

Stewards of Unrighteous Mammon

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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The Old Testament reading this morning is a fitting opening to the Gospel today. It was the year 750 B.C. and the prophet Amos had been sent to warn the people of Israel to repent. Israel had placed its trust in money and not in God. God was angry about their idolatry to money. He was preparing to allow an Assyrian army to conquer them and destroy the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.; Israel did not repent and was destroyed. The idol of money was of no use in combating the Assyrian army or the wrath of God.

The parable in our gospel lesson this morning has been described as one of the most difficult for us to understand. That is not Jesus' problem; that is ours. Usually, when people say that don't understand the Word of God, it is because either they refuse to understand, or the facts are so evident they don't want to see them in themselves. You need to decide which one of those might fit you this morning.

The first part of the parable is a story about a property manager. He has the responsibility of managing the property of a wealthy owner. He becomes so attracted to the wealth that he mismanages and squanders the money which he is supposed to be managing and overseeing for the owner, his boss. Somehow, the boss learns of his mismanagement and informs him that he wants the accounting books, and he is firing him. The manager is facing unemployment and embarrassment. Being a shrewd man, he concocts a plan to survive without having to do manual work to earn a living or begging in his community. He decides to reduce the amount of debt the clients owe his boss.

We only hear that he reduced the amount owed by 2 of them but the amounts are staggering. One client has 50% of his debt forgiven. The other has 20% forgiven. To give you some idea of the amounts involved, 100 measures of oil was about 875 gallons. The total value would be about 1,000 denarii. One denarius was the wage paid to a common laborer for a day of work. Halving that amount would be amount to deducting 500 denarii off the original bill or 1 ½ years wages. The amount of grain owed by the second client was 1,000 and 1,200 bushels. The total value would be about 2,500 denarii. The reduction of 20% was the same as the first, about 500 denarii. These amounts were probably interest and included commissions for the manager.

This unscrupulous manager was also clever in how the debts were reduced. The debtors are told to sign the IOU as if this was the original debt. Now, they became complicit in his scam, and they would not tell the owner of the change. In fact, they probably thought it was the owner's idea being carried out by the manager and were grateful to the owner for his generosity, although he had nothing to do with the whole scheme.

Notice the reason that this man wants to reduce these debts. The clients probably didn't know that the manager is about to be fired. He wanted to be accepted in the homes of the clients when he lost his job. He wanted recognition and honor, even though he squandered the resources that had been entrusted to him. He would use any means necessary to gain their acceptance and recognition including cheating his boss. Money was in control of his life.

The clients probably expressed their delight to the owner and now, the owner has a dilemma. If he says it is all a mistake, that the clients were misled and they had to pay the costs anyway, they will be angry with him. He should have thrown

the manager in prison for cheating him. Instead, he commends him for his dishonesty, his shrewdness.

These practices were typical of the practices of the Pharisees of the day. They used any means they could to make money. They usually justified their dishonesty with Mosaic Law or their own interpretations of it. They saw wealth and financial success as a sign from God of His blessing and poverty and financial loss as a sign from God of his displeasure and curse. They assumed that since God had already turned on the poor, the poor were fair game for them. They were hypocrites who couldn't wait to leave worship to get back to making a deal to gain more money for themselves based on the Word of God, which is highlighted in the reading from Amos.

Perhaps a story would be appropriate here. Senator Huey Long was a controversial Governor and Senator from the State of Louisiana in the 1930s. He was from a very humble beginning. There is a story about his campaign for reelection to the Senate. He was campaigning in southern Louisiana. A local politician took him aside and reminded him that he would be speaking to a lot of Catholic voters. Throughout the day, Long told his audiences how as a boy he would get up at six o'clock on Sunday mornings, hitch the family horse to the buggy and take his Catholic grandparents to mass. After he brought them home, he would turn around and take his Baptist grandparents to church. At the end of the day of campaigning, the local politician complimented Long and expressed his surprise at learning he had Catholic grandparents. Long replied: "Don't be a fool. We didn't even have a horse." Long was both a liar and a hypocrite.

In his parable, Jesus was not complimenting the dishonesty of the manager. Neither was Jesus condemning wealth and legitimately earning it. Jesus was teaching his disciples with

this parable and with a dry sense of humor, that the men of the world were outsmarting the men of light, his followers. He was showing how a conniving rogue faced the facts, sized up a situation and acted in quick, cold logic. Jesus wanted his followers do the same but for much from nobler motives.

Do you see the point Jesus is making in this parable? Jesus said, "for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." He was saying that since the people of the world are so intense in their way of life for accumulating wealth, why aren't my followers as ardent? If the crooks of the world will stop at nothing to make money, why aren't we, who are followers of Jesus, as committed to him with similar zeal, ambition, and dedication? Jesus was saying, why aren't you as committed to me with such shrewdness as the sons or people of this world are in looking out for themselves?

Now, let me ask you a question, if your income last week was \$1,000, how much of it would belong to God - \$100, which is 10%, a tithe? That would be sensible and Biblical. But the truth is all of it belongs to God. God is the owner of everything we have. We are his stewards. We are His managers. We are stewards of all that we have, both in this temporal world and in the spiritual world. And each of us is accountable to God for what He has given to us just like the dishonest manager in the parable today.

In addition to our wealth, each of us has our own personal skills and talents. And God has allotted each of us time to fulfill His purposes. Jesus says we are to use all this, especially what He calls unrighteous wealth – temporal wealth – which is only worldly, as honest and careful managers. And how are we to manage all that God has given to us managers? We are to use it for Godly purposes and not squander it. It is not ours but God's. He entrusted it to us to use for His purposes. His

purpose is to spread the Gospel. Jesus tells us that by our wise use of the resources He has given us, we will be greeted by those who we have enabled to become believers. According to Jesus, they will greet us when we enter heaven. We can also anticipate that we will be greeted by Jesus too.

Jesus noted some secondary lessons regarding our stewardship. The temporal wealth God gives us is a test to measure our ability as managers. God is watching to determine if we are capable and trustworthy or if we squander and waste what we have been given. If we are shrewd managers, then we will be equally capable of managing what Jesus calls “true riches.” By “true riches,” he means the spiritual blessings. Our management of these resources both temporal and spiritual are an investment in eternity.

Jesus adds that wealth cannot become primary in our lives. We are admonished by Jesus to place our trust in God above all things, especially wealth – just as found on our coins, “In God we trust.” Money in the end will fail us. When we die, it will have absolutely no use.

Listen to this story. Once there was a certain labor racketeer who had grown rich on sweetheart contracts based on bribes and in the illegal use of pension fund money. One day, he learned that the F.B.I. was investigating him, and he came to the realization that there was no escape from his crimes. So, what did he do? Carefully, he placed a large sum of money in a numbered Swiss bank so that no one could touch it. Then, he was arrested and went to trial. After exhausting all appeals, he was sentenced and served time in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. After serving time, he took his money from the Swiss account, moved to Miami Beach, and planned to live happily ever after on the beach in luxury. Two weeks

after he arrived in Miami Beach, he died. His money was of no use to him.

When Jesus told this parable, he was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. He was teaching his disciples, and us, as he went. But others are also listening to him. Jesus closed this parable with a statement that strikes to the heart of the matter when he said: "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 Mammon," or money.

The Pharisees heard all that Jesus said and knew He was talking about them. They hated him for his accusations. They plotted to kill this poor, itinerant teacher who shamed them so greatly. They could not accept the fact that they had to choose between money, which they loved, and God, who they should have loved even more. They were the very examples of Jesus of loving one thing and hating the other. They loved money and really came to despise God in Jesus. They killed Jesus.

So, this parable does not deal with earning money or commending a person for being dishonest, but this parable really deals with one's commitment or discipleship for Jesus. Jesus wants our lifestyle committed to him. He wants us to act, think, make decisions, interact with others, influenced by our commitment to God.

Jesus does not want us for only one hour a week on Sunday morning, but he wants every hour every day. He wants an intensity in that relationship to be before everything else on this earth including money and things. And he wants us to work at that commitment, not take it for granted or leaving it all up to him. He wants our active participation in this relationship with Him. In our relationship with Jesus, we

come to experience his love for us, and then, we are expected to take that love and give it to others. We are the stewards of the means to serve Jesus in this world in love. A world that is focused on temporal things and not God. A world that is full of brokenness.

On the cross, Jesus the Christ became THE Steward of Unrighteousness. For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). In essence, Jesus managed the unrighteousness of our sin and bore its consequences for us. He begged His Father, the master of the estate, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He paid all our debts, delivering us from sin and bondage to the accuser, Satan. Having done so, He was received into heaven and received with honor and praise. There, He has prepared a place for us to live with Him forever.

And having completed His task of clearing away the slate of our debt, He sends us forth as His forgiven people and his stewards to announce that grace, mercy, and forgiveness to others so that they may know that all accusations the evil one brings against them have been wiped clean as well.

All of us baptized children of God are the first of His stewards of righteousness. In God's mercy we have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven and we are sent out to bring more people into that kingdom. First, we are all stewards of the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments for the forgiveness of sins that grants the mercy of God on all who hear and believe. Second, we are stewards of the "unrighteous mammon," the riches of this world by which we ensure the means of grace have a home, a called servant of the Word to administer them, and the means to take them out into the world.

And that because we have been forgiven, by the steward of our unrighteous sin and debt, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord equips and sends us into the world in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He has generously given us the resources to manage for his purposes. He is watching us to assure we are faithful and accountable for his trust. We know we cannot serve two masters, only Him. We look forward to the day when our work leads us to heaven and those who welcome us for our commitment and service in His name.

May you see and hear the words of Jesus today and may you faithfully serve as his stewards of the temporal and spiritual resources He has provided you to serve Him and bring glory to His name. Amen.