

THE MERCIFUL RICH MAN

Luke 16:1-15

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 22, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 16, verses 1 through 15. It is on page 740 of the pew Bible. This parable is probably the most difficult of Jesus' parables, but that should not turn us off. Instead, it should inspire us to ponder, because what Jesus says is always good. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 16, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ 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. ² 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.' ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷ 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.' ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ "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. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? 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."

¹⁴ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵ 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."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

What do you do when you are caught? You're busted. You've done something wrong, you knew it was wrong, and you thought you would get away with it, but you didn't. You're busted, and you have no way out. And what if your life as you know it depended on your secret remaining a secret? Getting busted means you lose your job, your family, or your friends. Or you get kicked out of school. Or maybe you even go to prison. You did something, you got caught,

THE MERCIFUL RICH MAN (Luke 16:1-15)

and now justice is coming for you. What do you do? Hopefully, something like this will never happen to you. And I don't mean that I hope you don't get caught. Rather, I hope you never do anything that would have such severe consequences.

But every once in a while we are surprised when someone we think highly of gets caught in something like this. And it reminds us that even those who seem to be the best of us still have a depraved nature. And so we might not be as immune to scandal as we thought. And even if something like this never happens to us in our lifetime, what will we do when we stand before God, and the things we thought no one could ever know become exposed to the light.

Jesus tells a story about a bad man, who did a bad thing, and then did something illegal to cover it up. Sounds like a bad man, right? But in the end, things actually work out well for the bad man. That makes this parable a bit puzzling. But it gets even more puzzling when his master commends him, and Jesus tells his disciples to be more like this bad man who did a bad thing, followed by something illegal.

This is probably the most difficult of Jesus' parables. Anyone who claims to understand it completely is likely a bit arrogant. And I think most pastors would agree that this is the most difficult text in the entire three-year lectionary.

But this is one of the values of the lectionary. It forces us to wrestle with God's Word. And when we wrestle with it—when we actually work through it—we might actually find that difficult passages can be a real blessing. We might find something we didn't expect to find.

And this is one of the reasons Jesus used parables so often. They hid things from those who thought they were wise. Those who thought they were wise dismissed Jesus as a fool. But those who hungered for the Word of God wrestled with Jesus' words, and they found the blessing Jesus had for them there.

So let's try that. Let's wrestle with this parable. I hope you will join me. Let's pay attention to the details. And let's see where it takes us.

The first detail to recognize is that this parable is about God. It's not really about us and our behavior, though it does have instructions for us. The main character in the parable isn't really the wasteful manager; it's the rich man, and I'll explain how we come to that conclusion.

The vast majority of Jesus' parables are about God. Whenever there is an authority figure in a parable, and that authority figure is good, that person represents God. Whenever there is a master, a father, a king, a shepherd, a farmer, or a rich man, that character usually represents God.

And whoever gets mentioned first in the parable is usually the main character. This is just a basic feature of story-telling. When you tell your kids a bedtime story, and you start by saying, "There once was a charitable pirate named Happy Jack," it's probably a safe bet that the main character is going to be Happy Jack. And when Jesus says, "**There was a rich man who had a manager**" (16:1), we should recognize right away that the main character is the rich man, and this parable is going to have something to do with how he relates to the manager.

Most likely, the rich man owned a great deal of property. His debtors, then, would be his renters. He would rent land to them, and in exchange they would pay him a percentage of the crop. An olive farmer owes him a hundred measures of oil, which is about 875 gallons. And a wheat farmer owes him a hundred measures of wheat, which is about 1,100 bushels.

THE MERCIFUL RICH MAN (Luke 16:1-15)

The rich man did a lot of business like this, so he needed a manager to handle the books. But the manager turns out to be a shady fellow, and he was wasting the rich man's possessions. He must have been skimming off the top or embezzling or something like that. He was cheating the rich man. Eventually someone discovered what the manager was doing and told the rich man about it.

So the rich man called for his manager and said, **“What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.”** (16:2)

Now the manager doesn't argue with him. He knows he is burned. So he doesn't accuse people of slandering him. And he doesn't try to make excuses. He accepts his termination and goes back to his office to get the books.

The rich man was very merciful to even allow the unrighteous manager to do this. Typically, you would have the manager arrested. He's already done something illegal. And if the rich man had any common sense, he would not trust this *untrustworthy* manager to go and get the evidence that incriminates himself. These days, if you get fired, the boss has you turn in your keys or your badge, and if they have security, they call them to escort you out of the building. Even if they think you are a trustworthy person, they don't give you the chance to take advantage of them. So the rich man is giving the unrighteous manager an opportunity to pull one over on him. This is quite foolish, unless, of course, this is exactly what he wants.

So as the unrighteous manager goes to get the incriminating books, he considers what he will do to survive. He has gotten used to a desk job, so he's not strong enough for hard labor. He doesn't even consider another managerial position; no one will hire him now. The only other option is begging, but he's too proud for that.

But then he has a clever idea—something that will make people grateful to him. But we're not told yet what his plan is. We will have to watch as events unfold to see what this clever idea might be.

One by one he calls the rich man's debtors into his office. Now these debtors don't know he has been fired. So far, that's just between the rich man and the manager. This is an important detail. If they knew he had been fired, they would also know that he has no authority to change their debts. This is all illegal, but the debtors don't know that. Instead, they just think they're getting a break. This is really going to boost the reputation, both of the rich man and the manager. It's going to be the talk of the town. *The rich man is giving us all a break!* And the dishonest manager gets to deliver the good news.

And the manager has the debtors change the debts in their own hand. This is essential to his plan. The rich man has to see the new figures in *their* handwriting. If it's in the manager's handwriting, he might not believe he actually made these deals. Maybe he just tried to make it look that way. But when the rich man sees it in his debtors' handwriting, then he knows for certain that the word is out that he's giving everyone a break.

And the manager tells the debtors to do it quickly. Time is of the essence. He has to change all the debts and get the books back to the rich man before word gets out that he has been fired. If the rich man happens to mention it to just one person, the whole village will find out, and the manager's plan will be ruined.

So what's going to happen now when he takes the books back to the rich man? The rich man is going to look and see all these bills that have been discounted. And he's going to see them in the handwriting of his debtors, not his manager. And he's going to realize that this is the talk of

THE MERCIFUL RICH MAN (Luke 16:1-15)

the town. All the people must be talking about how he is *so gracious* and has such a nice manager.

So now the rich man has two options. He can expose the manager, revealing that all these discounts were unauthorized and therefore void. *Or* he can be generous and play along.

If he reveals that the manager had been fired and all the discounts were illegal, his debtors will be extremely disappointed. The celebratory mood of the village will take a big hit. He will be the bearer of bad news, and no one will be happy with him over it. He has every right to do it, but it's not consistent with his generous character.

So his other option is to play along. If he does this, all the villagers will be *happy*, and they will be grateful to him. At harvest time, the farmers will have feasts in his honor. They will all know his mercy and generosity. Sure; he'll lose some money, but he can afford that.

So these are the two options. And, of course, the rich man chooses the second. He chooses mercy. Instead of arresting the unrighteous manager and reversing all the discounts, he *commends* the scoundrel for his shrewdness. "Well played," he says. "Well played. You knew that I am generous, and you bet everything on it."

Now suppose the rich man chose justice instead of generosity. The unrighteous manager would be in worse shape than before. If he wasn't going to jail before, he certainly is now, and the cancelled debts would become his.

But the unrighteous manager knew the generosity of the rich man. That's why he played his cards the way he did. He knew that, given the option between wrath and mercy, the rich man would choose mercy every time. So the unrighteous manager played his cards right and bet on the rich man's generosity.

And I wonder if this is what the rich man wanted all along. He had every right to arrest the unrighteous manager at the very beginning. This would have been the prudent thing to do. But he decides to trust an untrustworthy person. He tips his hand. He reveals his mercy right away. The unrighteous manager may have played his cards right, but so did the rich man. He set himself up to be generous to his debtors, and merciful to his former manager.

And I think this is what the rich man wanted all along. In the typical fashion of Jesus' parables, the wealthy landowner is just trying to give away his wealth. He has the same character as the king who invites a bunch of random strangers to a feast, just because he wants it to be full. He has the same character as the owner of a vineyard who sends his only son to collect the rent, even though his son will be murdered in the process. He has the same character as the father who throws a welcome home feast for a son who wished him dead and wasted a third of his estate.

He wants to show himself generous to the poor villagers and merciful to the unrighteous manager. So he is actually pleased with the discounts the fired manager gave. He wants him to give his money away. Generosity is his defining characteristic, and it shines through brilliantly.

But one difficulty still remains. Why did the rich man commend the unrighteous manager? Yes, the manager was *clever*, but he was not *good*. His actions may have been *wise*, but they were still *bad*. He just piled dishonesty on top of wastefulness.

It's not the dishonesty that is commendable. He was commended because he was looking out for his future, and he knew who to bet it on. He knew to bet his future on the rich man's mercy. He knew that his own actions were unrighteous, and he could not reverse them. He knew that his only shot was the rich man's mercy. And that is what he bet his life on.

And this is the application Jesus makes from the parable. He says, "**The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light**" (16:8). That is, we

THE MERCIFUL RICH MAN (Luke 16:1-15)

tend to put a lot of brain energy into securing our *temporal* security, but not so much into *eternal* things. Wisdom is wasted on things that fade away, while little thought is given to what comes next. This is really the opposite of wisdom. This is foolishness.

We keep our résumés up to date. We plan for retirement. We look for the best deals on houses, cars, and insurance. We do all these various things to ensure our temporal security. And there is nothing really wrong with this. But Jesus says that all these things will fail (16:9). It's not "if," but "when." And we don't have to look very hard to see that he is right. In the end, nothing we do will keep our cars from rusting out, or our houses from falling apart, or our bodies from shutting down and dying. And just like the unrighteous manager, you don't get to keep your job forever either. Nothing we see will remain. When all these things fail, the only thing left will be God's mercy. And if God's mercy is the only thing that will remain and bring us through whatever comes our way, then we should do the same thing the unrighteous manager did: Bet everything on God's mercy.

This doesn't mean that we use our temporal goods to earn God's mercy. God's mercy can't be bought. That's why we call it "mercy." But when we realize that God is merciful—that this is his unchanging character—it changes the way we handle the temporal gifts we have been given to manage.

When we realize—as the unrighteous manager did—that everything we have is fading fast, and our only hope is God's mercy, then we are free to take whatever we have and give it away. We are free to let it go out and accomplish something for someone else.

Worldly wealth isn't bad. It's actually a good thing, but sometimes it might do more good for someone else. So we are free to use it wisely, instead of selfishly, because we have God's mercy, and that's not going away.

This is who God is. He is generous and merciful. To the poor, he shows himself generous. To the wasteful, he shows himself merciful. To the unrighteous and dishonest, he *still* shows himself merciful. This is the character of God. This is the same God who gave us his Son to be beaten, abused, and killed—all so that he might have mercy on us. When everything around you fails or is taken away, one thing remains: God's mercy. It is given to those who do not deserve it. It is unchanging. It is the one thing you can trust in. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.