

Sermon for Trinity IX – Luke 16:1-9

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

“There was not one needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” In the beginning days of the New Testament Church, the faithful gave generously to the Church as says Luke’s account in the book of Acts of the Apostles. One Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus sold a field and gave the money to the Church. He earned the nickname among the Apostles as “Barnabas” which means, “the son of encouragement.”

But not all those first followers of Christ were so faithful. A man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira kept back the gift that they had pledged to the Lord. Satan had filled the heart of this man to keep back for himself what rightly belonged to the Lord. The law convicted Ananias so greatly in his theft from men and God that he died that very moment. Upon the same just accusations of robbery of God’s belongings, his wife Sapphira also fell dead. God’s righteous wrath was swift against those who misused the stewardship that He gave them.

Yet, in a seeming contradiction, the Lord tells the parable in today’s Gospel of a steward, his master, and his master’s debtors. The steward had failed at both of his duties: on the one hand, he had wasted his master’s goods; on the other hand, he had not earned the honor and respect of the debtors. He led a selfish life- yes, a life he would no longer be able to support. This steward, who had all but lost his job, in the angst and anguish of what will have to him next, works out a plan. He summoned the debtors of the rich man his master, and, one by one, began cutting down their bills. One owes a hundred measures of oil, “Sit down, make it 50.” One owes a hundred measures of wheat, “Take you bill, write 80.” What a poor mismanagement of the rich man’s accounts! Huge sums of goods owed the rich man are gone in a moment. Sure, the steward had made new friends with those who owed the debt, but what would happen when he had to pay the piper? What would happen when he had to make account of everything that he had let slip easily through his fingers? The steward’s day of reckoning came, and what happened? The rich man actually commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness! The rich man rewarded the steward for this robbery and misuse of goods! Does Christ praise a person who delivers himself out of his dilemma by deception? And here’s wherein the contradiction lies: in this parable, is the Lord condoning stealing?

If you take into consideration the account in Acts where the couple died of fear for stealing from God, the answer is “no.” If you recall God’s seventh commandment, “You shall not steal,” you see God does not permit theft. And the law cuts deeper than you may realize: Have you been discontent with what God has or has not given you? Have you neglected the care of your neighbor’s property, possessions, or earnings? Have you supported your neighbor in all means available to you? Have you taken work

supplies for you own personal use? Have you kept something that was borrowed or found? If God would not permit such actions, if God would condemn such neglect, why in the world does the Lord tell a parable in which the rich man condones his dishonest steward's unfaithful use of goods? Why does Christ condone theft in this parable?

In all actuality, the Lord does not condone theft, rather He condones grace. The dishonest steward showed favor toward the debtors and removed their debt. So the Son removes the debt and guilt of you and all sinners. The Father is pleased with His only-begotten Son who has dealt shrewdly with the debtors. In fact, so shrewdly has He dealt with you, that He has taken all your sins against the Father into Himself. Your debt of sin is not a hundred measures, but zero. The Lord doesn't condone theft. The Lord condones grace.

The Lord condones grace and that means Christ forgives your sins freely. Forgiveness of sins is free! You need never to pay anything for it. If you gave no money and no time to the church- Jesus' forgiveness of all your sins is still free. There's absolutely nothing that you can give that will ever make His forgiveness of your sins more complete for you than it already is.

Dearly beloved, it was no accident in today's parable that the steward and debtors dealt in the currency of oil and wheat. These two elements, though unrighteous mammon, have greater Biblical significance. Oil was used in ancient times for Baptismal anointing and the anointing of the sick. Wheat was and is used for the Sacrament of the Altar. When the earthly elements of oil and wheat are consecrated and joined with God's Word, those who receive them enter into a heavenly home even when earthly homes fall apart.

Even as future residents of heaven, you are still an earthly steward. This is true. Love your neighbors beyond all doubt. Trust Christ and receive His gifts faithfully. Be content on earth with your steward's wages, with nourishment and clothing. Turn your gifts to God's glory and the good of your neighbor. In heaven, you shall then find an eternal harvest for your brief sowing on earth. If the Lord has given you a useful skill, use it to your neighbor's benefit, and not your own. Serve the world with your gift. Use your God-given wealth and unrighteous mammon to make for yourself friends in heaven.

But know this, dearly beloved: No man enters eternal habitations by any means of his own. The Lord will receive you into heaven because He is the Master of heaven who earned the entrance for you. Christ will receive you into heaven because He is the Steward of heaven who will give account to your freedom from guilt and sin. And know that the eternal gifts prepared for you are for your taking at no cost. Amen.

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