

August 6, 2023
Text: Luke 16:1-13

Ninth Sunday after Trinity

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells a parable about a manager, a steward of a house. There is much about this manager that's not good, things we shouldn't seek to emulate. He's wasteful. He's dishonest. He's a thief. All things that the Bible clearly condemns as sinful, and therefore things that we are to avoid.

Yet the manager does have one trait that is good, one thing for which his master commends him. He is shrewd. He realizes what is truly important, and puts that above everything else. That is what Jesus is commending to His Church in this parable. He is showing us in this manager how we must realize what is lastingly important, and seek it above everything else. So let's look at this parable and see how this is the case.

Jesus speaks of a household manager or steward. This is a guy who would have been in charge of running the affairs of his master's household and his business – in ancient times those were often connected.

The manager doesn't own any of the things; they aren't his to do with as he pleases. Rather, a manager was to manage things in accord with the desires and instructions of his master – the individual who actually did own everything.

The manager was given responsibility and certain authority to use his judgment on how best to handle things, but again, it was always to be in keeping with the master's wishes.

This manager, though, is dishonest and unjust. We hear in the parable that “charges were brought to [the master] that this man was wasting [the master's] possessions.”

How was he wasting them? We aren't told exactly. Perhaps he was lazy, not putting in the effort to cause the master's possessions to be used to their full potential, letting them gather dust rather than being put to use. Or perhaps he was negligent, not keeping track of the master's things and allowing them to go missing or be lost. Or perhaps he himself was skimming off the top, taking a little here and a little there to enrich himself while hoping that the master didn't notice. Maybe it was a combination of all three.

The point is, he was not being faithful with what he had been given charge over. For reasons that were not good, and that were his fault, his master's goods were being lost. And contrary to the manager's hopes, the master did find out about this. The offense must have been pretty bad, and the evidence pretty clear, because the manager isn't even allowed to make a defense. The master simply tells him, “What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.” You're fired. Get out. The end.

Our situation isn't so different from this manager. We, and all of humanity, have one master – the Lord God. He created our first parents – Adam and Eve – and placed them in this world to tend it and keep it. The Lord gave them dominion over creation; they were His managers, so to speak. God

gave them considerable freedom in how they were to tend the world. In fact, they only had a few explicit commands, including no eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But Satan came and tempted them to do exactly that. He led them to desire to be like God. They weren't happy being God's managers; they wanted to be His equal. And so they defied their loving master and His words to them. Because the Lord is just, He was forced to cast them out of the Garden, much like the dishonest manager being sent away from his master's house.

We follow in Adam and Eve's footsteps all too often. The Lord has given us many, many good gifts. Everything that we have is from His hand. All our possessions, all our talents, all our days – they are all gifts from God. He gives them to us as managers, to use in accord with His commands.

As our Creator, and the God who knows all things, He knows how best these gifts should be used. He knows what will bring about the greatest good for us, and for our neighbors, and for His glory. Hence His words and teachings to us in the Scriptures.

Yet how often are we unfaithful managers with these gifts we are given? How often do we think of the stuff that we have as ours, for us to use however we please, rather than considering first why our Lord might have given it to us?

How often do think of our money as something to spend first and foremost on ourselves, rather than on helping our neighbors or for the sake of the spread of the Gospel? How often do we consider the days we have as ours, instead of confessing with the Scriptures that “This is the day which the Lord has made” or “in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them”?

When we consider what we devote our time and our talents and our efforts to, what we are doing with our lives, is it for the sake of the things of God, or is it in pursuit of earthly wealth and comfort and happiness? We are too often wasteful, like the dishonest manager, looking to our own desires rather than God's will when it comes to our use of His things.

And so, in His justice, our Lord has decreed that we will not be managers and stewards of them forever. The day is coming, for each and every one of us, when we will be removed from this life and its stuff. On that day, we will – like the manager of the parable – stand before our master and have to give an account of our management, an account of our lives. What will you do in that day?

What does the manager do? He realizes very quickly that he's not going to be able to survive on his own. Thinking to himself, he says, “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.”

He can't earn a living through his own strength. He is unwilling to beg, and begging contains no guarantee that anyone will give you anything. No other master will be foolish enough to take him in as a manager. And on top of all that, it seems that he doesn't even have a house to call his own – that was all provided for him by the master he offended. In short, the manager realizes he can't save himself.

This is the reality that we, and all people, must face as well. This life, this period of stewardship, will end. Like the manager who isn't strong enough to dig, our strength, our works, our

efforts, are totally insufficient to get eternal life. You can't do enough to live forever, or earn your way into heaven.

And also like the manager, begging isn't an option. God is just, and so no amount of begging, bargaining, or arguing will get you into heaven. All men are sinners, and God's justice requires sin to be punished. Adam and Eve were not allowed back into the Garden; unrepentant sinners will not be allowed into heaven.

Yet the master shows mercy. The manager, though caught and found guilty, is still allowed to stay in the master's house for a time. He isn't thrown out the door the moment he's caught. What other explanation could there be than the master was willing to show mercy to this dishonest man?

We are shown mercy as well. Our Lord doesn't immediately make us suffer the just punishment of our sins the moment we commit them. We aren't cast into the eternal darkness the moment we break the divine Law. No, our God is merciful.

He shows mercy even greater than that of the master in the parable, as He sends His only Son to pay the price for our sinful management. God doesn't simply ignore our misuse and abuse of His possessions, not to mention our other sins. If He did this, He wouldn't be just. No, He sends Jesus, who is completely faithful to the task given Him by the Father, and who sheds His blood to wipe away our every transgression.

Through Jesus, we are reconciled to the Father, given peace with God once more. By faith, He gives us this peace and reconciliation, placing us once more in a right standing with our Lord.

This new standing, this new life, gives us a new perspective on our use of what we have in this life. The manager in the parable realizes that he only has a little time left. His authority over the master's goods is just a temporary thing. And so he uses that temporary authority to secure himself lasting benefits.

He starts calling in his master's debtors and slashes their debts. This will lose the master's possessions even more, but at this point, it's all going away for the manager anyways. Since it will be all gone, he uses it to get himself security and friends for the future.

This is what makes him shrewd. His master doesn't commend the stealing, wasting even more of his possessions. Again, this parable is not justification for cheating others or taking advantage of the system. No, it is the shrewdness of the manager, his use of what is temporary for the sake of what is lasting, that is commended to us.

Because we have been shown mercy, greater mercy than that manager, we too can exercise this shrewdness. When Christ works repentance and faith in our hearts, when He covers us with His righteousness and gives us new life in Holy Baptism, our whole future changes. Our Lord has won eternal life in paradise for us. Because of Jesus, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

What then becomes of all our earthly stuff? Like the manager's authority over his master's goods, it's all temporary. It's all going away. Why then would we be concerned about our earthly stuff? None of it will last into eternity!

In heaven, it won't matter what your job was, or how much money you made, or how nice of a retirement package you got. In splendor of the new creation, you will not care about what kind of car you drove or how nice your house was or what sort of stuff you filled it with.

Whatever awards, certifications, achievements, diplomas, or trophies you received in this life, they will all be nothing compared to hearing God the Father say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." Heaven is real, and it is infinitely better than anything this world has to offer.

So, as Jesus teaches elsewhere in the Gospels, don't strive to build up treasures in this life, which will all pass away. Instead, strive to build up treasures in heaven. Or as He says in our Gospel reading, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

Make friends, not just in this life, but those whom you will get to spend eternity with in the Lord's kingdom. Use what you've been given – your possessions, your abilities, your time – for the sake of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Use your unrighteous wealth – the stuff of this earth that cannot grant righteousness – as an instrument through which people are drawn to Christ. There are many ways in which you might do this, many which you probably already do.

Likely the most obvious is supporting this congregation, helping us pay our bills and maintain this building we've been given. Through this, an outpost of the Kingdom of God is sustained here in Rawlins, a place where people can come and hear the Gospel, a place where God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation may be given, a place where you, the people of the Lord, may have your souls fed and nourished in the wilderness of this sinful world.

And there is much beyond our congregation. There are organizations like the Lutheran Heritage Foundation and Lutheran Bible Translators, which seek to put God's word into the languages of all the nations of the world. Or Orphan Grain Train, through which God provides care and provision for those in great hardship or need.

There are things closer to home, such as Lander Camp or the Tell the Good News Conference, which seek to strengthen faith in children and adults. Or the campus center in Laramie, St. Andrew's, which provides a place of refuge to students who are spiritually attacked by all the temptations of college life.

Speaking of college and education, you could support the various Lutheran schools in our district, which seek to teach children not only useful knowledge in this life, but even more the knowledge of the Lord, which is useful for everlasting life. Or there's Luther Classical College, being started as a deliberate statement that college doesn't have to be a place of temptation and spiritual attack, but rather a place where the Christian faith is upheld as the center of life.

And there are many, many other worthy organizations. With whatever you might do, do it joyfully, to the glory of God and the spread of His saving word.

And it's not just money that's a temporary thing to devote to the Lord. Maybe even greater is time, the time you've been given on this earth. Don't waste it in pursuit of what will be lost and forgotten. Spend it on the things of eternity.

Let your mornings and evenings be filled with prayer, speaking to the Father who delights to hear from you. Especially, let your Sunday mornings be spent gathered together as the people of God around the gifts of God, that He might give you blessings which last forever. Rather than wasting your time scrolling through social media or listening to talking heads on the TV, pick up your Bible and read it, that the Holy Spirit would grow your fear, love, and trust in God. Time spent in the word, and in books about the word written by faithful teachers, is always time well-spent.

Being in the word benefits both you and those you meet in this world. How? The world desperately needs to hear that everlasting word. We are in a culture that is obsessed with chasing after the temporary. It's all about the pursuit of money and pleasure and satisfying whatever desires I have or even think I might have. It's about getting what I want, doing the things I want to do, living the life I want to live, being with the people I want to be with.

And it's all a chasing after the wind. None of this stuff satisfies or lasts, and people are left empty and adrift, lost in hopelessness and despair.

We the Church have been blessed by our Lord to share the Gospel with such people. We have been given the ability to give something of true substance, something that truly satisfies.

We have the ability to show the love of Christ – a sacrificial, lasting, deep love – to people who have been taught that love is just a fuzzy feeling or the same as lust. We can speak of eternal security and peace to those who are worried about what tomorrow will bring. We proclaim the true God, the God who gave Himself for us and for all people, to a world full of idols that only take and take and take.

We confess the Scriptures, that the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.

Though we don't deserve it, our Lord has shown us mercy. He has forgiven us for our misuse of His possessions and granted us new lives in Him.

Being given eternity, we can live our lives for the sake of sharing His mercy with others. We can be shrewd, using what we've been temporarily entrusted with for the sake of that which will endure forever. We cannot serve God and money, so let us serve the One who gives us what truly matters.

In the name of Jesus, amen.