

Luke 16 1-13 "The Unrighteous Steward and the Merciful Lord"

I. The Parable

If you think this parable is about the steward, you're going to get it all wrong.

After all, what sorts of lessons are there to learn from the steward? For one thing, if you slack off or waste your boss's goods, don't get caught. If you do get caught, settle that you're too proud to do anything menial for a living. Use your boss's business to gain friends by losing more of your boss's money. Do any of these lessons sound like something you want to teach your child? Are these three habits of highly effective people? Hardly. This guy is the reason that, when someone gets fired, the security guard is right there to escort them straight to the door. He's the role model for the unrighteous sons of the world who know how to look out for themselves.

No, if you think this parable is about the doings of an unrighteous steward, you're in for a bumpy ride. There is one thing to learn from the steward. There is one thing that the steward does that all of us ought to do; but we'll get back to that later on. Right now, let's get to what the parable is really about: the steward's lord. The steward's lord is a just man who runs a good business, and he employs the steward to look after things. When he finds that the steward is wasting his goods, he tells the steward that he's fired. He tells the steward that the day of reckoning is coming for his abuses.

That only makes sense, but here's the part that doesn't: the lord leaves the steward in charge of his business until that future day of reckoning. He certainly gets high marks for mercy, but Trump isn't going to approve of this one. It's almost like the lord wants the unrighteous steward to misuse his goods some more. So the lord waits to call his unrighteous steward to account and gives him access to everything, and the steward makes the most of it by taking the lord's profits and giving them to others. He's cutting bills in half so that clients only owe half as much, and he's putting his lord in a box. If the lord goes back and demands what is really owed, his clients will be angry. If the lord lets the steward get away with his mischief, then his clients will love and trust him more.

How does it all end? The lord commends the unrighteous steward for taking his goods and giving them to others. Kind of a strange story from our Lord, yes? This obviously isn't a real-deal message about how to succeed in business. Nope. It's not about profit-making and business management. This is a parable about mercy.

II. The Meaning

The English calls the steward "dishonest" or "unjust." The Greek says "unrighteous," which tips us off that this is a lesson about sin and forgiveness. Your Lord has created you and all creatures. He has given you your body and soul, eyes, ears and all your members, your reason and all your senses, and still preserves them. That makes you the steward to whom the Lord has entrusted His "business" of loving Him and your neighbor. You know what comes next: all that you are and do by nature is tainted by sin, and none of you or what you do is righteous before God. Your Lord gives you possessions with which to serve others, and instead you want more for yourself. The Lord gives you a mouth to sing His praise, but you

put it to use for gossip, deceit or malice. The Lord gives health and fitness, and you're tempted to vanity. You're the unrighteous steward, wasting the things your Lord has entrusted to you. So the Lord declares that the day of reckoning is coming. It's only fair. It's only just.

But your Lord isn't just just. He's also merciful, and here's the part of the story that doesn't get mentioned in the parable: The Lord has sent His Son to be your Savior. From conception on and throughout His life, He went about His Father's business (Lk. 2:49). He kept God's Law perfectly, fulfilling every requirement without sin. He loved His neighbor and served His Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus was the perfect steward as He went about His Father's business. And then what? He was crucified in your place. He was made to be sin for you, in order to suffer the judgment for your sin. In other words, at the cross Jesus was the unrighteous steward of the world. Good Friday was the day of reckoning where the Lord condemned His Son for the sin of all His stewards. Christ is risen from the dead! And risen, He continues to be of service to you. In fact, since you are now His people by His grace, He entrusts you with His most precious treasures.

He entrusts to His Church the means of grace by which sins are forgiven, salvation is bestowed and disciples are made. He gives them to you, personally, that you might have life in His name. He has placed His name upon you in Holy Baptism, giving you His kingdom forever. He continues to speak His forgiving Word of Holy Absolution to you, to cleanse you of your sin. He gives you His body and blood in Holy Communion, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. By these means, He has brought you into His house and keeps you in His house. By these means, He strengthens your faith and sets you free to serve with all that He has given you. So now, as His gathered and forgiven stewards, how do you do in your stewardship? Our Lord gives us a few statements against which to measure ourselves. He says, "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home" (Lk. 16:9). Mammon—money—is unrighteous, unholy, because it has no forgiveness to give. It's only for this world. Do you make use of what you have in service to others, particularly for the spread of the Gospel so that others might be friends in an everlasting home of heaven for the sake of Jesus? Or do you find yourself hoarding it all, still using what you have in service to you?

The Lord says, "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" (Lk. 16:11) How well do you make use of true, everlasting riches? Do you begin each day remembering your Baptism, giving thanks to the Lord that you have already died the second death and have eternal life? Or do you regard it as just a point of history that has little relevance to you now? Do you eagerly hear the Absolution, knowing that it is only by the Lord's forgiveness that you have the hope of salvation? Perhaps. Or perhaps you regard His grace as a safety net, as you decide which sins will be useful to you in the coming week. Or perhaps you think that you've heard enough of forgiveness to last a while, and no longer desire to hear of the Lord's love for you. Do you take the time to prepare for the Lord's Supper, marveling that the Lord God of Sabaoth visits you, to serve you, to give you His very own body and blood? Or do you interrupt thinking about your to-do list long enough during the distribution to come forward and kneel, lest someone think that you were daydreaming about your to-do list?

Do you take seriously the truth that those who are unprepared will receive this Communion to their judgment, or do you set aside that Word of God for the sake of appearing more agreeable to the world? Among us and all the world, there is no one righteous—not even one. We are far from faithful stewards of what our Lord entrusts to us. And sadly, we are probably more careful with gifts like unrighteous mammon than we are with the Word and Sacraments that bestow righteousness and life. Even now, as the baptized people of God, you and I are still unrighteous stewards who waste what our Lord commends to our use. The day of reckoning is still deserved. But once again, look how our merciful Lord treats us. Although we often take His means of grace for granted and treat them shabbily, He does not relieve us of our stewardship. From now until the Last Day of reckoning, He keeps us as His stewards. He wills that we continue to make use of His means of grace, so that through them He might forgive us for the sake of Jesus. Furthermore, He wills that we use them to erase (completely—not just half!) the debt of others. As we encounter sinners who are burdened with a load of killing sin, we do not tell them to erase half the debt and go from there. No, we proclaim to them the Word. We tell them that Christ has died for all of their sins—not half, not most, but all. We give our Lord's grace out to all who will receive it. Does our Lord grow angry that we give out His grace so freely? Not at all! He commends this as the mission of the Church.

"Freely you have received," He declares; "freely give" (Mt. 10:8). How abundant and excessive is the Lord's mercy for you! Because His Law demanded a level of righteousness you could not muster, He became flesh, gave the accounting and suffered the judgment for your sin. So that you might be forgiven, He continues to pour out His grace upon you by His Word and Sacrament, proclaiming you righteous for His sake—by His work, not your own. His work, not your own. I mentioned a while back that, while this parable is about the lord and his mercy, there is one thing for us to learn from the steward. Here it is: the steward's entire scheme rested on his lord's mercy. If the lord was not merciful, he would have the steward thrown out right away, imprisoned or killed for using his goods to his own advantage; but the steward used the Lord's things to make friends, trusting that the lord would commend, not punish, him. By the grace of God, we trust in the Lord's mercy. We confess our sin and unrighteousness to Him, trusting that He who gave His own life to redeem us will continue to save us now. And so He does. Your Lord commends you today with these words, "You are saved by My mercy this day, because Christ has accounted for your sin at the cross. So I declare you righteous, because you are forgiven for all of your sins." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen