

September 23, 2007
17th Sunday After Pentecost

“Stewarding Unrighteousness”

Luke 16:1-15

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 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? No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money."

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Sermon

If you look up today's Gospel reading in the English Standard Version of the Bible, it has the heading "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager." It's easy to figure out how they came up with the heading, but I think they're actually way off base here. In the end, I think the New International Version of the Bible which you have in the pews has a much better heading, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager." It's not surprising there is disagreement, for this is considered by most as one of Jesus' more difficult parables to understand.

"There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions." It's important to note that there is nothing about dishonesty here. The text tells us the steward was wasting the master's stuff, not necessarily stealing it, but squandering it on stupid or useless enterprises, things that were of no value to anyone. In this light, perhaps our heading should be something along the lines of "The Parable of the Bone-headed Manager" or better yet "The Parable of the nincompoop Steward."

So the master calls this nincompoop steward into the office and says to him, *"What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager."* Here's another point you have to make sure you don't miss. By our standards what should happen here? The master would simply look at the steward with a Donald Trump stare and say, "You're fired." But the master in the parable doesn't do that. Instead, the nincompoop steward is allowed to have some time to work on the problem.

"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses. So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the

first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'"

"Aha!" we say. "This is why they called him a dishonest manager. He's stealing from the master!" But what is the master's reaction? "*The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*" Huh? That doesn't make any sense. Why on earth would a master commend someone for stealing from him? This is where the interpretation of the parable often messes with our minds. Are we supposed to imitate a dishonest manager? It seems so from what Christ says. "*For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*"

So if we break it down, we stand in the place of the manager and God is obviously the master. God created the world and put it in the care of mankind. Well, mankind proved to be nincompoops and fell into sin and polluted all of creation with unrighteousness. Yet, though in all justice God could have said "You're fired!" and destroyed all creation, He decided to leave us in charge for a time. Death entered the world with sin, so each man now had a limited life, a short time to deal with the worldly blessings with which God had gifted him. And that is where each of us finds ourselves today—stewards of a fallen creation, each gifted with some amount of material blessings and talents which are part of a fallen world.

And what does our master, our God, find commendable? When we use those earthly gifts to ease the burdens of others in the world, to serve a cause other than ourselves. Remember Jesus words a few chapters earlier in Luke, "*Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*"

Christ tells us in this parable that our time is limited and we need to be looking toward the future. Use the material wealth of a fallen world, our unrighteous wealth, not selfishly, but in service to others. This steward may have begun as a nincompoop, a silly and foolish and wasteful manger, but when he came to the realization that his time as a manager would end, he looked to the future and did what was needed to secure a good one. I should note that where the text calls him "dishonest manager" it is more literally translated from Greek as a "steward of unrighteousness." I think that makes us identify more easily with him. Look at the wealth you have. It's all unrighteous in a way. It's part of a sinful world and it's all going to pass away, be destroyed and replaced by a new earth, a righteous earth at Christ's second coming.

And that's the question we're faced with; how are we going to use the gifts we have on loan from God? And being Stewardship Sunday, you're probably expecting me to say, "Give some to the church." Far be it from me to disappoint you, so yes, give some to the church. I hope the Holy Spirit has moved or will move you to commit to some generous support of this place so we can plan our budget, pay our bills and not have pastor's paycheck bounce. This physical church building and operation is yours and needs your financial support to function. It also needs the volunteering of your time and your talents to accomplish day to day tasks and the many ministry projects we undertake. It needs you in worship and Bible study, not only for your own benefit, but to lift up those around you in the faith simply by your very presence here.

But that doesn't mean that whatever cash you don't give is yours. It doesn't mean that your life outside of church can be lived anyway you please. Every material blessing and every beat of your heart and every breath you take was created by God and belongs to Him. You are a steward of God's property every minute of your life. You need to continually be asking yourself, "Am I using the time, talents and treasure God has gifted me to His glory? Or am I serving some other master, some earthly delight or

desire that falls outside God's will for me?" Jesus makes it clear that there can be no splitting of loyalties. To be commended by God, you must be His servant and His alone.

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? 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." The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."

Luckily for us, Jesus is saying these words as He travels to the cross to suffer our punishment for all those times we have indeed loved money and other things highly valued among men which are detestable to God. Jesus is the only one who was perfect in keeping focused on the Father's will. He really was the only honest manager ever, the only one to use His entire humanity in service to others, even though that service would lead Him to suffering, torture and death on a cross. And because of that death, that payment for our sin, we are able through faith to be seen as commendable in our father's sight—a person warranting that eternal dwelling in heaven.

That faith that saves us is a living thing, something that is lived out in our lives both inside and outside of church. Be a shrewd manager of what God has given you to steward. Build God pleasing habits with your time and treasure because Christ has enabled you to be God pleasing. That's the greatest gift. You *can* please God. That wasn't possible without Christ. Don't squander and waste that gift thinking that what you have is yours to please yourself. Look at your wealth and abilities as an opportunity to serve, both in the church and in the world at large.

There is one overriding aspect of this parable. It shows the nature of the master. He's patient. He's willing and maybe even eager to be pleased with His nincompoop manager. His nature is to be loving and generous. His nature is to give His only Son to die, so that we stewards of unrighteousness may become righteous in His sight. And that's what He's done. His blood has accomplished it. His righteousness is now ours. We live it out His righteousness in our lives, being generous, giving and forgiving, just as He has been to us.