

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 16:1-13

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, who has bountifully given us Your blessing and our daily bread, we beseech You, preserve us from covetousness, and so enliven our hearts that we willingly share Your blessed gifts with our needy brethren; that we may be found faithful stewards of Your gifts and abide in Your grace when we shall be removed from our stewardship and shall come before Your judgment; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

In the Name of the One who though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor that through His poverty we might become rich, Dear Fellow Redeemed;

This text from St Luke is always interesting. It doesn't show up in Sunday School or Bible History books; there are no famous illustrations or paintings of it, and it isn't hard to guess why. The story is so different than the other parables of Jesus. It is the story of a man who is a picture of greed: he was stealing from his employer, and when he finally does find generosity it is because his neck is on the line, and even then he is generous not with his own, but with his master's wealth; he essentially steals again. Then two unexpected things happen: First, the man is commended by his master for being shrewd, and second, we hear Jesus say that line about using worldly wealth to make friends. And we find ourselves thinking, If the parables are meant to enlighten us and explain things about Jesus' work and the kingdom of God then either I am really stupid or this one failed miserably, because this seems to contradict everything else I've learned about Christianity. But as with all the hard sayings in the Bible, the key to this one is context. The context of this parable is important, since it helps us understand the point Jesus is making.

The Parable of the Unjust Steward, as it is commonly called, comes right after the much more familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. You might remember how that parable ends with the older son, the "good" son upset because he thinks his father is being unfair in celebrating the return of his younger brother. He complains that he has been faithful all these years, and where is his reward? And his father replies, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found"* (St. Luke 15:31-32). In other words, the parable of the prodigal son ends noting the greed of the older son, his desire to get what is his, and the father reminding the older son not to worry about such things, for "all I have is yours".

It is on that note that Jesus now transitions into our Gospel lesson for this morning. He is going to speak about the proper attitude toward wealth among God's people, and His introduction to this will be the parable of the unjust steward. It is, as we heard, about a man accused of wasting his master's possessions. He is in charge

of all his master's wealth but he doesn't manage it very well. He is using his master's wealth to make his own life comfortable, but isn't doing such a good job of using the master's wealth to benefit his master. Perhaps he has even gone so far as to skim a bit for himself, figuring that the master won't miss it and he probably deserves it anyway. In any case, the master's balance sheet doesn't look as good as it did before this guy took over the job. And so the master has come to a decision: it is time for this guy to go.

When the news is given to the manager he realizes it is too late for him to save his job, but not too late for him to do something. So he utilizes his master's possessions for his own benefit one more time. He goes to work collecting some of the debts owed to his master, and in doing so he shows some generosity toward the debtors, greatly reducing their debts. This, as the master comments, was a very shrewd thing to do. For the debtors are not only grateful to the servant but to the master as well, and so the master can't very well reinstate the debts, otherwise he'll look like either a fool or an ogre. Thus Jesus, by way of the master in the parable, describes his behavior: He calls it "shrewd". In other words the servant used all of his intelligence to further himself and his goals. The master may not have liked what happened, but he could appreciate the intelligence and cleverness behind it.

Jesus then closes the parable with that statement, *"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"* (St Luke 16:8-9). This is probably the hardest part of the parable for many of us, but it too becomes a little clearer when we read what follows a few verses later is where Jesus sums up all His points in St Luke 16: *"No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money"* (St Luke 16:13). The man in the parable used worldly wealth to make friends for himself, but only to benefit himself. He didn't really care about helping those people, but about helping himself, making sure his life was comfortable and that he had all the things he wanted. And while he may have been unprincipled and immoral, he at least realized he could only serve one master, and so when it came time to choose between serving his greed and serving his employer, he made his choice; he chose greed, and dedicated himself toward serving that master.

Set in its context, it becomes easier to see that the parable is about the attitude God's people are to have toward wealth. Like the man in the parable the wealth that we have really isn't ours; it belongs to our master, it belongs to God. We simply manage it, and in doing so we are to use it in ways that will benefit and please our master.

However, also like the man in the parable, we have not always been the most faithful of servants. Surrounded by the gifts God has given us, we have often fallen into the sin of forgetting God's role in this, and believing that it is really all mine for me to do with as I please. I worked for it, I got it, and I'm going to use it to make *me* happy and to further *my* goals. But in the end, to manage our possessions with this

attitude is to waste the possessions of our master, because they are not being used in the ways he wants them to be used. It would be like a parent depositing money in a child's bank account to pay for their college tuition, and then the child taking that money and using it to buy a new tv or to take a trip, or to go out to eat at fancy restaurants. Those things are not evil in themselves; but it becomes a wrong use of that money when it isn't what the giver, the parent, intended.

When the man in the parable is called on the carpet for his wasteful actions, he is essentially unrepentant. He is sorry not for what he did, but sorry that he got caught. Thus his response is to continue to use his master's possessions to further his own goals. He calls in the debtors, reduces their debts to make them owe him, so that he may now live off of them and their wealth.

This too, is dishonest, says Jesus, especially because he did it not to benefit his master but only himself. But at least his beliefs and his behavior are consistent. His attitude toward wealth is that it is there for me to make me happy. That guy in the big office may be my boss, he says, but my true *master* is wealth, and I will apply all my wisdom and abilities to serve him.

Oh that the children of the light were as clear and focused in their attitude toward wealth, says Jesus. You see, the man in the parable had two masters, but he understood the whole time that there was really only one; his true master was wealth, or greed. We, the children of the light, find ourselves in a similar position. We have our Father in heaven who as we confess in the First Article of the Creed has given us all we have, and we have our greed, and we are often guilty of trying to appease both. We hear from the time we are children that what we have is a gift of God. David certainly understood that when he spoke in our Old Testament lesson: *"All that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours, is the kingdom, O LORD, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You and You reign over all"* (1 Chronicles 29:11-12).

And we hear that one of the reasons God blesses us with His gifts is so that we can be generous with those around us. The catechism gives a good definition of how we are to use the gifts God gives us when it says, "As faithful stewards of the gifts of God we are...to use our money and goods to His glory and for the welfare of mankind." God blesses parents with opportunities to work and earn money so they can take care of their families. One of the reasons God designates husbands to be head of their homes is to give them the responsibility of providing for their families. Parents are to provide especially for their children so they are clothed and fed. God even goes so far as to often give us much more than we need, so that we might have the opportunity to be God's hands in serving our neighbor, sharing with those who are in need. Scripture is full of exhortations to help the poor and needy. And Scripture is just as full of exhortations that a portion of our income be dedicated back to our Master, as a sign that we understand Who is the source of our wealth, and as a sign of thankfulness for God's gifts.

But hearing these things, suddenly what we have seems like so little, we don't want to share or give any back, fearing we may not have enough. When we are

young we say “I only have a little bit of money, and there are all these other things I want to spend my money on.” Nor does the situation improve when we get older. We may have more money, but also more responsibilities, and more things we want. We pay our bills and look at what is left over, and still we worry we can’t give any back, lest we not have enough. We have other things we want to spend this money on. It gets even worse in retirement as we live on a fixed income. How are we to give back to God when we have so little? How can I give back to God and still get what I want? How can I serve both masters?

You can’t, and the attempt to serve both is a sin in itself, since we are to fear, love and trust in God above all things. Worse, we have often found ourselves making the choice of the man in the parable to serve the master of wealth and greed, over our true Master, who has been nothing but generous with us and done nothing to earn such disloyalty.

And yet, also like the man in the parable, our master is not only generous, but merciful. The master in the parable could have had the man thrown into prison and punished for his behavior. Instead, he simply dismisses him from his service. Our master is even more generous and merciful than that. He does not dismiss us from His household, but instructs His Son to pay our debt of disobedience and greed. By His perfect life, Jesus pays the debt of obedience you owe to God, and by His death on the cross Jesus endured the punishment for all your greed, all your selfishness, all your disloyalty to your master. God now looks upon you as one with perfect service, worthy not only of being a servant in His kingdom, but worthy of being His child, His heir.

It isn’t unusual for Christians to think, “If God would make me rich, then I could do so much more for Him; I could do so much good.” Sometimes people will say this to “sanctify” their desire for wealth, but sometimes it is spoken out the desire to do more, to do more good for the Church and for their neighbors.

Yet on this Sunday God would remind us that He knows what blessings to give us, and that in His wisdom He has already put us where we can do the most amount of good. We have all found ourselves dishonest managers, who even in our state of redemption struggle with our greed and selfishness. In ourselves we shall never attain the shrewdness and purity that God demands be used in the use and management of His gifts. In ourselves we have nothing to look forward to but being cast out of the house of God. But in Christ

You Can Be Generous With Your Master’s Gifts

for in Christ you are good and trustworthy stewards of all God’s gifts. In Christ all our wants are satisfied, and we are fit not only for service in God’s house but to be received into the eternal habitations of heaven.

Gloria Patri...

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