

Luke 16.1-9  
Ninth Sunday after Trinity  
29 July 2018  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Jesus tells his disciples another parable... the parable of the unrighteous Steward... this is such a difficult story... all these complicated themes come up and we think: Why does Luke add a story where:

1. a guy who acts unrighteously, gets praised by God
2. The sons of this age are praised for being wiser than the sons of light
3. And we are supposed to use unrighteous money to make friends?

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At first glance - this story irritates us! Just imagine reading a novel and at the end the villain wins due to his trickery. The hero does not get the girl ... his good deeds are found to be wanting and he does not get his happy ending.

It would be like the final Lord of the Rings movie ending with Frodo's death... before he destroys the Ring. And Sauron wins the war for Middleearth.

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We would go home from this movie unsatisfied... We would probably even start making up better endings ... on how we want the stories to end. The story would have been better if this or that happened. The author should have done this rather than that. We would make an ending that aligns with our expectations and affirms our way of thinking. An ending, that makes us feel good about ourselves.

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When writing a story... certain rules apply... the readers bring certain expectations. If you want people to like your story – follow those rules!!

So a good ending for this parable would include:

1. The punishment of the bad steward
2. A lesson on how it is bad to trust Money
3. A note for the sons of light – that they will win in the end
4. And a teaching on how to be a good steward

Having such an ending ... we would be much more satisfied. We could just keep on reading the book of Luke without spending another thought on this parable... it would immediately align with the plot as we like it ... the bad get punished and the good get their due.

We would read ourselves into the side of justice and feel good about ourselves and life goes on.

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Well... I am sorry to say... tough luck! This is not such a story. Luke did not add it into his gospel to make you feel good. In this way the parable is supposed to be unsatisfying. Justice is not served – we do not hear how the villain gets what’s coming to him.

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But the parable is fulfilling its purpose... In exactly the way Luke and Jesus intended it... This Gospel was written to tell us the story of Jesus. How he came and became man. How he humiliated himself and suffered for us. How he died for us so that we could be saved! It is written to show us that we are sinners! Not how those surrounding us are sinners... How we are sinners! We are in desperate need of Jesus ... and this Gospel shows us why. We keep on seeing how incompetent we are when it comes to fulfilling Gods law. But the gospel tells us – do not be afraid- it does not matter what you do. It matters what Christ has already done. Repent... and recognize you need Jesus.

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So a parable is not like how we want stories to be. We can’t put ourselves in the shoes of the hero. We get forced in the shoes of the villain. It is supposed to unsettle us. If we can just smoothly read over a story in the bible without it rattling us... we are doing something wrong. The parables – just like the rest of the bible - are written to show us, we need Jesus!

The parable of the sower does not only show us that we are the good ground and the others are bad... No. It is there to remind us we are sinners. Due to our sinful nature Gods Word falls onto our deaf ears. We need Jesus.

And that’s how we should read this parable too! Not: How does the bad Steward get what is coming to him. But: How is my sinful nature – once again – getting in the way of God’s plan for me. Why do I need Jesus?

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With this at the back of our mind. Let us now look at this parable.

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A rich man had a steward. This steward was squandering his masters possessions and it got reported to the rich man.

The rich man is clearly God... But who is this steward? What does he do? To answer the second question, we can look directly into Luke’s gospel. He tells us what a steward is supposed to be doing: Let’s look at chapter 12:

<sup>42</sup>And the Lord said: “Who then is ‘the faithful steward’ whom his master will set over his household, to give them the portion of food at the proper time? <sup>43</sup>Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. <sup>44</sup>Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.”

The good steward is the one who takes care of Gods flock and gives them what they need at the proper time. What the flock needs is what God wants to give and a good steward must manage this gift in such a way that the flock does not go hungry!

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But the steward in this story was most definitely not doing that... he was squandering the Lords possession. He was a bad manager.

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And God confronts this manager and tells him he has been caught out... he is about to be fired.

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And the steward immediately starts planning his own bailout. He is clearly a son of this age...with the philosophy: only you can save yourself... and he seems to be quite good at doing this. He says: "I have one more move, wat's it going to be?"

So he gathers all the people that are in his Lords debt. He then starts forgiving a part of their debt... so that they are thankful to him... and when the time comes, and he gets fired... he can depend on their help...

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And the Lord finds out about this. But... he does not get angry... he praises the unrighteous steward for his shrewdness. And fellow redeemed ... here is the unexpected plot twist. This is where we stop and go back to the beginning of the verse. Did we read this correctly? Yes, we did. It completely rattles us. This is not supposed to be happening. We want lightning to come from heaven and burn him like a toast.

For us it seems like the steward... with this final act... just dug his own grave. The Lord should have immediately punished him!

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But wait a second... It seems like our earthly perspective is getting in the way here. We think we know what a steward must do. He is supposed to take care of his boss's possessions. The more of a penny pincher he is... the better. In any business on this earth - If a steward was so generous or frivolous with his boss's money...as this steward was.... He would immediately get punished... if not even put into jail.

But, fellow redeemed, this is not just any old business ... it's Gods business ...and in Gods business the currency is forgiveness. In God's business everyone is in his debt. And it's the job of his stewards to forgive! God doesn't need his mercy to be stored up in huge vaults. He wants his forgiveness to be spent.

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So, to a certain extent the final move of the steward could be seen as him finally doing his job.

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To a certain extent. There are still a few problems, regarding his egocentricity. And he was definitely not being set up as an example for us – to see how we should behave.

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But let's look at what God praised him for... his shrewdness... that's it. God praised him for his shrewdness... because in his last move he banked everything on God's mercy. He knew that God was not going to retract the debts he had forgiven. God is grace and mercy personified. And that will not change! No matter how unfair it seems to us!

And that's it... the parable moves away from the steward and this Praise is the last thing we hear about him... justice isn't served... no fire and brimstone... it so frustrating!

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but only until we realize that the bad steward is us.

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How often do we react like he does? We squander the Lord's possessions.

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How much has God given us? How often do we use it only for our selfish needs?

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Nothing that you have belongs to you. It belongs to God! But we think we need every last cent to survive ... and we struggle to part with just a bit. And this does not only regard our earthly possessions. How do we treat his mercy? We know how sinful we are – or at least, the bit of the sinfulness we do recognize in ourselves already scares us. But all of it has been wiped away in God's eyes... and still we struggle to forgive minor infractions done to us by our neighbor.

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And when the law of God shows us our sin... how often do we try to save ourselves by justifying our actions?

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"the sons of this age are wiser than the sons of light" ... and we are both – we are equally sinner and saint. And when we get into trouble we like to turn to the "wise" side to get out of it... As a son of this age you do not have to humiliate yourself by admitting to a sin. You can keep your pride. You can just push everything under a rug...

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But unfortunately, the rug starts bulging, and we start tripping over it... it's only a matter of time until we fall flat on our faces.

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Another option we have is:

We could be "less wise" and turn to Jesus – the only utterly good steward. He also gathers all the people in the Lord's debt. He tells them to take out their bill and write "0". He is the most frivolous spender of God's treasure! On the cross he eliminated all sin and now we can also write a big "0" on our bill.

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This parable is not supposed to be a story about fairness... it is not about justice being served... the villain does not get his due... and we can be thankful for that! This parable is telling us that we're the villains and we're in big trouble... but Jesus came with a plot twist... a plot twist that might be dissatisfying to our understanding, - but a plot twist that we can be eternally grateful for... Because if things were as "fair" as we wanted them to be ... then we would be lost. Thank God that he made things unfair and gave us his son, Jesus Christ, to die for us!

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.