

**+ Luke 16:1-13 + The Life of a Christian Is Characterized by Service +
+ Fourth Sunday after Pentecost + 20 June 2010 + Author: Peter Metzger +**

Our sermon text for this morning introduces us to a manager, a man who is described in no uncertain terms as dishonest, shrewd, unfaithful. And yet, at the end of the text we read of him being commended, certainly not for everything that he has done, but commended nonetheless. It begs the question, "What is it about this wicked servant that is worth commending?" And this is an especially relevant question for us since we find ourselves occupying the same position. We, as Christians, are often described in the Bible as being managers, stewards, people who live and work in a world that is not our own and who have to answer to a higher authority for our actions. You see, the life of a Christian is characterized by service on the one hand to his master and on the other, for his neighbor.

Before we look specifically at our text for today, let us first consider what Scripture has to say about management in general. In our lessons for today we've already heard a good deal of what God demands from servants as well as what he plans to do with them when calling them in to account for their actions. Our Old Testament reading for today speaks to God's memory. We read again verse seven of Amos chapter 8, "The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: 'I will never forget anything they have done.'" That is to say, the LORD is strict with his books. He doesn't allow for dishonesty. He won't stand for deception. He demands the managers of his creation, man himself, to be faithful, loving and honest with this, his world.

When his managers fail to accomplish this task, when they act in a way other than that prescribed for them, these men fall between the crosshairs of his mighty bow, as we read in Psalm 38; they feel the full force of his righteous anger. The whole psalm is an awesome image of the oppression of God's wrath upon those who have been unfaithful in service to him. "I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart." The Lord does not take service to him lightly.

Furthermore, our lesson for today plainly states, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." This is not a theme isolated to the Gospel of Luke. Throughout Scripture we read about God's jealousy when it comes to the loyalty that is owed to him. In Isaiah we read, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols."

Therefore, since God has described himself as a just and jealous God, we know that He is the one and only master we are to serve. He is the character corresponding to the master in our parable today. He is the one who will demand an accounting. He is the one who will either commend or condemn his servants. But notice how the master is depicted in our parable. In the face of the accusations against his manager, the master did not instantly fire him. He called him to account. He gave him a chance to own up to his actions.

Remember the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sinned God did not immediately destroy them, as their actions rightly deserved. No, he called out, "Where are you, Adam?" Rather than emphasizing his justice, God chose to emphasize his grace, by giving his beloved creation the chance to confess and repent for their sin. And even when they did not take advantage of this great grace of God, the Lord still granted them a time of grace on this earth to live out their lives, though they did not deserve to.

The master in today's parable exhibits much these same characteristics. Even though the firing of the servant seems inescapable, he still gives him time to make use of his position, to make things right not only for his master but also for himself. And when that time of grace was up, the master even went so far as to commend his servant for his shrewdness. What a gracious master, who would offer praise to a servant who has acted in such disservice to him!

But that is not the point of this parable. We'll discuss the reason for the master's commendation in a minute. Before we examine that, we must first look at the manager himself, to see what, if anything, might be worth a second glance.

The first qualifying characteristic for this manager, the very first bit of information given with which we might identify him, is that he was accused of "wasting his possessions." The sense of this word, "wasting," is the same as that of the previous chapter of Luke where we are told the story of the prodigal son. In the same way that the prodigal son "squandered" his possessions, our manager here "wasted his." It is not so much the sense of a willful or fraudulent crime, so much as a negligent mismanagement of goods, but it's a serious crime all the same.

This is what compelled the master to say "you cannot be manager any longer." This is what goes against verse 13, "No servant can serve two masters." The manager was evidently serving himself, satisfying his own selfish desires rather than using his gifts and talents to the best of his ability to serve his master. This, we already know, is something that will only earn the sharp, piercing arrows of the Lord's wrath.

But the manager doesn't stop there. While he still has the ability, he makes use of his master's possessions once again as if they were his own and establishes good relations for himself as a personal means of job security in the future. It almost seems as if this manager is completely unphased by the severity of his master's threat. We see in him no sense of contrition, repentance, no inclination toward making confession, taking a step toward correcting his wrong-doings, or making amends with his master. He is enslaved to the needs of his self-appointed master, himself.

Brothers and sisters, wake up! Our master is coming. He will demand an account. Will you be accused of mismanagement? Will you be found worshipping at the shrine of your own self-importance? Have you only sought to serve yourself with the bountiful blessings that God has bestowed upon you? When we take the means given to us, and spend them willy-nilly on the frail and fleeting things of this world, to what purpose are they spent? The Lord demands that they be spent in line with his will, which does include taking care of ourselves but is certainly not limited to that. Every time we spend these gifts with ourselves in mind, to keep up with the Jones, or to give in to our earthly desires, we elevate ourselves to the same self-appointed mastery and fall under the same inescapable threat of punishment that the dishonest manager from our parable did.

So then, the question remains, if we seek to serve our Lord with the blessings he's given us, how can we do so in a way that is in accord with his will? How can I stand confidently before the Lord when he calls me to account? Well, in light of what we've just discussed, we can say that the Christian servant can stand confidently when he knows that he has faithfully served his only master. However, in light of what our lesson for today continues to say beyond the condemnation of the manager, we can also say that the Christian servant can stand confidently when he knows that he has worked for the benefit of his neighbor.

We know by this point in the parable that the manager was dishonest and was promptly dismissed for his unfaithfulness. And yet, we still have that question from before, "Why did the master commend him?" Not only did the manager waste the possessions entrusted to him, but he went further and reduced the bills of his master's debtors. This move only benefited the manager. He gained a good reputation, while his master was kept from his rightful income. This is certainly not the source of commendation.

Look at the reaction of the master once again, "the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." Here we have it. The master, while still describing the manager as dishonest, commends his shrewdness, his savvy, his street-smarts, if you will, for the manager had made sure to make inroads with other people so that he would not be left in the lurch once he lost his job.

Sometimes, as Christians, and as Lutherans, we feel uncomfortable speaking well of shrewdness. And this thought is even captured in the text itself. Believers are called "the people of the light" who are not as often able to act with shrewdness with regards to their possessions. Rather shrewdness is often ascribed to the likes of the wicked and deceptive and self-serving. We see so many bad examples of "good business," that we're turned off to the idea of acting shrewdly ourselves. And yet, this is what the master commends. He commends in us an attitude of eagerly striving to get the most out of what has been entrusted to us.

The key is expressed in terms of perspective. Our savvy in handling our time, talents and gifts is to be directed toward eternal benefit. Luke writes, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Again, our possessions themselves, which wither and age and die, are not the focus of our attention, nor is the temporary ease provided by them. No, they are only a means to an end.

And we know full well what that end is, for we know what pleases God. He told us in our New Testament reading, 1 Timothy 2:3,4 "God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." This is our goal. This is the directive we are given when God makes us managers of his creation. Therefore, even though we often fail, even though we often lose sight of who our only master is, we are still left with the message, that will always remain, which we are to share with the world. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son."

When we are struggling with our own management we turn to the cross. There we find forgiveness for our selfishness. There we find relief from the oppression of God's wrath over our sin. There we find a message worth telling, a message that is worth using any means possible to share, so that we and those to whom we proclaim this message might be "welcomed into eternal dwellings."

That's what it's all about. Our lives are not commodities meant only for our own pleasure. Nor are we our own masters whom we serve without reservation. No. We are Christians. We serve God, our only master, directing our efforts according to his will, so that "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Amen.