

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
12 August, Anno Domini 2017
St. Luke 16:1-9
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Undoubtedly, this is one of the most difficult parables to understand. Everything in it seems completely backwards. Jesus even seems to be advocating being a cheat in order to get ahead. The problem is, we know that the Lord would never encourage that. The God who says "You shall not steal" doesn't then turn around and tell you to rob your neighbor.

I believe that if we are to rightly understand the seemingly confusing word which Jesus speaks this morning we must first begin with prayer. Let us pray. "Heavenly Father, grant us your Holy Spirit this day that we may hear your Word in faith and rightly receive the truth which you would teach us. Help us to submit ourselves to your wisdom, wisdom which so often appears to be foolish to our reason, but, in truth, is infinitely wiser. Remove whatever stumbling blocks lie before us that we may rightly hear, believe, and confess Your saving name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

We don't necessarily have the advantage with this parable of Jesus expressly saying "The kingdom of heaven is like a rich man who had a manager." But, the three parables that Jesus told ahead of this one - the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son - are all about the kingdom of God. Particularly, they display for us the true character of God as merciful. He is a God who delights in receiving back into His fellowship those who had previously wandered away from Him. More than that, He actually seeks out sinners because He doesn't want to lose them to eternal destruction.

Now, turning away from the Pharisees and scribes who had no use for God's mercy, Jesus turns to His disciples. Particularly, but not exclusively, I would argue, Jesus gives this parable to those whom He will send out in His name, and gives them direction as to how they are to faithfully manage the things of their Lord.

As the prior parables have shown, God is exceedingly rich in His mercy toward us poor, miserable sinners. While it's certainly true that one of

God's attributes is that He is a perfectly just God, that justice is subservient to His mercy. For this reason, God would rather punish our sins in His Son, rather than condemn us. Sinners surely deserve nothing but punishment from God's hand. We don't deserve our daily bread and we certainly don't deserve salvation. We deserve to be forced to pay every last penny of the terrible debt of our sin - a debt which, of course, we could never pay. But God searches for lost sheep and coins. He welcomes back, without an ounce of retribution, those wretched sons who have wasted their inheritance in reckless and worldly living. God didn't even spare His greatest treasure, His own dear Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, in order to put the best robe on us, a ring of sonship on our hand, and sandals on our feet. He restored us as sons - freely. No making up for what we had done, no paying Him back, no time of parole to prove ourselves. Just great joy and merriment over even one sinner who repents.

And so, when Jesus turns to His disciples, He is turning to those who have tasted this great mercy. It is God who is the rich man in the parable before us today - a God rich in mercy and love for sinners. All that He is and has and does is rooted in His desire that everyone live eternally with Him in His kingdom. God absolutely wants everyone to receive the benefits of His mercy. There isn't a single person whom the Lord wishes to suffer the consequences of their sins. Not all will, sadly. But that's only because they refused it. There isn't a sinner out there to whom the Lord wouldn't gladly say "I have put your sins away from you. Come, feast on riches of my kingdom. Enjoy everything that I have shed my Blood to obtain for you. Sit down with your bill quickly and zero out the balance. In fact, I will gladly fill your account to overflowing with peace and joy and inheritance in my kingdom. You will have all that you need and, more often than not, you will have more than you need for your daily bread." This is exactly what Jesus is directing His disciples to do - freely distribute the mercy and the grace of God by canceling the debt of sin. In other words, give away God's things!

That's the thing about mercy. It's meant to be given away - freely. It is always directed outward toward those who need it. There's no such thing as deserving mercy. This is what the unrighteous manager gets wrong. He believes that his master is interested in filling his own pockets. But he's not. God does nothing, nothing, to benefit Himself. He doesn't use His power, His wisdom, or His wealth for Himself. He gives it away. He wants to flood the world with it. He wants it poured out to the ends of the earth.

God fervently desires that YOU receive His mercy and nothing makes Him happier than to give it to you.

And He wants it given away precisely to sinners like us who don't deserve even the smallest crumb. We owe a debt that, even if we had eternity to repay, we would never even be able to begin. Our flesh is sold into slavery to sin and even the best of our efforts are tainted, filthy rags. It can't be preached or believed too much - God's greatest desire is that wretches be saved and made sons of light. Wretches like us who feverishly chase after the desires of our flesh; who despise weakness and chase after strength; who lust after success and independence; whose thoughts are most often filled with ourselves and how to have, be, think, and do more, bigger, and better; who would rather turn away from and look down on the weak and broken rather than inconvenience and dirty ourselves so that we might suffer with them and bear their burden. God would save us from such utter foolishness so that we might know the joy of His mercy and so share that mercy freely with others.

No, we are not like God. First us, then, if there there is a little left over we might share it. But not too much. God certainly wouldn't want us just giving our stuff away! Responsible people collect on their debts. That's why the parable makes absolutely no business sense. We are always using what we have been given to get more believing that's why it was given in the first place - after all, I've worked hard for it! How great it will be when people and God look at us and admire us for our wit, our wealth, and our wisdom! "They will sing my praises and tell me how wonderful and cool I am."

But God isn't impressed. He isn't interested in collecting on debts. He's interested in forgiving them, wiping them absolutely clean, bearing the full responsibility of that debt. He didn't freely forgive you your sins so that you could turn around and hold grudges against those who have sinned against you. Nothing was given to you so you would go and build yourself bigger barns. He doesn't give you a good income so that you can be richer. He gives you what you have so that your needs would be met and then with the same reckless generosity share with those through whom, in your various vocations, God lays a claim upon you - your time, your prayers, your skills, your wisdom, and your money. God places before you those who need the things with which God has first blessed you - your spouse,

your children, your family, your church, your neighbors, your boss and colleagues, your community, your country.

And you do not need to be afraid to help them. You will not lose anything. How can you when the Lord of heaven and earth is the One who is looking out for you, even better than you can? God has given to you freely. The only way to mismanage what He has given is to keep it for yourself. That isn't pleasing to Him. Don't be surprised if He takes away your management from you. God hasn't withheld a single good thing from you that you needed. That is truly the work of the Church - to pour forth the mercy of Christ, to proclaim to repentant sinners everywhere the good news that their debt has been wiped out by Jesus. By extension, every Christian, as those who have tasted the sweet cup of Christ's mercy, is to pour out that mercy to all who are in need.

Only, pray to God that we don't receive this mercy in vain and then, like the Corinthians Christians, use our Christian freedom as an excuse to walk again in all the ways of darkness and selfishness that we have been rescued from. May God grant that we do not become arrogant and wrongly imagine that in Christ we now have been given license to live as the unbelieving world lives - for itself and its own desires and glory. What a sad witness it is when those who have known the great mercy and blessing of God then withhold themselves and their gifts; when neighbor's needs go unmet; when prayers are not lifted to God's throne; when our churches, the very places where God's forgiveness and mercy are poured out, languish for lack of volunteers and resources; when our communities crumble under the poison of materialism and secular humanism because God's people would rather withdraw than suffer the world's scorn for speaking up and exposing the world's dark wickedness with the bright light of God's Word. Protect us from this, heavenly Father!

May God grant us repentance for mismanaging His gifts and refresh us with the abundance of His mercy. May He so strengthen us to use all the gifts that He has given, spiritual and material, in order to be a blessing and help to our neighbors so that they too might rejoice in our Lord who delights in giving away the great riches of His kingdom.

In the Name of +Jesus.