Jesus, the words of the pastor in Holy Absolution are just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself.

This is why a pastor is often called a steward of the mysteries. He carries out the Office of the Keys on behalf of Christ. And Lord willing, the steward of the mysteries proves himself not an unjust steward like the one in the parable, but a steward worthy of his calling. Unlike the shrewd manager, he must never forgive the sins of others to curry favor for himself. He must never act secretly behind the Master's back. He's called to act openly, in the stead and by the command of the Master, according to the authority of Christ himself, to forgive the sins of any, so they are truly forgiven, to bind the sins of any, so they are retained.

Yet as we know, whenever a debt is cancelled, someone must eat the cost. In America, the burden of cancelled debts often falls on the taxpayers. In the parable, the burden fell on the master. And the same is true in the church. We enjoy the privilege of forgiving debts, while our Master suffers the loss. Christ has borne the full burden of the forgiveness of the world.

Glory to God, our merciful Master. The Father bore the burden of our debt, he gave his Son, who suffered the cost of our sin, and won for us the true riches of heaven. And glory to Jesus, the faithful steward, the faithful Son. He alone is faithful in all God's house, obedient unto death, even death on a cross. By his death, Jesus has forgiven us not just a hundred measures of oil, or a hundred measures of wheat, but the whole debt of all our sin, all our failure to put God's gifts to use. And now, in his great love, he even calls us friends. He's made friends for himself in us, not by means of unrighteous mammon, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood. And now he's gone before us to prepare the eternal dwellings, and receive us there one day. Thank and praise him forever, the one thing needful, the highest treasure! Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.