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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20C)

September 18, 2016

Text: Luke 16:1–15

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

Let's be blunt this morning. The Lord's parable in Luke 16:1–15 is confusing and difficult. The parable could be understood and interpreted to support and encourage dishonesty, trickery, and thievery. To be sure, such an understanding of this parable is incorrect. But that doesn't change the fact that it's a difficult parable to understand and ultimately, apply in a faithful, God-pleasing way.

One reason we struggle with this parable is that we focus on the wrong character, the dishonest manager. We should study in more detail the rich man. His noble character controls the events in the parable. The dishonest manager shrewdly takes care of his future by cashing in on the rich man's good name; he stakes his entire future on the nature and character of the rich man. That's the key to a better understanding of this parable. This is a parable about the shrewdness of Christian faith and trust in the goodness and mercy of God.

Faith in God unto salvation is able to evaluate any given situation and react to it wisely for the best result. Biblical faith is clever and practical. In other words, it's shrewd. Pure and simple.

This is how the Lord Jesus describes faith in Luke 16. The problem with this Bible reading is that it teaches the shrewdness of faith using a faithless middle manager who manipulates the system to achieve his own selfish ends. And the rich man commends this scoundrel for his shrewdness! It's hard for us to see anything good or praiseworthy in this parable...until we focus on the noble character of the rich man. Let's look at the parable in more detail. Again, focus on the rich man.

According to vs. 1, the rich man discovers that his manager is wasting his (i.e., the rich man's) possessions (vs. 1). Turn over the books; the accounts will be audited and set straight. And you, o faithless manager are fired. That's the essence of vs. 2. Notice, even here the goodness of the rich man is revealed. He could have had the manager arrested. Instead, he has mercy and allows him time to set his affairs in order.

The manager begins a thorough evaluation of his circumstances. I'm too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg. What am I to do? This is where his shrewdness kicks in. Look at vs. 4, "I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses." The dishonest manager uses that precious time following him being fired and before the word gets out to the rest of the community in order to save his future. He can't dig and refuses to beg. Using the character and reputation of the rich man, the manager formulates a third option.

The manager goes to two of the rich man's debtors. He reduces their debt, one by 50%, the other by 20% (vs. 5–7). There are three reasons the dishonest manager can get away with such crooked behavior: 1) the debtors still think the manager works for the rich man and so has the authority to reduce the debt, 2) reducing the debt is consistent with the generous character of the rich man – this is the kind of man he is; it wouldn't seem strange for him to act in such a manner, 3) the rich man will honor the actions of the dishonest manager. He will honor the dishonest actions of the manager and suffer the financial loss rather than violate his own character and reputation of generosity and goodness.

When the word finally gets out that the manager has been fired, the rich man's debtors will be ingratiated to him for reducing their debt. They will take him in, i.e., "receive [him] into their houses" (vs. 4). No digging ditches and begging for him!

In the parable, the rich man commends the manager for how he dealt with the situation. Vs. 8, "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. *(There it is!)* For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." *(He rightly evaluated the situation and followed a practical, wise course of action that saved him from a disastrous end.)*

That's the kind of shrewd faith we are to have, a faith that knows God loves the world and wants to save His people, sinful though they be, from a disastrous fate. We stake our eternal future on God's desire to save, forgive, redeem, and sanctify His people for all eternity. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will act mercifully and graciously. No matter what happens, no matter how bad you and me mess things up with our sins and iniquities, God cannot and will not violate His character. He will save me. That's the kind of shrewd faith we are to have. Or to use the language of the Catechism, "We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things." That means we trust in God to save us even when we look the most damnable, that He will love us

even when we feel most unlovable, that He will hold us in His arms even when we seem to be the most repulsive.

Don't miss understand me here. The parable does not teach that we should be dishonest. And I'm not suggesting that we can indulge in sin without fear of punishment. Heaven forbid! Our Lord's parable teaches us to live wisely and believe shrewdly knowing that God wants to save us in and through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven's glory. His mercy and steadfast love are the rock solid foundation upon which all our hopes are built.

It's that kind of shrewd faith that allows you to (vs. 9) "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." Like the dishonest manager who used material things to secure his future by means of faith in the goodness of the rich man, so we use material things in this world in the knowledge of God's desire to save us through the power of the Gospel.

Through this shrewd faith, we use the little things (earthly, temporal things) so that we can have the big things (heaven, eternal life, fellowship with God and His saints). Look at vs. 10–11, "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. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"

Think about our weekly offerings. Why do we pass around the plate? Is it to meet the congregational budget? You know, the church is got to take in a certain amount each week in order to pay the bills. This is true but only regarding the little things.

There is a far bigger reason why we give of our time, talents, and resources. Through our offerings, we are saying to wealth and the things of this world that they are not in charge. They aren't the main things. They are lesser things that must serve the bigger things: the preaching of Jesus, the administration of the sacraments, the promise of salvation, the love and support of God's people. When we give offerings, we are saying to all of our resources, "I am your master. You will serve me as I serve the will and purposes of God. For God is my master and I fear, love and trust in Him above all things. My faithful service to God and His people in unrighteous wealth (lesser things) will serve me into eternal life (bigger things)."

That's the message of vs. 13, "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."

Meeting the budget is secondary. What's primary is loving God and our neighbor in and through Jesus Christ. We know who He is, His nature and character. Jesus is true God and true man come in love and mercy to save us from sin, despair, and eternal degradation. On the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." To sinners of every kind, the Lord says, "I do not condemn you. Depart in peace. Sin no more for your debt is paid in full, cancelled, never to be mentioned again." And on the Last Day He will say, "Rise from your earthly graves and enter into my eternal home you good and faithful servants. For in loving the least of these my brothers and sisters, you loved me."

That's the shrewd nature and character of our most holy faith. It risks life and limb on the goodness of the God who gives Himself to the world completely and fully. This God became a Man, was faithful in the lesser things of this world so that He can bring us into the greater, eternal habitations of His eternal kingdom. Such is the noble character of our God, such is the shrewd character of our faith in this loving Savior.

So go. Be like the dishonest manager and bring glory to God. Amen.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.