

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 9 – August 6, 2023
Luke 16:1-13 – The Master's Mercy
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

The parable of the unjust steward is perhaps the most difficult of all the parables of Jesus. Why is Jesus commending dishonesty? What could be commendable about this steward who is negligent in his duties, and then abuses his position to curry favor with future benefactors? And what exactly should the sons of light imitate about the shrewdness of the sons of this world?

A challenging parable is a good thing. It's humbling for preachers to have to wrestle with a text. Jesus wants to force all of us to keep meditating on the difficult parts of Scripture, turning them over in our minds again and again, rather than passing over them quickly or lightly.

A clue to start making sense of the unjust steward is that this parable is closely connected to the parable of the prodigal son. In fact, the prodigal son of Luke chapter 15 comes right before the unjust steward in Luke 16. And the first line of Luke 16 makes the connection clear. "Jesus also said to the disciples." The also means that right after Jesus spoke about the prodigal son, he also spoke about the unjust steward. The two stories go together, in the same conversation. And the way the parable of the unjust steward begins, with a certain rich man, makes it sound like the rich man could be the same as the rich father of the two sons. And the Greek word for the way the unjust steward squanders his master's possessions is the same Greek word for the way the younger son squandered his father's inheritance. And just as the prodigal son hit rock bottom in a pig pen, the steward hits rock bottom because of his foolish actions. The prodigal had to feed pods to the pigs; the steward has to decide between digging and begging. And just as the prodigal finally came to his senses and devised a plan to save himself, the steward also comes up with a plan to escape from his crisis.

All these connections should make us wonder if the two parables are really two sides of the same coin. Because they are. The two stories build on each other. The unjust steward adds to the teaching of the prodigal son, showing how we should live in our heavenly Father's mercy.

Remember that the message of the story of the prodigal son was not about the younger son's efforts to save himself. His plan to go back as a hired servant didn't work. It turned out far better – his father received him as a son. So the story was really about the father's incredible mercy and love. The father saw his son from a long way off, he ran to embrace him, he welcomed him back, he ignored all the nonsense about no longer being worthy to be called his son, he slaughtered the fattened calf, he brought out the robe and signet ring. Truly the prodigal son is about our heavenly Father's love for us despite our rebellion.

So if the message of the prodigal son is to pay attention to the love and mercy of the father, and if the parable of the unjust steward builds on the prodigal, then the message of the unjust steward is not about the steward's dishonesty, but about the mercy of his lord.

When the unjust steward called in his lord's debtors one by one without his master knowing it, when he told the first to sit down and slash the bill in half, when he gave another a twenty percent discount, he was shrewdly buying favor to get a new job and a place to live. And his plan was especially shrewd, because the debtors had no idea he was acting independently. They thought he was following his master's instructions. They thought the mercy came from the master, and they were going to be grateful to the master. So the steward was putting his master in an uncomfortable position. His master would not be able to back out easily, he would have to honor his steward's dealings. Shrewd indeed.

But no matter how shrewd the steward was, the mercy of his master was even greater. A normal master, upon finding out he's been cheated, would react with great anger. But this man reacted mildly, with mercy. Probably he still fired the guy, but not before paying him a compliment. A letter of recommendation. He spoke well of his servant, contrary to all expectations.

So both parables teach about God's mercy. Just as the father of the prodigal suffered shame because of his son's behavior, the master of the unjust servant suffered financial loss because of his servant. And so our Lord and heavenly Father also suffered on our account. He suffered the death of his only Son for our behavior. Jesus suffered death and shame on the cross, for our sake, to cut down our debt not by twenty percent or fifty percent, but all the way down to zero. Such is the great mercy of our Lord.

But Jesus also uses the parable of the unjust steward to teach us how to live in the mercy of our heavenly Father. The prodigal received generous love from his father, and you have received generous mercy from God. So use the gifts your heavenly Father has given you shrewdly and profitably for God's kingdom. Learn good stewardship. Do not imitate the steward's dishonesty, but his shrewdness. Regard money as a tool, a tool given by God for winning brothers and sisters for the kingdom of God.

Jesus also says that the possessions God entrusts to us in this world are a kind of test. "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?" If we prove faithful in little things like money, if we use mammon wisely, then we shall also prove faithful in real things, in true heavenly gifts. Heavenly gifts like the word and sacraments of God. Being faithful in heavenly gifts means hearing God's word with joy, receiving the sacraments with thanksgiving, treasuring them, and using them to our eternal profit.

For as Jesus declares, no servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Either you will love and trust in mammon as your false god and run after it, or you will love and trust in the true God and recognize your wealth as a tool he has given. You have been entrusted with money for the care of others. Not so you can buy whatever you want, whatever toy or vehicle or property catches your eye. But for the sake of proving yourself a faithful steward, for building up the church, for proving you are worthy to be entrusted with heavenly gifts. And Jesus calls you to make friends for yourself by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. He's telling you to use your money to buy eternal friendships. Use your mammon wisely, to draw others into the church, so they become eternal friends who will one day welcome you in heaven. Give generously to the poor and to unbelievers, to show them the love of Christ and invite them into God's mercy. You will take nothing with you into the eternal dwellings, but what a joy it will be to meet these friends in heaven!

So take heed how you spend your earthly possessions, and pray for wisdom to use them well. And when you recognize that you have been unfaithful with your money, when God calls you to account for squandering, dishonesty, and coveting, then learn from the unrighteous steward. When the gig is up, when you're called to give an account on the last day of your stewardship, cast yourself on the mercy of your master. Remember his mercy, contrary to all expectations. Turn to him, rather than any manmade scheme.

Cast yourself on the mercy of the God who gave his Son for you. Cast yourself on the mercy of the God who longs to welcome you into the heavenly dwellings with open arms, who calls you his son though you do not deserve it. For he is the God who longs to show mercy to all men for the sake of Jesus. And on the last day, despite all your unfaithfulness, he who forgives all your iniquity will also commend you for Jesus' sake. Your master will say to you, contrary to all expectations, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen.

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