

## Ninth Sunday after Trinity, August 6, 2023

**Readings:** 2 Samuel 22: 26-34, 1 Corinthians 10: 6-13, Luke 16: 1-13

### The Steward's Shrewdness Sanctified

*"The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness"* (Luke 16:1–9). The steward's shrewdness is praiseworthy for two reasons. First, he knew the master would be merciful. He trusted that the master would honor the debts he forgave in the master's name. In the same way, though we have squandered our heavenly Father's possessions in selfishness and sin, Jesus is the Steward who has canceled our debt, knowing that His forgiveness will be honored by the Father because of the holy cross. Secondly, the steward was shrewd in using oil and wheat to provide for his earthly welfare. So also do these earthly elements aid us when pressed into heavenly use in the anointing of baptism and the wheat of the Lord's Supper. Those who have the Sacraments will have an eternal home when their earthly home fails. These provide us aid in times of temptation (1 Cor. 10:6–13). For the Lord is our strength and a shield to all who trust in Him (2 Sam. 22:26–34).

### Sermon Transcript

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

Today, we have probably one of the most difficult parables in all of Scripture to try and figure out. If you noticed, I read it a little bit differently than was written in your text. I read the master commended the unrighteous manager for his shrewdness, whereas it says dishonest, and therein lies the crux. What does it mean to be dishonest or unrighteous or unjust? Those are all kinds of terms that describe this manager of the master.

Now, first off, before we get into it, we need to understand why Jesus uses parables and what are parables. Because if we get the wrong understanding of what a parable is, we're going to come up with a wrong answer of what it's trying to tell us. First off, what is a parable? You might've heard that a parable is an earthly story that communicates a heavenly message. And that's okay, but it doesn't really get at the crux of things. Because when we look at parables, parables are fairly ridiculous when it comes right down to it. I mean, nobody thinks and acts like the people in the parables for the most part. Nobody who lost a coin goes and searches and finds the coin. Okay, maybe that's real, but nobody wakes up the entire neighborhood and says, "Rejoice with me. I lost a coin and now I found it." Really? Everybody's going, "Shut up. Please stop." Nobody who's a good farmer is going to take seed and just throw it all over the place, throw it in the path. I mean, really, nothing's going to grow there. I'm not going to waste seed on the path or the rocky soil.

I spent some of my childhood picking up rocks. That's a thing in Iowa. Rocks seem to grow in Iowa. I don't know what it is, but they just come to the surface. Every year you got to pick the rock out of the field so that you can plant the seed. Otherwise, the rock gets in the way and you can't grow. You don't, as a good farmer, throw seed in the rocky soil. That's not what you do. You don't leave 99 sheep and leave them to their own devices and go find the lost one. You just don't work that way, and you don't praise somebody who's being dishonest.

It just is not the way things work. A parable is really there, as Jesus says, in fact, when he's talking to his disciples, his disciples say, "What's this parable about? Why are you speaking in parables?" Jesus himself says, "Parables are there so that you can understand and learn the things of God, and so that the world cannot understand." Parables are spoken so that they cannot actually understand what's going on on. Now, it seems pretty harsh when it comes right down to it. Doesn't God want everybody to know His will?

Yes, He does. But when we understand the things of God, especially the things that He's trying to teach us in parables, they already don't make sense to the world out there. If they heard what is being taught here, they

would not learn from it and grow from it because this is for catechesis. This is for us who already believe. This is for us to deepen our understanding. But if we gave them the meat first, they wouldn't be able to handle it, and they wouldn't understand it, and they would reject it.

They wouldn't be able to hear what they need to hear. This is meat. This is solid teaching. This is meant for those of us who are already here. The truth of the Gospel is for everybody, yes, but when it gets down into some of these difficult things of God, they're not ready for it yet. He tells us in parables so that those of us who are ready can be instructed and can learn and can grow, and then be prepared to share what needs to be shared with those around us.

Let's look at this. We have a manager who seems to be wasting the possessions of his master. Now, again, what does this mean when we're talking about God? What is Jesus trying to communicate? What is wasting the possessions as far as God is concerned? This seems to be the answer, the steward or the manager was demanding that those who owe debts to the master pay the full amount. And in that way, the master considered the servant wasteful in his possessions. Now again, that doesn't make any sense. You think that he would want the whole debt, everything that was owed to him.

But we're talking about God here. God demands what from us? He demands perfection. He demands holiness and righteousness. He demands that we obey Him 100% of the time in every way, shape, and form. Now, if God demanded that from us and expected us to fulfill it, how many of us could pay that debt? None. Exactly. None of us could pay the debt. So it's wasteful in God's eyes for His servants to demand a full payment of what we owe God. Turns it completely on its head.

What does the manager do now that he's discovered that he's going to lose his job because he's not doing it right? Well, he goes and he talks to all the debtors and he says, "Okay, you owe 100 of this, make it 50. You owe 100 of this, make it 80." Now, grain versus oil, it's about the same thing. He's basically forgiving an equal amount of debt to everybody. He's saying, "I'm going to just wipe this portion out for you because this is going to ingratiate me to you." But why in the world would he do that?

Because he finally understood the nature of his master. His master wanted him to be generous. His master wanted him to forgive debt. His master wanted him to use the possessions that were given to him to manage, and he wanted to use them for the benefit of everybody else. That was proper use of the debt that the manager was managing in God's eyes. So the manager is commended for his dishonesty, is how it's translated here, unrighteousness or injustice. Is it just to forgive the debt of somebody? No.

It's merciful, it's deeply appreciated, it's gracious, but it's not just. Justice is demanding the full payment. That is what is meet, right, and salutary. That is what is just. God does not want to be just to us. He wants to be merciful to us. He wants to be gracious to us. And so, He treats us unjustly, and for that we rejoice because there's no way we could ever pay the debt that we owe God. We rejoice that our God is unjust. Not only is He unjust to us, but the reason that He is unjust to us is because He was unjust to His Hon.

Now, think about that. What did Jesus Christ do to deserve the punishment and the judgment of sin? Nothing. He was perfect. He was perfect in every way. He never sinned. He never stepped out of line. He owed His Father nothing. He paid it in full and yet He paid the penalty that was rightly ours. God the Father treated His Son unjustly, punishing Him for our sake, so that He might treat us unjustly by giving us mercy and grace and forgiveness of sins. So we rejoice in an unjust God.

Now, you can imagine why that's told in parables because that doesn't make any sense, and people would take it the wrong way and apply it the wrong way. But here in the church today, we understand we owe our hope all to God because He is gracious and merciful rather than being just to us. Now, justice, that's not to say He's a weak God or He's a dotting old fool that says, "Oh, it's okay that you sin against Me. I don't really care." That's not the kind of God we're talking about.

We're not talking about a God who is love and He never will punish anybody, and everybody's getting into heaven, and He's pleased with everybody no matter how awful you are, because He's a God of love. No, we're not saying that. He is a God of love and He is a God of justice. But because His desire is to be generous to us, He took the payment and placed it on His Son. His justice was fulfilled, but not in the way we expected or the way we deserved. And for that, we rejoice.

And because of that then, we are called to live and rejoice in understanding of the great mercy and injustice that was given to us. We are to take the things that God has given to us, the gifts, the time, our talents, our money, our job, our life, our vocation, our neighborhood, the people that we interact with, everything that we are. Everything that we do, we are to see that God has given to us to show His mercy and His grace to those around us.

Now, I read a statistic recently about how do new people come to the church? How do new members come into the church? There's all sorts of ways. The pastor can go visit somebody and invite them to come to church. You can send out a mass flyer to everybody. Everybody gets something in the mail. You can put an advertisement on the radio or the TV or something like that. You put signs out front, invite them to some sort of rally or something like that, or you can personally invite a neighbor or a friend. Now, what do you think the statistics are on the percentage of people that actually end up becoming members of a congregation based on those different activities? Send out a flyer or a newsletter or something like that to the community, yeah, maybe you get 5% of the new members will come because they saw something. "Oh, let's try that church out. They had a good flyer." Or they hear something on the radio. Again, maybe say 5% or so if the pastor comes and talks to them. I spend my time and I go out and I visit the different neighborhoods and I talk to people and I interact with them. What do you think the percentage of new members that come into our community would be? About 5% even if I go talk to them. On the other hand, if you talk to your neighbor, if you invite your friend, you know what percentage of people end up coming? Of the 100% of new members that come in, what percentage of them were invited by a friend? 86%. 86% of new members come because somebody asked them, a neighbor or a friend.

We have been given a great gift and we are called to use that gift to share the grace, to be generous, to be unjust in the innocence, to share the love and mercy of God, to use our time, to use our money, to use our talents, to use everything that we are for the glory of God and for the sharing of the Gospel, and to let people know that their debt is forgiven, that they are loved by God as much as we are, and that we are being treated just as unjustly as they are because God has forgiven us as much as He has forgiven them, which is everything.

This is why this parable is in Scripture, that we might understand God's nature, that He desires that the gifts that He has given to us be used in a generous and flamboyant way, given out freely, that everything might be used to give Him glory because of the great joy that we have in our salvation. We are not called to hoard our riches. We're not called to grab onto and protect ourselves. We're called to give ourselves generously, because He gave generously to us, because this is the Master that we serve.

Every other master out there is a taskmaster and demands much of us, money, possessions. How often have you heard that there comes a time where you realize that you don't own your possessions, but your possessions own you? We live opposite of what we ought to. This parable is calling us to be free of the cares of this world, to be free of the concerns of this world because we know that God is taking care of us and that He is generous beyond measure more than we could possibly imagine. He is ready to give more than we could even contemplate asking. He wants to give to us, and therefore, let us walk in faith, trusting in His mercy and His grace and His unjustness.

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.