

Text: Luke 16:1-10

Who Is The Faithful One?

Who is the One who is faithful? The one who attends the Divine Service every week? The one who joyfully gives his offerings to the church? The one who is always putting his neighbor first and serving him with gladness? Yes that would be a faithful steward of God's gifts, but who really does all that all the time?

On the face of it, this parable commends a hired hand for acting dishonestly to save his own hide. Unless we understand what is going on around this parable we walk away from it thinking it is a lesson on dealing with our own finances and investments. Ah hah we think, if we can win friends and influence people at any cost we can feather a heavenly nest. But as always, if in reading the Scripture all we get out of it is what we have to do to gain access to our heavenly home, we leave ourselves on the outside looking in.

Jesus has turned from addressing the Pharisees and is speaking to His disciples as he tells this strange parable of the "steward of unrighteousness." However, we also must remember that the Pharisees are still present, listening in as Jesus teaches His disciples. But this parable is one of those difficult and cloudy texts—purposefully so. And when we face such a piece of Scripture, the rule for right interpretation and understanding is to look to other parts of Scripture that are clear.

As Jesus himself warns the Pharisees on another occasion, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

Luke indicates earlier in his gospel, that Jesus is now at a point in his ministry where He clearly is heading to Calvary and needs to prepare His disciples for that day. So, in this parable Jesus is teaching His disciples, preparing them for His death on the cross and His subsequent departure. His resurrection and ascension will leave them in charge of proclaiming and spreading the message of the kingdom of heaven. He does this with parables so that hearing, the Pharisees will not understand, because they do not recognize Him as the Christ, who by His crucifixion is THE key to understanding all of Scripture -- and therefore, also this parable.

Let's take a closer look at the story Jesus tells. Rather than getting all caught up in the details in the middle, focus on the beginning and the end of the story. It is at the beginning and the end that we see what is truly happening and why.

The parable begins: ""There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions." The word "charges," or accusation, is very important here for two reasons.

1. Nowhere in the parable do the charges become fact born out by evidence.
2. The person or persons making the charges are never revealed.

The word for "accusation" in the Greek is "diabollo," the same word from which we get the devil's name. Satan was our accuser before the throne of God until Jesus ascended victorious to cast Him out of heaven, and throughout His ministry the Pharisees were Christ's accusers. Keep this thought in mind, we will come back to it shortly.

Now, let us take a quick look at how Jesus closes the parable: the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Here the Greek word so often translated "shrewd" is perhaps better understood by us as "prudent" or even "wise."

What was so prudent and wise about the steward's actions toward the debtors? It could only be the forgiving of their debts. Here is the nugget of the story. It prepares the disciples for what is to come. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where He will suffer and die on the cross to forgive the debts of a sinful world that owes the Master, the Lord, their whole lives. It is the same nugget that leaves the Pharisees shaking their heads and leads to their being the agents for Christ's death.

These Pharisees were continually trying to trap Jesus, accusing Him of sinning against the Scriptures and blaspheming God and His name. Eventually they succeeded in making their accusations stick--at least in the realm of this unrighteous world. The result was that the only righteous one among us was slain on a cursed tree to bear the unrighteousness of those He came to serve. Jesus, the very Son of God who knew no sin became sin for us so that He could pay the price and wipe out all our debt of sin. He gave his life for us who owe our very lives and all we have to our heavenly Father.

On the cross, Jesus the Christ, became the steward of unrighteousness--that is, the one who managed our sin and bore its consequences for us--begged His Father, the master of the estate, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

He paid our debts, delivering us from sin and bondage to the accuser. Having done so, He is received up into heaven where He has prepared a place for us to live with Him forever. And having completed His task of clearing away the slate of our debt, He sends us forth as His forgiven people to deliver that forgiveness to others that they may know all accusations the evil one brings against them have been wiped clean as well.

Jesus, the steward of our unrighteousness, makes us stewards of His righteousness. What a great Gospel lesson and parable this is to help us better understand our own stewardship issues as well. We usually look at stewardship as what we do with our stuff. Meetings become forums to ask, "Where will we get the money?" "How are we going to get more people to help us make the budget?" "How can we spend less to preserve our resources?" Or "Now that we have a large bequest, what shall we do with it?"

Dear friends, these are the wrong questions to ask. Just as the steward of unrighteousness had nothing that has not been given to him by the master, that is, the Father in heaven, we have nothing that truly belongs to us that has not been given us by God to manage for the sake of our neighbor—our spouse, children, relatives, friends, fellow church members, and the needy of the community in which we live.

Stewardship is not a matter of our raising funds, or luring more people into the doors, or how frugal we can be with our resources. As the parable of the talents shows, it is about taking what we ALL have been given--some more, some less--and using it for God's purposes without fear of it running out. For the One who is faithful has given us all things and has all things to give.

Never think of stewardship as a sacrifice for God. For we have nothing of our own to sacrifice. We give, whether it be the treasures of this world or the grace of the kingdom of heaven, what has been given to us.

This is what Jesus has in mind when He exhorts us to, "... go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

All of us baptized children of God are first of all His stewards of righteousness. In God's mercy we have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven and are sent out to

bring more people into the kingdom of our Lord. We are first of all stewards of the means of grace, the Word and the Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins that bestows the mercy of God on all who hear and believe. And secondarily we are stewards of unrighteous mammon, the riches of this world by which we ensure the means of grace have a home, a person to administer them, and the means to take them out into the world.

We pray in The Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer as taken from Matthew 6:12: And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. What does this mean? "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us."

We forgive because we have been forgiven first by the steward of our unrighteous sin and debt, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. He alone is the One who is faithful. He alone is the one who attends the Divine Service every week. He alone is the one who joyfully gives his offering of grace and love to the church. He alone is the one who is always putting his neighbor first and serving him with gladness. And yet, He is never alone. For wherever He goes He takes you and all His baptized whom the Holy Spirit makes faithful to be with Him by forgiving our sins and giving us the name of the One Who Is Faithful.