

Sermon for Trinity 9 - Luke 16:1-9

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

When our Lord wished to teach His disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven, faith, and salvation, one of the ways He would do so is through parables. Now a parable is taking an everyday example that can be seen and using it to describe a heavenly reality. While this is true, not all parables are alike. Some parables teach us “you go and do likewise.” The Good Samaritan is an example of this: A man who is left for dead on a roadside is passed by a priest and a Levite. Then a Samaritan comes and takes the half-dead man, puts him on his donkey, and takes him to be cared for at a nearby inn. As the Good Samaritan, we should care for those who need us. We should be like him. Or another parable in this vein: The Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee bragged of his good works before God in self-proclaimed righteousness. The tax collector beat his chest before God, saying “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” We should be humble before God, trusting in His mercy alone and not our works, as the tax collector did.

But today’s parable, the dishonest manager, is not one of those parables. It’s a not a “you go and do likewise” parable. Take a look: Charges were brought against a rich man’s account manager that he had be wasting the man’s possessions. The dishonest manager is required to turn in his shady accounting and fired on the spot. Weighing out his options, the manager decides how he will improve his situation: he steals even more from the rich man. He cooks the books to reflect that the rich man’s debtors owe only half of what they really owe. So what is the end result of the manager’s compounded corrupt copping? What does the robbed rich man do with this rascal of a manger? He commends the dishonest manager! He promotes the “shrewdness” that the manager showed! Make sense? I didn’t think so either!

So this is obviously not a “you go and do likewise” parable. Our Lord, in many places in the Scriptures, speaks against stealing. So what is the point? How should we understand this parable? Why would God even tell it to us at all?

Today’s Old Testament reading sheds some light for us, as King David addresses God: “With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless; with the purified you deal purely, and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.” God deals mercifully with merciful people. With the blameless man, He deals blamelessly. With the pure, He deals purely. That’s all good and well if we are merciful, blameless, and pure. Have we been? Have we shown the mercy of the Good Samaritan in caring for those who need us most? Have we been purely humble before God as the tax collector and putting no trust in our good works? Have we been blameless in thoughts, words, and deeds? Honestly the last line describes us best: “with the crooked, you make yourself seem tortuous.”

Crooked. Tortuous. Dishonest. Unjust. The fact of the matter is that these words describe us best. Have we not also been dishonest managers? Have we not counted God’s material blessings to us as not His but ours? Have we not squandered excesses on whatever fancies us at the time? Have we not used God’s money and time for our own selfish, self-serving purposes rather than for our community, family, and parish-family? To dishonest managers God gives a parable about dishonest managers. At least He’s speaking our language.

But as God’s managers and stewards, we don’t have to be trapped in the cycle of our own dishonesty. His Word tells us, “On the first day of every week, each of you should put aside some

amount of money in relation to what you have earned and save it for this offering." This tells us that the Lord wants us to make money offerings to Him regularly, that is, whenever we have income, whether we are able to go to church that week or not. God also says, "Since you excel in so many ways – you have so much faith, such gifted speakers, such knowledge, such enthusiasm, and such love for us – now I want you to excel also in this gracious ministry of giving." So no matter how well or faithfully we may serve in other areas, the Lord expects us to follow His directions regarding money offerings, also, even to excel in this area. How much? "In relation to [or proportion to] what you have earned." The Old Testament's tithe (or giving 10%) was the inflexible minute regulation. But we're not in the Old Testament, for Christ's death and resurrection has ushered in the New. So if our Lord through Paul's letters says we are called to give proportionally, weekly, and generously, then surely the Old Testament tithe is the floor level of Christian giving, not the ceiling. New Testament stewardship is called to be an even greater sacrificial fulfillment of Old Testament tithing regulations. And this because the Sacrifice was much greater.

The parable of the dishonest manager is unlike the "you go and do likewise" parables. But it's not unlike every parable. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows the amazing, crazy, irrational, stupid, unfair grace of God. A son takes his great portion of the inheritance from his living father. He goes to a foreign country and squanders it all in reckless living. He wasted it all and has nothing left. So he goes home. What would be fair is the father disowning his son who had already essentially disowned his father. That is fair. That is just. But that's not what happened. The wayward son is restored to his son-ship and more, no questions asked. Unfair. Unjust. But that's how God's kingdom comes and how God's grace is given.

So it is with the dishonest manager. Justice was being fired. Fairness was a life of digging and begging. But that's not what happened. He is commended. In God's kingdom, our Lord chooses to deal in grace.

And there is no greater grace than God's ultimate injustice. The Father sent His only Begotten Son to this earth. He lived a merciful, blameless, pure life. No sin in Him. And yet He is sentenced, beaten, scourged, crucified, and dies for sinners. Us sinners. The crooked, dishonest, selfish sinners that we are. He died in our place. This is injustice. This is not fair. By our sins we justly deserve God's punishment, but what do we owe our master? Not 100. Not 80. Not 50. Christ paid it all. Not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. We are forgiven it all.

It's no accident that this parable of the dishonest manager mentions the physical commodities of oil and wheat. These goods have historically been employed for churchly use. Oil was used in anointing, setting one apart as God's own child. This happened for us in Holy Baptism, when God's unjust grace was first applied to us, who had nothing to offer God in return. Wheat is the other means by which God bestows His unfair grace. We sinners receive unearned forgiveness in Christ's Body and Blood.

By God's grace we are sons of light. By God's grace we are not His enemies, but friends of God. By God's grace we are received into eternal dwellings. And He would have it no other way. Amen.

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