

5. The Parable of the Unjust Steward

(Luke 16: 1-13)

As we journey through the parables, we are seeing how Christ teaches through simple stories. Some of the parables have opened our understanding to the complexity of the Kingdom of heaven, while others have taught us more about our very loving and merciful God. Still other parables teach us about how we should live our lives. For example, in our last lesson, Jesus spoke of a widow who would not give up but tenaciously asked a judge for help again and again, until finally he helped her. In today's lesson, we have another lesson about how we should behave, but it might surprise you a bit.

This is *The Parable of the Unjust Steward*. You might recall that another title for *The Parable of the Tenacious Widow* is *The Parable of the Unjust Judge*. This is a terrible judge. Unjust means that he is unfair. He doesn't fear God and he doesn't regard man; he is not at all interested in doing the right thing. He's a bad judge, and a bad role model. Christ wants us to identify with the widow, of course, and not that awful unjust judge. And yet, in *The Parable of the Unjust Steward*, we'll see that Christ is suggesting that we act more like this unjust man! How strange! "Unjust" is not a compliment! Saying that someone is unfair, that he doesn't worry about doing things the right and fair way, is usually an insult! Why would Christ want us to be more unjust, like this steward?

In the gospel of St. Luke, we read:

He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'"

A rich man has hired a steward, who is supposed to be taking care of his fortune. The job of a steward would be to watch over the money and the possessions of this wealthy man, keeping track of his purchases and sales, and any loans he gives. If someone owes him money, his steward should be collecting the payments they make, and keeping good track of everything. The steward should know where every dollar goes, and should have it all written neatly in his books, so that the boss always knows that he is taking good care of his fortune. But this steward has been accused of wasting his goods! People are saying he is a bad steward, and now he might lose his job.

The rich man calls for the steward to explain himself, but the steward knows that he is in big trouble, so he comes up with a very tricky plan:

"Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.'

“So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ So he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ So he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’

The steward knows that he is about to lose his job, and he says that he cannot dig and he doesn't want to beg. Being a steward is kind of a fancy job, and he is accustomed to an easier life. He doesn't want to work as a laborer or beg in the street. He cannot save his job, so instead he works on a plan so that his master's debtors will receive him into their houses: he lies about how much they owe, so that they won't have to pay it all back! Together, they create false paperwork to make it look like they owe much less than they really owe. The steward is hoping that the people will be so grateful that he helped them get out of debt by lying for them, that they will help him when he becomes poor and needy.

We might imagine that this steward is going to get in big trouble for this! It's his job to collect debts and keep accurate records, but he is doing the opposite! He is forgiving the debts and writing up fake paperwork, which makes his master lose money! But this strange parable has some surprises in store for us! Jesus continues, “So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly.” The master congratulates him and calls him “shrewd”; he finds the steward's dishonesty sharp-witted and clever. Of course, it is clever. He might have been made homeless and destitute, but instead he used his position as steward to do favors for people, so that they would take care of him later. He bought their friendship, so that he would have friends to take care of him. It is a clever idea, and the master is impressed -- even though it is an idea that surely cost the master a lot of money!

The master thinks the unjust steward is clever, but what does Jesus think? Does He think it's good to be dishonest like that? He says, “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.” He agrees that the steward was “shrewd”, but He calls the steward a “son of this world”. The steward is worldly because he isn't thinking about the Kingdom of God or about anything spiritual or holy; he's just worried about his job, and he's worried about finding food once he's been fired. He doesn't want to do hard work like digging, and he's too proud to become a beggar. His concerns are about the world: money, food, and status.

Jesus says that the sons of this world are more shrewd than the sons of light. Who are the sons of light? Jesus is the light of the world, and we know that our hearts are meant to be lamps that shine forth with His light, so you would be correct to guess that those who follow Jesus are the “sons of light”. Instead of worrying about worldly things like money and status, the sons of light should be thinking about being pleasing to God and spreading His light to everyone. But Jesus says that the sons of the world are shrewd, and the sons of light are not!

Jesus continues, “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.” Mammon is money, and Jesus says that we should use money to make friends, like that unjust steward did. We should use money to make friends so that when we fail, we can enter into “an everlasting home”. The steward used the master's money to make friends so that when he was fired, he would be welcomed into their houses -- and we

should use the money given to us by God to make friends too, so that when we die, we are welcomed into our eternal home, in heaven.

How could you do that? How could you use money to get to heaven? Jesus has said that the poor are blessed, and He heals beggars all the time. Jesus doesn't really care about whether you are rich or poor, so what is He talking about? Can you buy your way to heaven? Does God take bribes?

To understand, let's look at exactly what this unjust steward did: he went to the needy people who could not pay what they owed, and he made their debts lighter. He made life easier for people who needed money, and they were grateful. As a Christian, if God gives you money, what should you do with it? Well, you should share it, right? You should give that money to the poor and needy, so that they can eat and find shelter! And if you do that, God will be glad, and He will welcome you to heaven, your everlasting home!

Jesus finishes by talking about how Christians should understand and use money:

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? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?

God watches to see if you are faithful in small ways, to see if He can trust you with the better, true riches. He sends you some money (maybe a lot or maybe just a little) and He watches to see if you will be faithful by giving some of it away! Remember how we are asked to give our first fruits? When we receive blessings from God, we should offer some of it back to Him by giving to the Church or to charity. We should remember that all of this money and these blessings really come from God, and not get greedy, holding tight to them and thinking of them as being all our own! If we are faithful with these small things, with this money that belongs to God, then He will grant us true spiritual riches, like the presence of the Holy Spirit, and a deep love and faith. While the money belongs to God really, those spiritual riches will be all our own.

Jesus finishes the parable with a line that has become very famous:

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Remember that mammon is money, and Jesus is saying that you can't serve God, and also serve money. What would it look like if you served money? Well, money would be your master -- so you would always do things hoping to make more money, or to keep your money to yourself. You would be ruled by your love of money. Jesus is saying you can be ruled by God, or you can be ruled by money, but you cannot serve both of them! We have to choose.

This parable is about a steward who is pretty bad at his job, and when he realizes he's going to be fired, he lies and makes fake paperwork. Surprisingly, Jesus says we should be like that guy! Isn't that amazing? But the real point of this parable is that this unrighteous man used money to make friends so that he could go to their houses. We Christians should be using our money for good things, like helping

the needy, and building up a good relationship with God, so that when we leave this earth, He'll let us come stay in His house, which is heaven! When we help those in need, our souls are helped, too. In the end, helping others will enable us to enter the Kingdom of God.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! Let's hear and understand.

QUESTIONS:

Who is called "unjust" in this parable, and what was his job?

- *In this parable, the steward is unjust. His job is to watch over the money and the possessions of his wealthy boss, keeping track of his purchases and sales, and any loans he gives.*

What problem did the rich man have with his steward?

- *The steward was being accused of wasting the rich man's goods. So the rich man called the steward and asked him to give an account of his stewardship.*

How did the steward plan ahead when he knew he would lose his job?

- *The steward thought to himself that he did not want to have to dig or beg, so he planned a way that those who owed the rich man some money would welcome him into their houses: He sat with each of them, cross off their debt, and then mark a lower number as what they owed.*

FOR DISCUSSION:

What do you think about the unjust steward? It sounds like he was being sneaky, doesn't it? Like he was cheating his master! If we think about it like this, maybe we will understand what Jesus is telling us with this parable: in this world, money and success are the masters, aren't they? If we serve them, doing what they want us to do (which is gathering as much money as possible and being successful so that everyone notices us), we will be famous on earth, won't we? But is money and success good for our souls, which live on after our earthly life is done? Not if we use them for earthly fame.

But what if we have God as our master, and we understand that money and success are gifts from God? What if we use the money or success that God gives us to help other people? That would make us like the unjust steward! We would be bad servants to Mammon, but we would be good servants to God!

Talk together about how you are “cheating” the earthly masters of money and/or success. How are you sneaking behind their backs, giving away your money or using your success to help others? What will you do in this brand new year to be the best steward possible of what God has given you?