

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 16:1-13

Be Gospel Stewards

1. Applying the Gospel to Yourself
2. Bringing the Gospel to Others

Pastor Johnston woke up one morning and realized he was a sinner. He had been an unfaithful steward of his Lord's mysteries. His relationship with his Master had been severed. "What will I do now?" Pastor Johnston asked. "I am too out of shape to climb a ladder to God. I am too sinful to impress Him with my lifestyle. I am not smart enough to think up a loophole into heaven. I am too proud and too Lutheran to beg for the merits of the saints. I am lost and condemned. I am doomed for destruction."

"I know," Pastor Johnston thought, "I will use my Master's goods to win favor." Pastor Johnston called his circuit pastor and was absolved. Pastor Johnston knelt at the altar and received His Lord's Body and Blood. Pastor Johnston preached the Gospel that belonged to his Lord, but appropriated and applied it to himself. What will Pastor Johnston's Lord and Master say? "Well done, good and faithful servant." That is what He will say. You have acted shrewdly. You have used what was not yours for your own benefit. Now use what is yours for Me, by using it for the Church, for those in need, and for all who have not yet received the blessings of Christ's merits in Word and Sacrament. In other words, be a Gospel steward, applying the Gospel to yourself and bringing the Gospel to others.

Our text today is one of the most debated portions of all of Scripture. Is Jesus encouraging dishonesty? Are we saved by giving alms? How do we make friends who will welcome us into eternal dwellings? Do we somehow buy God's favor? Was the Pope right to sell indulgences?

Luther writes:

It is a similar story with a lewd woman who, in order to get on with her harlotry, grooms herself very beautifully. The gold, velvet, and silk are not to be blamed because she is using these things for unchaste purposes. Yet I can exhort you relative to her tactics: You see, don't you, how that woman prepares herself for her harlotry? Why don't you use the same diligence in order to please your bridegroom, our dear Lord Christ? When I say this, I am not approving adultery, but the effort, concern, and foresight which we ought to employ in honorable, good, and divine matters.

The harlot, or prostitute, dresses herself in her best to draw the attention of her customers and to please them. She uses what is not evil, that is, clothes and jewelry, for an evil end. How do we dress ourselves? Do we dress for God, or for the world? Do we dress ourselves with greed and for keeping-up-with-Joneses, or do we wear God's grace in Christ and reflect His love to all whom we encounter. Is the first question we ask when dressing, "Will this please the world and benefit me in the world?" or do we ask, "Will this please my Lord and benefit me and others in Christ?" The unbeliever chases after Satan with all his might, running from snare to snare, from greed to promiscuity to false spirituality to pride, never tiring of such antics. Do we chase after God the same way? Is our drive to church a near unbearable pilgrimage of twenty miles, or a joyous journey well worth the time? Do we run from Word to Sacrament without tiring, always seeking more forgiveness, always asking God for more opportunities to serve with the same fervor as the world chases Mammon? I won't answer for you, but I will say, when I am tired, it is usually not from serving God, because service to God renews me, but from chasing after numbers, titles, or abundance. When my budget is strapped, it is rarely because I gave too much in the offering, but because I absolutely needed the newest hunk of steel, the biggest picture box,

or the latest label on my clothes. As Luther says, "Ought I not to spit myself in the face, that while others rush pell-mell toward hell, I don't crawl toward heaven?"

How sad it is that the Devil so often has the church working overtime with arbitrary, grandiose visions, and with programs to do what we don't think Word and Sacrament will or can, while Christ has a hard time getting even an hour of grateful gathering around His grace! How sad that we toss our money at the world, while missionaries are called home, schools cut professors, and church buildings crumble! *"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*

So what do we do? Our bank accounts may be in good shape, but we are spiritually bankrupt. This is one big debtors' conference. A thousand *kyries* would still not be enough to earn God's favor. What shall we do? Aha! We can make use of our Master's account. It is full of Christ's merits. We can use what is His for our own good. Bathe in His Baptism. Greedily consume His every absolution. Take and eat, take and drink like you have never eaten or drunk before. Hoard every Word of His in the sermon. Use His every promise to cancel your spiritual debt. But won't the Master get angry? No, He will say, "Now that you have been faithful with what is my Son's, be faithful with what is your own." And what else could we possibly want to do, because grateful service is the best service of all; when someone has cancelled your debt, you can never repay them enough.

The point of each parable in Scripture is to teach about Christ and God's relationship with man in Christ. Just prior to this parable, we find the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal Son. We see how the Son has sought the lost and the unworthy and brought them back to the Father's great joy. Just after this we hear Jesus stress that faith, not wealth and stature, justifies. And now we have the parable of the shrewd manager. We must not get lost in each detail, but rather look at the points of comparison. I am convinced the Lord is posing two questions in this text, as He urges us to be Gospel stewards. The first is, "Will you be saved by your own account or by your Masters?" Like the shrewd manager, we are dependent on our Master's means for our salvation. Our situation is hopeless when we are left to our own devices. We plead His death and resurrection. We receive His Baptism. We eat and drink His Body and Blood. We trust in His Word.

The second question is, "Will you now be faithful with that which is your own?" As Christians, we are to be wise in how we manage the blessings our Master has given us. What we have is not our own. We are not our own. We are our Master's. Make friends for yourself to welcome you into heaven by serving the Lord with your life and supporting of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. When God examines your expense reports, let Him see where your priorities lie by where you have made the greatest investments.

Brothers and sisters, your sins are forgiven, not on your own account, but on account of Christ. He has paid your debt of sin. There is nothing you owe God to be saved. There is nothing you can do to repay Him. There is nothing you can do to add to Christ's payment or to supplement His sacrifice. Rather, today He will meet many of you at the altar and I will present you with your receipt, feeding you the proof that your debt is erased. And that forgiveness will not be idle. Rather, now that you have been faithful with what was not your own, you will be faithful with what is yours, giving your Lord in grateful service what He has given to you. You will be Gospel stewards, applying the Gospel to yourselves and bringing the Gospel to others. Amen.