

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

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It's a strange parable that Jesus told—strange, because it doesn't really fit the mold of the other parables that Jesus told. For years, the parable has been known as "The Unrighteous Steward." You heard it already, but here's a quick summary:

- A master has a slave that is in charge of the master's financial affairs. Think of Joseph in Potiphar's house—he had the same role. (cf. Genesis 39:1-6)
- Word reached the master that his steward was wasting his money. If true, it's enough for the master to put him out at best or to have him executed at worst.
- The master confronts the steward and demands an answer and puts him out right then and there.
- The steward, put out, devises a plan to go to the master's debtors and forgives them each a portion of their debt to the master.
- When master catches word of what the former steward had done, he praised him for his shrewdness.

Why is the steward called unrighteous? It is not because he forgave a portion of the master's debts without the master's consent or knowledge, but likely because as the parable starts, he is mismanaging his master's wealth.

The thing is, since this is a parable of Jesus, people have tried and continue to try to figure out who represents whom. For the most part, the master is equated with the Father and the steward with the Son, but when people try to explain how this is so, the metaphor falls apart quickly. For instance, why would anyone call the Son unrighteous, and why would the Father put the Son out? Well, some may argue that the Father sending the Son to earth to forgive sins is equivalent to the master putting the steward out, who then devises the scheme to forgive debts. Okay, so that could work, but recall that the steward did not forgive the entire debts of the debtors; however, according to the rest of Scripture, Jesus did forgive the entire debt of sin for all mankind: Jesus is "...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) "As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

There is a desire to make Jesus' parable fit a mold. They are all supposed to represent the reality of things in heaven and earth, how God deals with man—stories designed to allow humanity to peer into the mind of God, if only for an instant and in a "dimly lit" manner. (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12) With the Unrighteous Steward, however, that doesn't really work.

So what does it mean?

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, how will you commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, how will you give you what is your own?

"Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home."

I suppose it would do you well to explain unrighteous mammon. Is Jesus here indicating that money is a dirty thing? Is He saying that money makes you unrighteous and evil? It is, after all, said that, "Money is the root of all evil." (cf. 1 Timothy 6:10a, intentionally misquoted) No, not at all. In fact, St. Paul wrote to Timothy that, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." It's not that money is, itself, an evil thing, but that a preoccupation with it leads to all kinds of evil. You'll want to note here that the

steward in the parable is not described as a lover of money, even though he mismanaged his master's wealth; he just happened to work with money.

So, why is mammon characterized as unrighteous? Because it is not an object given by which you can then save yourselves. That is a very important point, and should color the rest of what you hear in the sermon. That which is righteous is holy or set apart for the work of salvation or has been saved. Therefore, communion and absolution are called holy. The Scripture is called holy. Even the liturgy, derived from the Holy Word, is called holy. Why? Because these things are given so that you would come to know your God and His Christ and be saved. Mammon, while a gift from God, does not reveal God to you, nor His will, and is therefore called unrighteous. And, in fact, since God and mammon can be set against each other in your hearts, God being holy automatically makes mammon unrighteous. But you, therefore, for your trust in Christ and His work of salvation from the cross, which are gifts of God to you, are called a saint—holy and righteous—but also a sinner.

But, that does not mean that God does not want you to use money. In fact, you have the clear command from Jesus in today's text to make friends for yourselves using it. So, when God gives you riches, use them. Support yourselves, enjoy yourselves, help the needy, be charitable, give at every opportunity. God gives you mammon in order to use it, not to hoard it or store it for no reason. Don't get me wrong, saving some for an emergency and planning for future expenses is fine stewardship, but putting riches away without a purpose is in direct violation of what Jesus commands in today's text.

Recall the parable of the rich man whose ground yielded plentifully. He thought to himself to tear down his barns and build bigger ones in order to store the plenty. God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (cf. Luke 12:16-21)

Of course, the hard part of the command is that it comes from God, and you, fallen flesh with which you live, are predisposed not to obey it. You are like the rich man in the parable who wanted to build bigger barns. You want to hoard the good gifts that God gives you and keep them all for yourself. You love them, and that love for them supplants the love you are commanded to have for God, as given in the First Commandment: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." "...Above all things." "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

That does not negate the command to use unrighteous mammon, though. But, now that you know what it is and that you are supposed to use it, what does Jesus mean by telling you to use it so that you may be received into an everlasting home? Well, there are some possibilities.

God gives you money in order that you may use it to His pleasure and be received into His eternal home. That's not entirely wrong, but it isn't completely correct, either. There are some who read and hear Jesus' command this way. "God gives me much so that I can please Him with my charitable good works and be received by Him into the eternal home of heaven." The problem with that is then that God expects you to work out—or in this case, buy—your salvation.

Another possibility is that God gives you money in order that you may use it to His pleasure and be received into His eternal home. What? Didn't I just say that already? Yes, I did, but here's the twist to it this time: His pleasure is that you handsomely pay those who bring the Word of God to you. After all, Jesus does tell you through St. Paul to, "[S]hare in all good things with him who teaches" (Galatians 6:6), and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (1 Timothy 5:18) This might sound like condemnation to your ears and music to mine, given the situation here, and many a prosperity teacher may teach this text this way, but mammon is not given in order for one to line their pockets, including those of preachers. Still, it is good and pleasing to God that you share in all good things with your teacher and preacher, but don't expect this to be a good work by which you earn or buy your salvation.

A final possibility is learned by the parable that closes St. Luke's 16th chapter. It just so happens that you heard it read and preached to you two months ago. It is the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus. In brief, the status of the rich man as rich and Lazarus as poor is not an indication of their standing before God. One can only rightly conclude that the rich man ends up in eternal torment because he did not believe in Jesus or trust in His merits and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom because he did believe. For it is only by grace through faith that one is saved. (cf. Ephesians 2:8) However, that Lazarus continued to beg at the door of the rich man's house indicates that the rich man had no regard for Lazarus, but only for his wealth; he probably loved his money more than God, and this unrighteous mammon in turn made the rich man unrighteous.

If the rich man had used his God-given wealth to aid Lazarus, it could have indicated a love for God over and above the love for money. He would have been more like the steward in today's parable, at least at the end of the parable. He would have demonstrated a cheerful giving attitude encouraged in Scripture. (cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7)

So it goes, "[I]f you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" Faithfulness in unrighteous mammon is demonstrated in a couple of lines that Jesus utters on either side of Luke's 16th chapter. "Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys." (Luke 12:33) "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven..." (Luke 18:22)

It may sound as if Jesus here is saying that if you sell and give, you will have treasure in heaven. This is similar to how He teaches you to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Here, Jesus is not saying that God will forgive you if you first forgive others. You love others because you have first been loved by God. (cf. 1 John 4:19) Likewise,

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. *So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.* (emphasis mine)

You love because you were first loved. You forgive because you were first forgiven. You give because you were first given to.

Think of it this way, then. The Son of God has all the riches of heaven at His disposal; they are rightly His. However, He put that all aside and took on human flesh and blood, descending to earth from heaven. He emptied Himself and handed Himself over to death in your stead. In Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus gave Himself to and for you. He forgives you for all of your sins. He demonstrates His love for you. He first loved you. He first forgave you. He first gave to you. Now, you can give to others, forgive others, love others. These are the things which God in His Word encourages you to do.

When you do love, forgive, and give, it is an expression of the New Life that you have been given in Baptism. And that's the point of it all, the point of Jesus telling this parable. You have been received into an everlasting home for the sake of Jesus Christ. You have true riches, won for you by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. You have been given much by way of the life and death of your God, Jesus Christ. When you are like the unrighteous steward as he was forgiving debtors their debts, you are giving of the good things that God has given you, you are loving because God has loved you, and you are forgiving, because God has forgiven you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.