

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13

The Merciful Master and His Shrewd Manager

What's been your favourite fairy tale? What was it that grabbed your attention? Were you fascinated to watch the bad guy in action being eventually defeated by the hero of the story? Just as in real life, fairy tales contain bad guys as well as good ones. What fascinates us, I think, is the conflict between good and evil, with the hope that good will triumph.

The stories Jesus tells are not simply nice ones with only nice people in them. Rather, Jesus tells stories true to life with people of questionable character, like we find in real life. Our Lord tells us stories with the kinds of people we hear about each day, in order to grasp our attention. Have you been let down by someone you trusted? It's a painful experience, isn't it? Life isn't always a rose garden. Jesus doesn't depict life as better or worse than it is. Today's parable has all the marks of something that really happened.

In the parable which Jesus tells us just before this one, the parable of the Prodigal Son, after wasting his father's property, his son returns home and throws himself on his father's mercy, just as in today's parable the wasteful manager throws himself on his master's mercy. This morning's parable is about more than the wasteful use of someone else's property. Its focus is rather on showing mercy on someone who doesn't deserve it.

Having hit rock-bottom, the bad manager acts with amazing decisiveness and shrewdness to secure his future. It isn't his dishonesty that's commended, but rather, his shrewdness in using whatever opportunity is available to him to secure his future and make friends with those indebted to him. The fact that Jesus shares this parable with us is an act of grace and mercy. It invites us, yes even urges us, to prepare for our eternal future while we still can.

We have an advantage the wasteful manager didn't have – as those who listen to and treasure Jesus our Saviour, and live in the light of the good news He brings us, our future is assured. Jesus reassures us: **“My sheep hear My voice. I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of My hand (John 10:27-28).”** The wasteful manager doesn't reap what he sowed or get what he deserved. Grace, which God

freely bestows on us, is God treating us so much better than we could ever deserve! Never forget that!

This parable is all about the amazing mercy of the manager's merciful master who doesn't punish or throw his wasteful manager into prison. The manager backs his whole future on his master's reputation for showing mercy. By sacrificing his own commission, he invests in friendship, realising that to have friends that welcome you and care for you is much more important than being wealthy. He now realises that other people aren't for our exploitation and personal advancement.

As soon as his master calls him to account, he doesn't waste time on self-pity or trying to defend his actions. Instead, he maintains a cool head in the crisis and promptly does all he can to secure his future. "I have decided what to do so that when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes (v4)." Already he can see the welcome mats being laid down for him. While he still has the finance books, he will alter the accounts so that both he and his master will be commended by the debtors.

He now invites the debtors to alter in their own hand, the figures on the contracts he has access to, thus lessening their debt. The debtors will now be indebted to him. His shrewd insight is that he sees that the solution to a good future must come from outside. His entire plan is based on the assumption that his master is an honourable person who will respond again with mercy, as he has done in the past. The manager must act in haste in order that the debtors will think that the diminishing of their debts have come from the master's mercy rather than the manager's desperation to save his own skin. For the master to now repudiate these alterations would reveal him as mean and hard-hearted. To maintain his good reputation, the master can do nothing but endorse his manager's actions. His master now commends his manager's shrewdness, rather than the morality of his actions.

What's more, Jesus suggests that we, His followers, can learn from worldly men like this manager; how to wisely prepare for our eternal future. Jesus says, "**The people of this world are much more shrewd in handling their affairs than the people who belong to the Light (v8).**" This means we're to love God with our minds as well as our hearts, and use all our intelligence and wisdom to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven. We're to use our brains to reflect on the meaning of life and death, time and eternity. Jesus' parables are brain-teasers that hold a mirror to ourselves, so that we're aware if we're avoiding thinking about life's most important questions in a flurry of secular activity. The better we understand the deep questions of our Christian faith, the more it will motivate us to grow in love for our Creator and eagerness to help others.

Jesus wants us to be as passionate and enthusiastic about the practice of our faith in God as the non-religious men and women around us are about their sport, their

hobbies and entertainment activities. We learn from them about dedication and commitment. The non-religious folk around us often make huge sacrifices to achieve their earthly goals. How much more shouldn't we do the same for something that will last forever? In the face of all the good things that God has in store for those who love God, there can be no room for a half-hearted faith. Instead of just possessing a faith in God, we want a faith that posses us, hook, line and sinker!

This week, God is giving you another chance, another opportunity to put God first, to love God above all things and discover the great and unexpected blessings that flow from doing so. When Jesus says, **“No servant can serve two masters; for a servant will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth”**, He is stating the First Commandment in different words. Treasure God above everything else because your God treasures you so much more than you could imagine.

This morning's parable doesn't threaten; it encourages. Here's someone without hope who has got himself into an unholy pickle. If he's so shrewd in dealing with his own interest, how much more reason have you, **“the people of the Light”**, to draw the consequence of the happy situation into which your Lord Jesus has placed you. Your interests are looked after. Your future is assured. You have the best possible hope.

God isn't going to sack you! God will not let you down although you may have let God down. Your life is in loving hands and your God surrounds you with His protecting and supporting hands. Since Jesus Christ died for you, that's assured. Your future is good. How much more reason have you to act and live discovering the joys of God's life! You don't have to compete with others anymore. You don't have to be afraid of dying anymore, for you have God's life now. Your life is worthwhile now. You needn't act as if the weight of the whole world is resting on your shoulders. Because of the mercies of the Lord that are new every day, you are worth a great deal more in God's sight than your non-Christian neighbours and friends could ever have an inkling of.

“Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favour; today is the day to be saved! (2 Corinthians 6:2)” Don't delay! Embrace God's grace and mercy today. For **“according to God's great mercy, we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance that is imperishable (1 Peter 1:3-4).”**

We thank God for that. Amen.