

Trinity 9
 August 9, 2009
 2 Sam. 22:26-34; 1 Cor. 10:6-13; Luke 16:1-13

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is usually summarized by most as the, “The Parable of the Dishonest or Unrighteous Manager.” This seems to focus on the wrong subject and verbs of Christ’s story to His disciples. A better summary might be, “The Story of the Merciful Master.” You make the call. Keep in mind that right before this story, Jesus told the story of the prodigal son who wasted his Father’s possessions, but was mercifully received back by his daddy with a gracious party. Jesus begins the story of the Merciful Master with these words, **“He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.”** The rich man, the lord, the master, most likely had acres and acres of land that he would allow people to work. We know that some produced olive oil and others wheat. He would then send out his manager, or steward, to collect a portion of the crop as a just payment for using his land. The surrounding area depended on this rich man for their livelihood. The rich man had a good reputation as being a generous and merciful master.

Then his manager, who would collect His payments, was accused of wasting his possessions. Notice that the possessions belonged to the master and that the manager was charged with being a bad steward and wasting his master’s possessions. Isn’t this true of us also? Everything that we have belongs to our merciful Lord. In the explanation of the first article of the creed we confess, *“I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”* However, does this really describe us? Do we believe that everything we have belongs to our Master and that He gives it to us to use for a time? Or do we think that we are self-sufficient and have earned everything by ourselves? If we do rightly believe that all that we have belongs to our Lord, have we been righteous managers? When we receive the offering up at the chancel, have you ever noticed that we hold up the plates and then bow? We are not offering to men, but we are giving back to God what is already His. Have you been dishonest or unrighteous with your Master’s possessions?

Though our story says that Jesus is speaking to His disciples we also know that the Pharisees were present and listening. You know the Pharisees who looked to everyone around them like faithful religious people? The verses after our lesson today say, **The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination**

in the sight of God. Do you, like the Pharisees, justify yourself? Are you a lover of money? Don't forget, God knows your heart. Is it that you can't afford to be merciful to your neighbor in need, or that you can't afford it and still maintain your standard of living? Don't forget Jesus ends our story with these words, **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, who do you serve, your possessions or God? It can only be one or the other. It can't be some of both.

Furthermore, are we content with the daily bread that our Lord provides or do we always want more? Do we grumble like the Israelites that we are tired of what we see as worthless bread from heaven? Are we dissatisfied with our home, spouse, or car? Do we think we are entitled to something better? Do we daydream about using the gifts God gives us for the benefit of our neighbor or do we daydream about living like Hollywood stars? Don't you know that if you don't love your neighbor who you see, that also means that you don't love God Who you don't see? **Whatever you do unto the least of these you have done unto Me.**

We could keep on going here, couldn't we? We could march through the Ten Commandments and see that we are not good stewards. We could see that we are ungrateful prodigal sons. We could see that we are not the Good Samaritan. We could see that we are the dishonest manager. We could see that we have broken the second table of the Law. We could see that we have coveted our neighbor's possessions and haven't helped our neighbor, as we should, to improve and protect his possessions and income. And remember that all of the commandments that deal with our neighbor flow back to the first commandment - **You shall have no other gods. We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.** Or as it says in our appointed psalm, "Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight."¹

And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' The Master could have justly had his manager thrown into prison or worse, but he mercifully lets him go. The manager trusts that his Master always shows mercy according to His steadfast love. **And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.** The manager can't save Himself from his predicament. Just like us, he is poor in spirit, and has nothing to offer his Lord. He is completely depended on the Merciful Master continuing to show mercy to him a poor miserable being. So he said to himself, **I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'** So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, **'How much do you owe my master?'** He said, **'A hundred measures of oil.'** 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?'** He said, **'A hundred measures of wheat.'** He said to him, **'Take your bill, and write eighty.'**

The manger acts quickly so that the debtors will assume that he is still acting on behalf of the Merciful Master. So, the manager summons the debtors one by one and has them pay much less than they rightly owe. This would cost the Master dearly. A measure of olive oil is about 9 gallons. Multiply that by fifty. This amount of oil could earn about

¹ Psalm 51:1-12

500 denarii. One denarius was the average daily wage, so you can see with this one situation alone that the Master lost a ton.

So, what could the Merciful Master do? He could either justly correct and punish the manager or show him mercy. He could collect the just amount from his debtors and tell them that manager wasn't delivering his merciful message, or let it stand. If the Lord corrected the manager then everyone would know the Master as just, but no longer merciful. If he let it stand then his reputation of being a Merciful Master would be furthered. Though it cost the Merciful Master severely, he would rather be known as merciful than right.

The same is true for our Lord. He would be right to send lightening bolts our way for our love of money, but He wants to be known as a Merciful Master. He wouldn't be wrong to take His gifts from us for our failing to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving, but we have a Merciful Master who desires mercy and not sacrifice. He could rightly throw us into the eternal prison for our prodigal ways, but He desires that we enter into His eternal dwelling where He meets us with open arms.

For God to be merciful to us, it cost Him dearly. Our Master took on the form of a servant. Christ gave up the riches of heaven and came down to earth to save us from our self-helpless predicament. The Merciful Master took our place and was the good steward. Jesus was the Good Samaritan and the perfect lamb in our place and in the place of the world. He served God and never money, all the while being ridiculed by those He came to save. Yet, the Master didn't stop there. Though He kept the 10 commandments perfectly, He died as a damned sinner. The punishment for our failing to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves was poured out on Jesus. Rather than be known as right, our Father wants to be known as merciful and so He poured out His justice on the cross and in return pours out mercy on us.

What a story! The rich Lord takes the beating that the wicked servant deserves - and then gives the wicked servant immeasurable riches in His kingdom. This is what your Merciful Master does for you. He received what you deserve on the cross, and in Baptism you receive what He deserved for His perfect life. You get the forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and salvation. The Merciful Master doesn't turn you over to the jailors when you fail to serve Him week after week. - No, He mercifully comes to you and serves you His righteous body and blood for the forgiveness of all your debts. When your Master speaks to you in Absolution, **He has mercy on you according to His steadfast love; according to His abundant mercy and blots out your transgressions – washes you thoroughly of your iniquity, and cleanses you from your sin.**²

So, while it is OK to focus in on the dishonest or unrighteous manager in this story, you should focus all the more on the Merciful Master. We should focus and repent that we are unrighteous, but we should focus all the more on our righteous Merciful Master, Who daily and richly forgives our sins. Focusing on how the Merciful Master forgives our huge debt and covers us with His righteousness--helps to properly focus us on showing mercy to our spouse, children, and enemies. Since you are free to bask in the mercy of your Merciful Master you are also free to live a life of love, compassion, generosity, and mercy towards your neighbor. In Jesus' name. Amen.

² From Psalm 51