

USING WHAT WE HAVE
Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, 2019
Luke 16:1-15

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, Luke 16:1-15: ¹ Then Jesus also told His disciples: “There was a certain rich man who had a manager, and allegations were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² He called the manager and asked him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management! For you cannot be manager any longer.’

³ “The manager said to himself, ‘What am I to do? For my master is taking my position as manager away from me. I am not strong enough to dig, I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have realised what I should do, so that, when I am dismissed from my position as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

⁵ “So, he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first one, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶ “He answered, ‘Three thousand litres of olive-oil.’

“The manager said, ‘Take your bill and sit down quickly and write “one thousand, five hundred!”’

⁷ “Then he asked another, ‘How much do you owe?’

“He answered, ‘Thirty tonnes of wheat.’

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill and write, “Twenty-four!”’

⁸ “The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are shrewder than the people of the light in dealing with their own kind of people. ⁹ I also tell you: Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, so that, when it runs out, they may welcome you into the eternal dwellings! ¹⁰ The person who is trustworthy in what is least is also trustworthy in much. The person who is unjust in what is least is also unjust in much. ¹¹ Therefore, if you have not been trustworthy with unrighteous mammon, who will trust you with what is genuine? ¹² If you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³ No household slave can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were fond of money, heard all this and began to sneer at Jesus. ¹⁵ He told them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is detestable in the sight of God.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We all have bad days. Sometimes those days are so bad you wish you could just close your eyes and make them disappear. However, have any of us ever had a day as bad as the manager that Jesus tells of in the parable before us today? That man was having a *really* bad day. Jesus tells the parable to make the point about using what we have to the best effect.

In order to make sense of the parable, we need to remember a couple of facts about who Jesus refers to as a “**manager**” in our Gospel.

In the day and culture of Jesus’ Israel, the office of a manager was an office of extraordinary authority. The manager could make deals that his master did not approve of, and the deal was made as surely and with the same authority as though the master had done it himself. That is why the “**squandering**” of the master’s possessions was such a serious thing. His employer had no recourse to recover mismanaged funds. Everyone in Jesus’ day would have known this since this is just how things worked back then.

Anyhow, the **rich man** in the parable discovered the problem of his manager in time to keep from going broke. ² **He called the manager and asked him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management! For you cannot be manager any longer.’** The manager now faced the real prospect of having to leave his employment with the shirt on his back and nothing more. When the steward heard of his impending firing, he did not protest but deliberated over his future, and his first reaction was to approach the crisis from a human point of view. What could he do, humanly speaking, in order to remove himself from this mess he had caused? He was **not strong enough to dig** and was too **ashamed to beg** - which was the first century’s unemployment and social security plan all rolled up into one. Back then, you worked, or, if you did not want to starve, you would beg and depend on the generosity of the townspeople. It was a simple equation. Like the prodigal son who desired to eat pig food,¹ the unrighteous steward had hit rock bottom and realised that *he could do nothing for himself*. Humanly speaking, there was no escape from his crisis. What was he to do?

¹ Luke 15:16

He decided to reduce the debts of his master's wealthier debtors by significant amounts.³ **"The manager said to himself...⁴ I have realised what I should do, so that, when I am dismissed from my position as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."** In all likelihood, perhaps the manager hoped that when he lost his job, those with whom he had shown mercy would welcome him into their homes either for employment or as a guest.

The manager's great insight was to see that the solution *must come from outside himself.* His entire plan was based on his assumption that *his master* was an honourable man who would respond in mercy. The manager trusted that his master would allow a brief span of time, an opportunity to prepare for the imminent reckoning and reversal. The manager must act in haste so that the master's debtors would think that the adjustments in the accounts stemmed from the master's mercy and not the manager's desperation. The readiness of the debtors to accept the manager's rewriting of their bills indicated that they believed this came from the master's hand, perhaps under the gentle persuasion of the wise manager who was looking out for the renters. Thus the community would see the master as being merciful, and the manager would benefit in that *he was an extension of the master.*

When his plan was discovered, **"The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly"**. The parable doesn't tell us if the manager kept his job, or whether his scheming worked or anything like that, because this is, after all, a parable - and not a real recounting of historical events. However, the point of the story had been made, so Jesus did not need to add any more to the story.

What was the point? The point is, **"the people of this world are shrewder than the people of the light in dealing with their own kind of people."**

People tend to exercise more intelligence and realistic thinking when they deal with the passing things of this world than Christians do when dealing with the eternal realities of Christ. People manage their portfolio's with care. They know where their money is. They calculate cash-flow and interest rates and almost always know how this or that action will serve their self-interest *before* they act. This is not universally true - there are poor people and lousy managers out there, but generally, people pay attention to their things - and generally they follow easy to understand principles for self-preservation and self-advantage. For example, we lock our cars, and we don't loan our credit cards to strangers. We try not to create havoc for ourselves when we are thinking clearly.

Christians are not so 'shrewd'. We often fail to live according to our theology. We say we believe something, but we often act as though we do not. We frequently value the things of this world in ways that suggest that they are more permanent and significant than they actually are, while faith, and fellowship with our fellow-believers, and doctrine, and the life of our family - *the congregation* - take a back seat to toys, and personal pleasures, and ideas and activities that often directly contradict our faith. Christians often have their 'faith' in a mental "lock-box" kept separate from how they think and how they speak and how they act regarding life in general. We see Christians placing the esteem and society of the unbelieving world *before* the people and things of our faith, and we behave as though life in this world is to be adhered to at any cost, as though the promises and hope of the Gospel are not real.

So it is that Jesus draws our attention to that by means of this parable. When He says, **"⁹ I also tell you: Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, so that, when it runs out, they may welcome you into the eternal dwellings!"**, He is addressing what we may call a *disconnect* between what we confess and what we actually do.

The word **'mammon'** is found in the Greek text and goes back to the same Hebrew root as that found in *'amen.'* It means *"that in which one puts trust."* It came to mean simply "money" or "possessions," the earthly things in which so many trusts. So, the **'unrighteous mammon'** refers to the 'stuff' of this world. When Jesus says to make friends for yourself with it, He doesn't mean to use it to make friends of society or people around you, but to use it in ways that are consistent with your confession.

Now, let's put the pieces together.

Jesus Himself tells us that the message of the parable is that this shrewd manager is cleverer at using his soon-to-be-lost authority to feather his nest than are God's own people. Or to say it another way: the manager is doing something that those who are in a similar circumstance are not doing - but should be. The manager knows that his life, as he knows it, is coming to an end. He's about to be fired because he's failing to perform his responsibilities properly; but unlike the people Jesus is talking about, he's smart enough to look ahead, take advantage of what he's still got, and make sure he'll have a place to go when he's removed from his position.

With that in mind, it became clear that Jesus was still talking about the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They were the ones whom people looked up to as the custodians, or managers, of God's Word. They interpreted the Scriptures and made the will of God's known, but they'd been doing a botched job of it. They'd been abusing their authority to put heavy burdens on people and to make themselves look good. They had invented all kinds of rules that a person should observe if he wanted to be "righteous", while never bothering to mention God's grace or His forgiveness, even though God had said, *"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,"* (Hosea 6:6). And Forgiveness? Forget it.

So, in a sense, they had been overcharging the tenants and skimming profits for themselves. Besides, they thought using their riches was a sign to other people that their teachings and life were pleasing to God. That's why ¹⁴ **The Pharisees, who were fond**

of money, heard all this and began to sneer at Jesus. Jesus saw in riches just so much outward glitter that said nothing at all about the heart. People may put a high value on riches, but riches carry no impact at all with God.

Now the true Owner, Jesus, was here telling them that they were about to be sacked. *“You cannot be My managers any longer. You’ve been bungling the books long enough.”* When faced with this same situation, the shrewd manager used his still remaining authority to forgive the debts of others, and for it, he was praised by his master - but these Pharisees were not so clever. At some level, they must have known that Jesus was right about the way they had been mishandling God’s Word. They could see from the parables Jesus told that the Scriptures were about the grace of God reaching out *to save the lost*. But changing their attitude would mean giving up what they’d been trusting in all along - their own imagined moral perfection - the righteousness they’d earned by their hard work. They feared that they would soon no longer be looked up to as the most righteous people in society – why, they would even have to depend on God’s mercy just like these poor sinners who Jesus is reaching out to! That thought was unbearable. So rather than do what they knew was the best course of action, that is, to use their positions to extend God’s grace and forgive the debts of others, they stuck to their own untenable position, which was for them a form of the mammon of unrighteousness: misplaced trust in their own goodness, and what Jesus says is **“you cannot serve God and mammon.”**

Jesus says that even someone who is not spiritually enlightened knows how to use forgiveness to his advantage; but very often God’s own people, whose job it is to practice forgiveness, don’t. The clear implication is that when the Owner calls them to account for their management, not only will they be thrown out of their present position, but they will have no place to go.

Now, many years later, we are the ones entrusted with the management of God’s Word. We, collectively in the church and individually as children of light², are the distributors of God’s grace and forgiveness in the world. The day God brought us into His kingdom, He called us in, set us down, and said, *“How much do you owe?”* Out came the contract which showed Him a staggering debt, but then He said, *“My Son, Jesus, died for all your sins. Take your bill, sit down quickly, write zero. Good. Now, go out there and do the same for others.”*

That’s the charge God has given us, and perhaps if we do an honest assessment, we’ll have to admit that we haven’t been doing a very good job. Each one of us has been mishandling the Master’s resources. We’ve been inattentive to our duties. Sure, we’re more than happy to take the abundance of God’s grace and forgiveness for ourselves; but like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, we’ve held others to a standard of behaviour that we can’t keep ourselves, and then we have the audacity to look down on them and treat them as if they were unworthy of God’s forgiveness.

Now is the time to cancel debts. Now it’s urgent that we give up our grudges and our tendency to look down on others as if they were somehow more sinful than we are. Now is the time to redouble our efforts to extend God’s forgiveness in Christ Jesus to all people.

We can’t do it by ourselves, so repenting of our past mismanagement and relying on Christ, we can, and as we do, we shall become increasingly trustworthy with the charge God has given us. We shall find ourselves using the Gospel we’ve been entrusted with to make friends for God; friends with whom will be welcomed into the eternal dwellings where we shall hear not just the respect of the Master for our creative accounting; but rather we shall receive His full commendation, *“Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”* May God grant it to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, we rejoice to stand in Your presence and to come before You in prayer, praise, and thanks through Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank You for showing us Your power and glory in this vast universe, and for enabling us to see Your majesty and might in the creation around us. We praise You for filling the earth with life and goodness, and for renewing it continually according to Your laws. Help us to harvest the fruit of honest effort, to find joy in the coming of each new day, and to rest in the peace of each night.

Above all else, we thank You for the gift of Your only Son Jesus Christ, and for revealing Yourself and Your saving love to us through Him. We praise You for His holy life of true manhood, for His innocent sufferings and death on our behalf, and for His glorious resurrection to eternal life, so that, through Him, we have the forgiveness of our sins, the power to conquer all evil, and the sure gift of eternal life. Bring us finally to the everlasting kingdom that You have promised us through Your Son.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Word to be the lamp to light our path through life. Give us Your Spirit that we may listen to Your Word with eager understanding. Enrich our lives with the endurance and the encouragement that the Scriptures give, and fill us with hope, now and for ever. Lead us by the Spirit, so that we may not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us to ignore the desires of our sinful natures. Give us confidence that there is wisdom in Your commandments, and grant that we may take delight in them. Fill our lives with the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, humility, patience, goodness, and faithfulness.

² Ephesians 5:8

We pray for Your Church. Rule and direct it to accomplish Your purposes and plans. Defend it against all error and doubt, and keep it in the truth. Make it alive by Your grace, that it may seek to praise You in every good work.

Uphold all leaders in our land. Help them to know and follow Your will, so that they may maintain law and order with firmness and love, and so that we may live in peace and quietness, and serve You without hindrance.

Bless our homes. Guide all parents that Your Word and will may have pride of place in their lives. Help the young to live in the light of Your Word and to know the happiness of a life of faith and purity.

We pray for all who are facing hardship, sickness, suffering, and danger. Fill their lives with Your grace, and hold before them the perfect peace of Christ. Please hear our prayers and send rain again.

These prayers, and all our unspoken desires, and anything else we should have asked of Your mercy, give us for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:4-7

⁴ Listen to this, you who trample on a needy person and put an end to the oppressed people of the land! ⁵ You ask yourselves: ‘When will the New Moon be over, that we may sell grain? When will the Sabbath be over, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may shrink the forty-litre corn-measure, make the twelve-gram money-weight large and cheat with fraudulent scales, ⁶ that we may buy helpless people with silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals, that we may sell the chaff-sweepings as wheat?’”

⁷ The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: “I shall certainly never forget anything that they have done.”

1 Timothy 2:1-15

¹ Therefore, I exhort, first, that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may live a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and reverence. ³ This is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Saviour, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to know the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself as a ransom instead of all, to be testified in its proper time. ⁷ For this purpose I was appointed as a preacher and an apostle – I am telling the truth and not lying – a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

⁸ Therefore, I desire that the men should pray everywhere, lifting holy hands, without anger and doubting.

⁹ Similarly, I also desire that the women should adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good works. This is proper for women who profess godliness.

¹¹ Let a woman learn in quietness, with all subordination! ¹² Nor do I permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but she should be in quietness! ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ Moreover, Adam was not deceived; but, when the woman was deceived, she fell into transgression. ¹⁵ However, she will be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith, love and holiness, with self-control.

Luke 16:1-15

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to him that this man was squandering his property. ² He called the manager and asked him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management! For you cannot be manager any longer.’

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