

Sermon Transcript for August 1, 2021

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now in our readings, we have some pretty challenging sayings that should rightfully convict us and make us be concerned about what God is trying to say. And the Gospel lesson we have here, you cannot serve God and money. And we as Americans have a hard time with this one, I think, because we are... Well, our culture is kind of focused upon money. You can measure success in this world by how rich you are in many respects. You know, the people that have the money, they're the ones that everybody assumes actually have the good ideas, which is questionable when you come to think about it. And we figure, "Well, if I just had extra money or if I just had enough money, then I would be happy, then life would be okay."

Have we not read the tabloids? Have we not seen the results of people with money? Not a single one of them are happy. They're always sad. They're always looking for something more or different. Money does not satisfy. It does not. It is a really bad god, a really bad idol because it will never, ever fulfill us. And money has become the idol for both the rich and the poor. For the rich, "I've got enough money. I can do whatever I want. I don't need to care about anybody else. I'm taken care of. Well, that's where I put my trust is my money."

On the other hand, if you don't have enough money, you're always looking for more and your whole focus becomes getting more money. And then it becomes your idol in that respect, because "If I just had enough, then I would be good," rather than saying, "What is this world to me? I've got God. He is my treasure and that is enough for me." Or do we not believe that God is faithful to us and that He will provide for us? Do we actually believe that He will never leave us or forsake us? Can we say that I have food and drink and that is enough? Or do we think, "Well, there should be more." It's a difficult thing for us to look at our own money and to see it as God sees it, but we are called to do that. We're called to do that, not just with our money though, but with everything that we are.

We've got Paul talking about all these events that happened in the wilderness when the Israelites were wandering around and they had some pretty awful things that they did. I mean, the sexual immorality that took place. Again, our culture and our society seems to have a real hard time with this one. It's everywhere, trying to deceive and pull people away from the true worship of God and the true understanding of marriage: one man, one woman in the confines of marriage. Period. Everything else may feel good for a moment, but there's guilt and there's shame and it's not pleasing to God. And so we're called, not to indulge in that type of personal desires for what we want for the moment. And that's really the problem that we all face is, we have a hard time thinking long-term. Temptation that comes our way is very often something that we need to deal with immediately and we worry and we fret and we wonder if God can really handle this.

And the fact of the matter is sometimes we doubt. I mean, let's face it. If we are worrying about something, that means we're not completely certain God's going to take care of it. As my wife has been wont to say very often recently to me, "If you know how to worry, you know how to pray, so rather than worry about it, pray about it. It's a much better use of your time and energies and your thoughts." So this whole parable that Jesus is talking about is trying to help us understand where we put our value in life, what we put our trust in and what is important in this life. And so He tells the parable, but quite frankly, this parable doesn't make a whole lot of sense, at least not logically, because why in the world would God be praising the dishonest manager when the dishonest manager was cheating him out of his goods?

And quite frankly, this is true of almost all of the parables. See, we've often maybe thought the parables are earthly stories that help us make sense of heavenly realities, and to some degree that's accurate. The thing of it is, these earthly stories don't always make a lot of sense. They seem dumb. They seem crazy. This is not what any normal person would do. I mean, if you're a farmer, you don't take the good seed that you have and throw it on the path. The hard soil, it's not going to grow there. That's wasteful. And yet in the parable of the sower and the seeds, he throws it everywhere. I mean, one of my summer jobs was picking up rock in fields in Iowa because the rocks made it difficult for crops to grow, so you went through the field and you picked up the rocks and you put it on a platform to take it away from the field. You don't throw seed into rocky soil. You get rid of the rocks. But here the sower just throws it in the rocky soil, no matter what. Wasteful. That doesn't make any sense.

The prodigal son, no rich man in his right mind would go picking up his robe and running to his wayward son who just wasted half of his inheritance or half of what the owner had, on wine, women and song. Thumbed his nose at his dad and said, "I don't care. I want what I want." And he comes back humble, having wasted everything, and the father welcomes him back with open arms and gives him a promise of a new inheritance. No way. Really? That doesn't happen.

And let's face it, if I lose a coin, if I lose some money and I find it, I don't wake up the neighbors and ask them to rejoice with me that I found my coin that was lost. They're going to look at me like I'm a little loopy. They are!

These parables don't make sense from a worldly perspective. They're not meant to. That's not really the point. Jesus spoke in parables. He really says He speaks in parables so that we who are already in the family might understand. They're meant as catechesis, as teaching tools, for those who know. It's not meant for those out there. They're going to listen to these stories and go, "That doesn't make any sense." What they need to hear is the plain and simple truth that God loves them and cares for them. We get to see more depth and meaning to that, and that's what these are all about: to strengthen and nourish our faith, so that then we might be able to proclaim clearly the faith to others.

So here, what are we talking about? Rich man has a manager. This rich man has sharecroppers. They're working the land for him and they give him a portion of it as payment, as rent, for using the land. But it says that for whatever reason, the manager was wasting the rich man's possessions. Now it doesn't say exactly what it means by wasting, but we get some clue when we understand the nature of this rich man, or God, in this case. First of all, if you know that your manager is wasting your possessions, you don't give them the opportunity to go grab the books and cook them so they make sense. You throw him in jail and you send somebody else to get the books. You don't give him a chance to change the register. That's dumb. That's foolish. That's not good business practice. And yet this rich man allows, in his grace and mercy, allows the manager to go grab the books and gives him time to do whatever he's going to do with them and bring them back, because the nature of the rich man is really what we are called to understand here. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is generous beyond measure. That's what we're beginning to learn about this rich man.

So the manager goes, "Okay, I'm in trouble. He's caught me red-handed. What am I going to do? I'm not going to beg. I don't have the strength to dig, so I'll change the books a little so that other people will welcome me, so that they will see how generous my master is and my generous master is not going to change it." See, the manager understood the nature of his master. He knew that his master wanted to be generous, wanted to be gracious. And probably possibly he was wasting the manager possessions or the rich man's possessions,

because he was demanding exactly what he owed. He was forcing the sharecroppers to give everything that they owed to the very last penny, when he knew that the rich man really wanted to be praised for his generosity.

The rich man didn't want to be honored because he was the richest man in town and you better be on his good side or else. That's not something to be joyful about. I don't want to kiss up to the rich man just because he's got all the power, and God doesn't want us to do that either. He wants us to serve Him and to love Him because He is generous, because He is forgiving. He is loving and gracious and He provides more than we could possibly imagine and He does not demand what is owed Him, and for that, we ought to be very thankful because what do we owe God?

What does Samuel say here in the Old Testament? "With the merciful, He shows Himself merciful; the blameless, He shows Himself blameless. He deals with the pure, purely." Now, are you merciful, blameless and pure? I wish I could say I was, but I can't. So if God, then, with the crooked-natured made Himself to seem torturous and He has His eyes on the haughty to bring them down, that's where I'd normally stand and that's what I deserve. But God is gracious and is merciful and sees me as merciful and kind and blameless and pure. Not because I earned that reputation, but because Christ did. He earned the reputation because He was blameless and pure. And in God's grace and mercy, He gives that identity to me. Now because of Christ, in my baptism, I'm brought into the family and I am made and declared pure by God.

What a blessing that is, because without His grace, I have no hope. So the manager, knowing the nature of his master, goes and does what the master wanted him to do in the first place. Be generous, be forgiving, be loving, so that they might praise you for your good nature. So that we might praise God for being generous to us and giving us all that we need to support this body in life, because what's the point of holding on strong and hard to all that we've earned? Is our money going to save us in the end? You know, what is the common phrase? "There's no U-Haul trailer on the back of any hearse." You can't take it with you. Somebody else is going to get the riches that you have earned, so why hoard them? What's the point? God doesn't want you to be self-satisfied and content with what you have. He wants you to use what you have been given for His honor, for His glory, to be generous with your time, with your energy, with your talents, with your funds. He wants you to use them for His honor, for His glory, for His praise, to be ready in season and out to give a witness to the hope that you have. Whether or not we think we have enough, we need to remember, has God not promised to provide all that I need? And then the answer is yes, He has. And even if evil befalls me, even if I am facing a temptation that seems to be overwhelming me, can I not trust God to provide a means of escape? Can I not trust God to bear me up through these trials and tribulations of my life? Yes, of course I can. Does that mean that everything's going to be smooth sailing and rainbows for my entire life? No. Does it mean that sometimes my life might actually be in danger and I might lose my life? Well, yeah, actually it does. But has not God saved me even in that instance, because to live is Christ, to die is gain. So what am I to be afraid of?

If I live, I live to serve God. If I die, I get the reward. I'm in paradise and I no longer have to deal with all the pain and the sorrow and the heartache of this world. It's a win-win either way, and God has given me a way through. So what do I need to be afraid of? What do I need to worry about? Why do I grumble? We are called to put our faith in God, because again, what does Samuel say? "He is a shield for all those who take refuge in Him and He is a rock and a strong refuge." I mean, think about that. No matter how chaotic the world seems, we have a sure and certain foundation that does not waiver.

The rest of the world is going to hell in a hand basket and all over the place, but we are secure. We have a rock that is not shaken, and we have a shield, a defender, that anything that comes our way, He will defend us, and He is our strong refuge. He will lead us beside still waters. He will guard and protect us and lead us to green pastures, places of safety and security. Wherever God is, that is where our security and safety is. The tempest may be going on all around us, but we are secure in Christ. Do not be afraid, no matter what comes your way. Trust in the Master's generosity. Use all that you have for His honor and His glory and trust that He'll take care of you.

I'm most remembered at this time of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They would not worship to the false idol that was created before them and they were being threatened to be thrown into the fiery furnace. And while they were facing that fire, they turned to the king and they said, "God will save us, but even if we die, we will not worship down to your false god." In other words, God will save us, but I know that that might mean I might actually die at this very moment, but I still know that God saves me. That is the faith, that is the confidence that He calls us to have in Him. I know God will save me, but even if I die, I'm not going to fall into temptation. I'm not going to be afraid, but I will hold fast to the promises of the mercy of God Almighty because He is faithful. He is faithful and He will never leave me and He will never forsake me.

May the grace, mercy and peace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ be and abide with you always, now and forever more unto life everlasting. Amen.