

Sermon for Trinity 9 – Luke 16:1-9

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The parable of the dishonest manager has always been disturbing. Preachers, other theologians, and other teachers have often avoided this parable of Jesus like the plague. But fortunately for us, this teaching of our Lord comes up virtually every year in the lectionary, so there's no getting around it! Perhaps you remember this parable: a story about a manager of accounts who cheats his master by embezzling from him and making the master's debtors richer. Superficially, it looks like Jesus is commending a liar and a thief. We scratch our heads at this story that rivals that of Jacob stealing the birthright from Esau by Jacob's underhanded scheming.

In the fourth century, there lived a Roman emperor named Julian. Emperor Julian was apostate; he was a former Christian who renounced the faith. Julian used this parable as a primary example to prove that Jesus taught his followers to be liars and thieves. Certainly, no upstanding Roman citizen would follow such a wicked teacher! Even common sense tells us to reject such corruption!

But what can we say? What is the virtue, what is the main point of this parable? Let's look closely at the details again...

The master rings forth his judgment against the dishonest manager: "What is this I hear about you?" No doubt in the manager's mind, even at this point, he must have known that his employment was close to over. His swindling was found out and his guilt was clear. Much like when God confronted Adam in the Garden, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat from?" there was no legitimate excuse. The master then cuts straight to the chase: "Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager." Don't balance the books. Retrieve them and turn them in. You're fired on the spot.

How did the manager react? How did he defend himself against such severe charges? He had a couple different options. "Beloved Master, I have served you. My father served your father. My grandfather served your grandfather. Surely you are not going to trash this beautiful 3-generational relationship over a little misunderstanding over money!" or "This really isn't my fault. I have done my best, but I don't have a thousand eyes. I cannot watch everything. The people I work with are thieves" or "Bring in those liars who tell you I am stealing. Let me confront them, and we will see if the cowards have the courage to repeat these lies in front of me" or "I have influential friends in high places. They will testify to my integrity." But none of these excuses cover over the sin and guilt of the stealing manager. These excuses cover his sin about as well as fig leaves covered the naked bodies of Adam and Eve. We recall their faulty defense: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate" and "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." And what about us? Do we not also seek to justify our sins by passing the blame? "I wouldn't have reacted that way if she hadn't started all this!" "I do so much for this company, I can take extra breaks and other perks, after all they owe me!" And in fact, from Adam onward, sinners, when confronted by God, never successfully offer excuses for the evil they have done, but like Adam we always try.

But that's also what's shocking of the dishonest manager's response to being accused. Silence. He just walked out of the room without pleading his case. Silence is consent and in this case an admission of guilt.

From the time that the manager is fired, everything he does regarding his management is illegal, and therefore not binding on the master. And yet, the manager still has possession of the accounting books, at least for a little while longer. Power and authority are still in his hands, but the time is fleeting. So he reasons out his options. He gives an honest reckoning of his physical

limitations: "I am not strong enough to dig." He also assesses his sense of personal honor: "I am ashamed to beg."

His only other option for the future involves his possession of the account books from his master. Anything he does regarding this route is illegal. Nevertheless, he was one last ace up his sleeve he can play. The manager caught stealing decides to steal even more! He meets with his masters debtors and reduces their debts. Remember, the debtors are still under the assumption that the manager is still working for the master. And these debt reductions are enormous! 50 measures of oil was worth about 500 denarii—a man's wages for 1 ½ years! The debt reduction for wheat was roughly the same value! How could the renter's explain good fortune? It had to be the overwhelming generosity of the master! What a benevolent man!

The master, upon finding out the news of his liquidated accounts, now has 2 options: 1. He can explain to his renters that the reductions were not legally authorized and that the original amounts must be paid in full. This would likely be followed by a gripe session calling the master unreasonable and greedy. Or 2. The master can remain quiet, take the financial hit created by that rascal manager, and continue to enjoy his reputation as a generous master. Needless to say, he chooses to keep his reputation.

The final detail of the story is the master commending the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Nowhere does the master commend the manager's actions of theft or dishonesty. Instead, he praises the manager's confidence in the master to be generous and gracious. And that's really the point: the manager's entire scheme is built on his keen insight into the true nature of the master. At his heart, this master is gracious and generous. The master had every right to have the dishonest manager thrown into prison and his family sold into slavery to cover the cost of his losses. But he didn't. The manager rolls the dice, bets on the master's generosity and grace, and wins big.

So what does this mean? What does this have to do with the overall big picture of you and me and God? When Jesus was accused of tax evasion, insurrection, and blasphemy, He remained silent, not unlike the dishonest manager. "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before his shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." Silence is a confession of guilt, but the sin and guilt were not His own—they were ours and they were placed upon our Lord, and paid for by Him upon the cross.

After being fired, anything the manager does in regard to the affairs of his former master's accounts is strictly illegal. According to the letter of the law, Christ's death on the cross was also completely illegal. By Pontius Pilate's own decree, "I have found in Him no guilt deserving death"! The death of an innocent man in the place of the guilty was unjust and lawless!

But the most important detail of this parable of the gracious master and the dishonest manager is Jesus' own commentary on the story: "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." The dishonest manager was a son of this world. His morals were deplorable. Yet he was smart enough to put his entire trust in the mercy of a generous master.

You are not sons of this world. You are sons of light. Your baptism says so. At God's heart is boundless compassion for you. Should you not rely all more on the generous and merciful God who spared not His own begotten Son, but gave Him into death to forgive all your sins and give you eternal life?

Emperor Julian was wrong. This parable is not chiefly about a manager who swindled his master. It's about our merciful God forgiving us. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠