



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School  
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

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**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 22, 2019**

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**“The Parable of the Dishonest Manager”**

*(Luke 16:1-15 )*

Rev. David K. Groth

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing  
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

**Collect:** O Lord, keep Your Church in Your perpetual mercy; and because without You we cannot but fall, preserve us from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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This is the most difficult parable Jesus ever told. I'm quite sure there are parts of it I do not understand. And based on what I've read, I'm not convinced anyone else does either.

It's about an estate manager, a steward, who works for a wealthy landowner. His job is to collect rent from the tenant farmers, to negotiate percentages, keep the books, and then call them in at harvest time to pay their rent with a percentage of the produce.

This manager, Jesus says, was wasting his employer's resources. We're not told how; maybe too many expensive dinners on the company card. In any event, the owner fires him. He orders the man to bring the books up to date, clear out his desk, and leave. The man knows his reputation as a manager is ruined and he knows he's not fit for physical work. His hands are way too soft. He knows he doesn't want to beg. So, he ponders his predicament and has a sort of "aha" moment. "I know what I'll do" he says. He goes to his office, calls the tenant farmers in, and announces that the rent they thought they owed has been reduced, dramatically. He doesn't say it but allows them to conclude that he is responsible for their stroke of fortune. In effect, the guy has just made himself some new friends at his employers' expense, with unrighteous money. The farmers, of course, are delighted. They are also grateful, and it's understood they will help their newly unemployed friend until he can get back on his feet.

When the landowner discovers his manager pulled a fast one on him, he doesn't react in the way he's supposed to. He doesn't have the guy arrested and put in jail. He doesn't even get angry. Instead, he commends the fellow. He knows he's been outfoxed and even sees a little humor in it. "Nicely done!" he says in effect. "Now get outta here!"

Now, this is where the story gets a little dicey. Jesus holds up this crook ("a son of the world" he calls him) as an

example for *us* (“sons of light” he calls us). He’s wanting us to be smarter with money, (like this guy was), more clever, less naive. As he says in Matthew 10, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Ok, fair enough. This fellow understands the connection between money and relationships. He knows how to work that connection to his own advantage and that of others.

Realize Jesus praises this guy’s shrewdness, but he’s not approving his actions. So you’ve got this parable wrong if you think you can use it as a license to cheat people. Scripture interprets Scripture and there are all kinds of texts in the Bible that are as clear as crystal in their condemnation of cheating others in any way. Jesus is not approving of this guy’s actions, just his shrewdness.

But then here comes verse 9. It’s a key verse and honestly, I just don’t get it. Jesus says, “*I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*” I’ve been chewing on that cud all week, tossing it round and round, reading the commentaries, and I’m still at a loss. It seems to say God’s people would do well to use their money to make friends on earth so that when you get to heaven they will be there too to show their gratitude to you. In this way, worldly wealth may be used wisely to gain eternal benefit. However, that just doesn’t sound quite right. Worst case scenario: my Watertown people start buying rounds at the local bars, so that when you die and go to heaven you will be welcomed by all sorts of other grateful Watertownians. It just doesn’t sit well, if for no other reason than my understanding of heaven, where there will be no shortage of hospitality or welcome in the first place.

So, what do you do when you come across a verse that just doesn’t make sense? Luther said somewhere – you keep reading. That is, we could easily start spinning our wheels in the mud of Verse 9, just as the commentators do. But there’s enough in this text that we can understand, and we should focus on that. So, my question today is “What is absolutely clear in this text that we can take home with us?”

First this: just like the manager in the parable, we too are stewards of another’s money. Whatever we have, we don’t really own it; we’re just taking care of it for a time. That’s the first

principle of Christian stewardship. We may feel we've earned it and it belongs to us, but the consistent claim of Scripture is that everything we have ultimately comes from God and belongs to God.

Secondly, we cannot keep it. Everything we have, will one day be taken from us. Jesus said it will fail us. When you die, you lose it all: to your heirs, to government, to charity, maybe some to thieves, but not a penny of it will still belong to you. 1 Timothy 6, "We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." Ecclesiastes 5, "Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs."

Third, what we have, God has given us to manage for a time. As we manage our money, we should always keep in mind the important role money plays on earth. We can use money to hurt people or to help people. We can use it to cement friendships (which here Jesus seems to recommend) or enemies. We can fearfully hoard it or cheerfully share it. It can be an end to itself, or it can have a direction to it, a purpose. These are decisions each of us makes all the time and every day. And they are important decisions. Again, how we handle money has long term consequences for ourselves and others. And this text teaches us to manage the master's goods in this life always mindful of the life to come. Be shrewd, like the steward, to use your possessions to gain a future for yourself and others, not lose it.

Remember the rich fool who decided to build bigger barns for his abundant crop and instead lost his life that very night? In the fourth century, Ambrose said "The bellies of the poor, the houses of widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last forever." That is, a man's true wealth is not in what he keeps, but in what he gives away. Possessing wealth is not a sin, but it is a great responsibility, and the one who uses it to help others has done much to meet that responsibility.

This text challenges us to be smart with our money, not foolish; to use it deliberately, not recklessly. To make plans for it, rather than be impulsive, wasteful or careless with it. With your money, be wise as serpents, innocent as doves.

Just a plug here: In January we will offer another class here called "Financial Peace." It'll help with strategies for

getting out of debt, budgeting, saving, tithing. It's about Christians being smart with money which Jesus is encouraging in our text. It will start in January and will be facilitated by Charles and Jan Schadt. I highly recommend it.

What else? In verse ten Jesus goes on to say that "one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much" (v. 10). If you can be trusted with nickels and dimes, you can be trusted with much more.

I know I've mentioned this before but it was a memorable lesson from one of my professors at the Seminary. One of the required readings for the class with Dr. Nagel was a book that was out of print, and so he had copies professionally made and bound for us. He paid for it all up front and was asking us to pay him back. It was something like \$19.82 cents. Every one of us would have been happy to just give him \$20 dollar bill and call it even, but he came with pockets full of pennies, nickels and dimes and insisted on giving us exact change. While doing so, he said, "Stay above reproach" also with the money. If you can be trusted with a very little, you can also be trusted with much.

How we use our money, what it does for us, is very close to who we are. There's a spiritual component to money; that's why Jesus talks about it so much. Money can easily become an idol. That's why in verse thirteen Jesus warns us, "No servant can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and money."

Finally, the wealthy land owner in the parable does not respond the way he's supposed to. He doesn't have the dishonest steward arrested and jailed or worse. Similarly, each of us has, at times, been dishonest, reckless, and untrustworthy with God's resources. We've not been the faithful stewards he has called us to be of the little or the large sums of money. Yet, God doesn't respond the way he's supposed to. He doesn't reach out with the long arm of the Law, and strip us of everything and have us arrested and jailed for eternity. Instead he reaches out to us with his Son, Jesus Christ. With great compassion for us, he reaches out with the Gospel. Jesus suffers the punishment for us. He is beaten to within an inch or two of his life, and then crucified, in our place, as if he was the dishonest steward who cheated God.

He was always faithful with the little, but still suffered the greatest.

We see examples of unrighteous wealth being traded all around him. I'm thinking specifically of Judas and the thirty pieces of silver given him to betray Jesus. I'm thinking how the chief priests and elders went out trolling for false witnesses to line up against Jesus. Surely, those who testified against him got something out of the deal. They weren't there out the goodness of their hearts. I'm thinking how Pilate protects his job and his wealth by caving in to external pressures. I'm thinking how the soldiers cast lots for the seamless tunic. Unrighteous wealth trading hands all around. But Jesus doesn't lash out at them; he prays "Father, forgive them."

So, what do you do when you come across a verse you don't understand? You keep reading. I don't understand verse 9, but I know what 1 Timothy 2:5-6 are about. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men." Because of sin, we were owned lock, stock and barrel by sin, death and the devil. Jesus paid in full that ransom for us all, his righteousness for all our unrighteousness.

I don't understand what Jesus means when he says "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth," but I know what Scripture means when it calls him "a friend of sinners" and I know what Jesus meant when he said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15).

There are lots of things I don't understand in the Bible, and I suppose that's a reminder that God is the author of Scripture, and his ways our not our ways, neither are his thoughts our thoughts (Is. 55). So, Luke 15:9 are muddy waters to me, and that's ok, because there are other verses in Scripture that are clear as crystal, and they proclaim God's love for you and me, God's forgiveness for you and me, and God's salvation for you and me, through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.



