

The 9th Sunday after Trinity
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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

ACCOUNTING FOR ONE'S STEWARDSHIP

II Samuel 22:26-34; I Corinthians 10:6-13; Luke 16:1-13

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The parable Jesus speaks today is probably the most difficult of all His parables to understand. Many have said it is a parable that teaches salvation by works rather than by faith alone. Many have said that in it Jesus

commends as an example someone who happens to be shrewd in his sinfulness. Others, like Luther, have said that Jesus is simply telling Christians to be wise in their dealings in this world as sinners are often wise about their unjust dealings.

Luther explains: “[The Lord is] praising nought but his cunning and shrewdness. Just as when a flirt draws the whole world after her, and I say: she is a clever flirt, she knows her business. The Lord further concludes, that just as the steward is wise and shrewd in his transactions, so should we also be in obtaining eternal life.” St. Augustine and a few of the other church fathers interpret this somewhat differently and I think they are right in this case, rather than Luther. But let’s leave aside for a moment the issue of whether

or not the steward in the parable is unrighteous in his last actions of slashing the people’s debts and these other issues. We’ll come back to how to interpret these things properly. For now we’ll focus on the main point of the parable.

Jesus concludes it by saying: “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.” Now mammon is a word for money and possessions. It has a negative connotation, almost as a false god, something one might choose to serve in place of the true God. Here Jesus calls it unrighteous mammon, not because money and possessions are evil, but because people do so much evil with them, and because they are a temptation to so many. So Christians can make use of what is called “unrighteous mammon” without being unrighteous in their doings. It is the sin that you do with possessions and the covetousness they arouse in you that causes what God gives to become an evil thing.



So this is a parable about money and other things God has given you and what you do with them. It's a parable about your stewardship of God's gifts to you. What use do you make of them? What importance do you place upon them? What service do they perform, or what services do you perform with them? This is why St. Luke says in the verses that follow this parable: "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.'" So this parable was spoken against those who loved money and position and the things these provided them. They saw God's gifts as things which were given only for their advantage and enjoyment, and not for the welfare and aid of their fellow man.

So the question is, what have you been doing with the things God has given you? To what use have you put the unrighteous mammon he has given into your keeping? Have you been faithful with it? Have you done what He commands you to do with it? Or have you kept it all for yourself, refusing to give aid to your neighbors who are in need?

Now some will say this obligation depends on whether you are rich or poor. And it is true that those who are wealthy may have greater opportunity to impact the plight of the the needy than those who are not so wealthy. But that does not mean that the not-so wealthy, or even the poor, have no opportunity to help others. This is why Jesus says to His disciples: "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" In other words, it doesn't matter how much you have been given. You have been called to be faithful in using it. You have been given a stewardship. And if that stewardship happens to be small or great, you are to do what you have been given to do. Now there is no guarantee that God will give you more for being faithful; but if what you have been given is small and you aren't faithful in it, can you really blame God for not making you rich?

And those who are wealthy might say, "I've plenty, and I give a certain portion to charity, isn't that enough?" I don't know. Is it? I can't answer that question for you. You must take stock of this yourself. Listen to your conscience, and let your neighbor's need guide you.

So you see whether you are rich or poor isn't the issue. Proper stewardship of God's gifts is the issue here. You see, money and possessions are not given you to be used just for your comfort and enjoyment. They are given that you might function as God's hands in giving to others too. When St. Paul commands thieves to stop stealing but to get a job instead, he says that they should do so not just to provide for themselves: "but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need." The ability to be charitable is one of the reasons God gives us work and an income. Students,

when you are here at college, you are to engage in your studies not just so that you can enjoy a good life, but so that you can impact our world in a positive way, both through what you learn and eventually do, but also through what you give to others, through your charity and love to those in need.

Now there is certainly nothing wrong with having money and possessions. But if you enjoy them while neglecting the needs of others, then there is something wrong. There is something selfish going on, and a serving of mammon taking place, rather than a serving of God. And this is not just about our stewardship of money, but also is about the attention we give to others, the love we show, the skills we possess and how we use them. It is a question about the stewardship of our lives.

And asking yourself that question seriously your answer will undoubtedly be that you have not been faithful in what God has given you. You do not do all that you are able to do for those in need. And even if you happen to be a very charitable person with a kind and giving nature, you aren't that way all the time. I know this because I know that you still struggle with sin. The old sinful nature within you will not let you be as loving or as giving as God requires. In this lifetime your generosity can never measure up to His. Your heart can never be as giving as His. At best Christians have a heart divided, with the mind and soul seeking to serve God and neighbor, but with the flesh always serving self and serving mammon. So this parable is not just an instruction in what you ought to be doing with the things God gives you, but also (and this is really the primary thing) a call to repentance.

And this is what we see happening in the parable Jesus gives. The steward hears that he must give an account to the master. So he repents of what he had been doing. The master had given many things into his care and he used them only for his own enjoyment. Now at last he turns to his neighbors and helps them. He uses the stewardship the master has given him to alleviate his neighbor's debts and need. And for this shrewdness, he who stood condemned is now commended for what he had done.

And this is how it is with God and us. God has put many good things into our hands. But we have not used them as we should. We know better. We must remember that we are accountable to God for the stewardship he has given us. And we know what the Lord expects; but also know that we have not done well at it. And so if we are shrewd, we will acknowledge our unrighteousness, repent of our sins and of our sinfulness, and seek our Master's grace.

And what does Christ do with sinners that repent? "You will save the humble people; but Your eyes are on the haughty, that You may bring them down." Those who are prideful and refuse to repent get wrath. But the penitent sinner He restores. He forgives them. He declares them to no longer be sinners, but calls the unrighteous righteous. And He does this not because of anything we have done or promise to do. He does it because it is what He has been called and given to do

by His Father. And He does it because it is also what He has willed and promised to do, and what He has suffered, died and risen again to accomplish. And so you need never doubt the graciousness of this Master. He always gives to those who seek His aid and confess their need.

And the same grace which now makes us who were unjust stewards into justified saints, also works in us to accomplish what God would have us do in this life. This is why David says in today's Old Testament lesson: "You are my lamp, O Lord; the Lord shall enlighten my darkness. For by You I can run against a troop; by my God I can leap over a wall." What we cannot accomplish, God gives. And so the good you do as a Christian is good He accomplishes through you. The love and charity you expend upon the poor, is love and charity received and now made active in you from Christ through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. So we are both forgiven and renewed. And look forward in faith to the day when our sinful flesh will at last lie in a grave and we are freed from its influence and truly live as we ought, in spirit and in holiness. And this too is ours by grace. For by grace we are received into the everlasting habitations our Lord speaks of. We will be welcomed by God's grace, with the witness of those we have helped ringing out an Amen to it. May our dear Lord bring us in safety and in faith to that great day. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠