

Sermon Trinity 9 2020

August 9, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

Of all of the parables that our Lord Jesus speaks, I think we can agree that this is one of the most, if not the most puzzling of them all. Usually, as we hear a parable, we can fairly easily draw from it a lesson to apply without having to wrestle too much with what's being said. This isn't so much the case for today's. And why?

Well, it's not so much the parable that's hard to understand, is it? Not really, right? After all, let's consider this. There's this man who's been cheating his boss. His boss finds out and is going to fire him, and so he cheats him more to make himself look good and give himself a golden parachute when he leaves. That's not so hard to understand, is it? No. That's business. In fact, you can see that a bit in the master's response, in that the master commends the manager. You can hear his understanding, "It's not personal, it's business." Right? But what's shocking is that our Lord Jesus, the perfect sinless man, the holy God in the flesh of man is using this manager as a positive example. It doesn't seem right at all, does it? So, what's with that?

Well to start let me dig into this a bit more in terms of things we should notice. First of all we see that this landowner must be wealthy. That's probably not a shocking insight, but the signs are that this is a really large scale operation he's got here. You see it in the large amounts of debt—over 800 gallons of oil from the first debtor, over 6,500 gallons of grain for the second. I saw figures in reading about this that would have said the grace shown by the manager to the debtors would have equated to the daily wages of one worker for about three years, just for these two debtors. And it's clear there's more. So this is a large operation, you can see it from that, you can see it from the lack of oversight of the manager. It seems like he's got housing provided for. He's got his residence given to him, since he has to find a new house to live in. And apparently he has status here too, since begging would be such a shift for him. So there's that context. There's also the context there of this owner.

Look at how owner deals with the manager. He gives the manager time to get the books together—which is when the manager pulls off his shenanigan. The owner also doesn't get angry about it. He maybe is upset, but it's not as though he pursues his right to legal action against the manager. And this would be perhaps be logical because managers had often been raised in the households of their landowner. They were trusted by the

owners—that's why it makes sense that there's a lack of oversight too. These two were likely close. So the manager and his relationship to the owner is important.

Then you have the outcome. This is a win, win, win. It's a win obviously for the manager. He gets his safety net, which motivated the whole thing in the first place. He wins. The debtors win too. They get the break on their debt. The owner gets a bit of a win too. Even though his business might suffer now, this can help in the future. It could pay big dividends for people who might want to do business with him. Or if these are internal debtors, those living on his land, that might motivate them to want to reap greater harvests for a kind owner. So, it helps his reputation too. So that's all contextual stuff, that makes sense.

But what about the part that doesn't? What about the part where our sinless, holy Lord is commending—or seemingly commending this behavior? Well, let's consider what he's actually saying? Is he telling people to go out and defraud their employers? He's actually not. He's not telling them to steal, he's not telling them to abuse those in authority over them. No, what does he say? **The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And 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.** Ok, but what does that mean?

It means that he's telling the disciples to look at how people use wealth to protect their own interests. How this manager was shrewd enough to manipulate the system of his master's wealth to make sure he was taken care of. This manager got these guys a good enough deal that he'll have people to live off of for a long time if need be. They'll be glad to see this shrewd man one after another. If he outstays his welcome in one place—and as a note hospitality was a really big thing in that culture. If he exhausted the hospitality of one, he had another place to go. And another. And another. Jesus is saying, look at how much shrewdness he was able to apply to that.

In our day, we could perhaps make the example of how we are wise about our earthly resources. Sometimes, to a fault we are good about taking care of ourselves materially speaking. How many of us in our day and place—and maybe even personally amongst the church—how many of us make sure we put our contribution to our 401k before we donate to the proclamation of the Gospel or to those who have no food? How many of us make sure we pay cable bills before we give to the Lord and His kingdom?

Or look at our reactions to the coronavirus. So many are terrified of the consequences of it. I want to be clear I am not advocating that we not wear masks, or

follow things that seem to aid in the care of our neighbor, protecting them from infection. But look at the fear that surrounds this all over. Where is our hope? Is our hope in the temporal or in the eternal? Christians, if we die starving to death, we have the eternal feast with our Lord. If we die at the hands of a virus—or even cancer or a heart attack, or whatever will finally be our end since it's inevitable—we have the promise of the resurrection of our very body. Is that our hope or not?!

Again, I'm not advocating that we be totally irresponsible. I have seen how making sure there is a savings for retirement can help care for the neighbor, or looking at things like social distancing, how it prevents the spread of a serious illness. But look at what our Lord is saying! Serve Him and His ends. Use even your earthly resources to do so.

As I say that about our hope, look even more at what He says: **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.** As he speaks of money there, I'm extrapolating that to the temporal versus the eternal, but it's true in either case. You can't serve two masters. You can't serve the earthly and eternal. Cling to one and despise the other.

To think of those words a bit, you will grab on, you will latch on to one for comfort, for hope, for security. The other one you will look down upon and despise. You will hold fast to one. You will concern yourself with it. You will cleave to it. The other you will not be concerned with. You will look down on it. You will regard it in an unseemly fashion.

Think about that in these terms. When you love money and cling to it, what happens when you hear your Lord telling you to be generous? On the one hand you probably feel guilty that you're not generous enough. At that point do you despise the money, or do you despise Jesus for telling you to give more away. Or what about time? How do you use time? When you hear the call to hear His Word to take time for prayer and devotion. Do you despise the lack of time you have, or despise the call to take limited time for something seemingly so impractical and ineffective—or maybe just seemingly boring. Or what about pleasures? Do you despise that Jesus calls you to not get drunk, or not commit adultery, or not partake in over-indulgence, or do you feel guilt about how you do?

It's very convicting, isn't it? It's convicting because of where our hearts should be, but where they aren't. I say that because the reality to all of those questions is probably mixed. Sometimes, I probably despise Jesus that He calls me to take time, to take money, to deny myself for the sake of His kingdom. Other times I feel guilt and shame for it. So what are we to do?

Well, as I have been talking about the context of the story, there's one thing I haven't emphasized. I've alluded to it, but haven't mentioned it outright. That's the mercy of the owner. The owner is merciful, and he likes that reputation. You can tell it. You can tell it because he's slow in taking the books back from the manager. You can tell it in that he doesn't pull back on the mercy that the manager shows the debtors. In fact, although it's not Jesus' direct point in the story—Jesus' direct point in the story is for us as Christians to use money to be generous to others that they would be willing to hear of the mercy of our Father in heaven—but the point could be extrapolated for us to trust in the mercy of God just as the manager trusted in the mercy of the landowner. He played this situation in such a way that he knew would work because of the owner's mercy. He knew the owner well, and he knew the result that would come.

How can we have hearts that aren't drawn away from the temporal concerns that can so easily wear us down—wear us down in the midst of viruses and economic concerns and political unrest? We can see that the things of this world are to be despised, and that we should use them as means to gather treasure where it really matters. We can see that the things now are only on loan from the One who made them in the first place. How can we have hearts that are drawn away from the temporal concerns? By having hearts that rely on the mercy of our Father in heaven who rightly owns everything.

And how do we have those hearts? When we hear of His mercy over and over and over. When we hear of how gracious He is to us. When we hear that He is the One who in Jesus could have enjoyed palaces and riches and feasts, but sacrificed that life that we could enjoy them eternally with Him. In other words, when we hear of the God who knew our selfishness, our inclinations to cling to the world despising Him, but despised all of that to cling to us. He clung to us even unto His death on the cross, rising again for our eternity.

Yes Christian, He has despised all of that to cling to you. And He clings to you as He absolves you. He clings to you as He baptized you, making you His own. He clings to you as He feeds you with the foretaste of that eternal feast in His body and blood. Cling to this One, this owner, this merciful one. Cling to Him and despise the world. Cling to Him in His mercy. Cling to Him and despise the temporal things that will pass away. Cling to Him because He clings to you. Amen.