

"I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses" ST. LUKE 16. 4.

Desperate. That's how today's Gospel's "unrighteous steward" felt. I'm sure it's a feeling we can relate to. Caught outside on a sweltering, 40-degree day without shade, we get desperate for shade and water. Hungry after not eating for many hours, we get desperate for food and may resort to stealing or scrounging to get the sustenance we need. I had a squirrel get into my house this week; it was trapped, scared, and was looking pretty desperate, too. It would probably have done anything just to get back outside again. I'm sure many of us know what it feels like to be desperate in one way or another, and to varying degrees. And, it's quite possible that some of us are very familiar with the steward's desperateness about losing his job.

This story, though, is a rather perplexing one. Let me break it down a bit. Jesus begins by telling this parable to those gathered to listen to him. A rich man had a manager (the steward) who he had hired to manage all his wealth and affairs. Word got back to the rich man that his manager was mishandling his wealth and duties, and the rich man fired him. The manager, now told he was being fired, was in a panic. He could not do manual labour, and he was ashamed to beg, so how would he survive? He decided that before word got out that he was fired, he would do favours to each of the rich man's debtors, so that they would find favour with him, and he could continue to work with them. He summoned the debtors one at a time and reduced their debts that were owed to the rich man. It appeared that he was cutting them bargains, and they would be pleased with him. The rich man caught wind of this and applauded the manager for his cleverness. This all makes sense in context, but what is perplexing is that Jesus sounds to be endorsing this kind of behaviour.

You may be hearing in this story about the cunning manager, or the unrighteous steward, that you have to be crafty and deceptive. That is not the message. What is the message, though, is that to an extent, the "children of light" need to be able to use the things of the world to secure themselves places in heaven. This sounds confusing.

Let us briefly step away from this and think about something different. Picture this: one of the classic scenes from our culture's comedy – be it TV, movies, or comic strips – is that when somebody dies, they are suddenly standing on a cloud before the Pearly Gates of Heaven with St. Peter as the doorkeeper. Everyone is standing in a line, and one-by-one names are called up to see whether you have been judged worthy of entering heaven or whether you'll be sent to the other place – the place of eternal torment. St. Peter looks up and says to this character, sorry pal, down you go. And the character suddenly has a flashback of all the ways they could have been better to avoid this judgement. If given the chance, knowing that they would be sent to the place of eternal torment, would they have acted differently, or done different things?

This is not much different than the story of the steward. The steward knew that he was being let go, so did whatever he could to try and sweeten the deal. At least if he was being fired, he could still have some work and clients to fall back on. He would repay the rich man what he owed and lessen the debt of the debtors. He was preparing for the next stage of his life the best way he knew how and was making the arrangements himself.

Some people might ask: well, wasn't the manager stealing from the rich man by lessening the debt? Some commentators¹ contend that this was not the case, as the manager was a middle-man who would mark up the price for their own profit. In this case, the manager was sacrificing his own cut of the profits in order to appease both the rich man and the debtors.

The late Nova Scotian theologian Robert Crouse wrote that this prudence, this "matter of good practical sense" was what this Gospel was all about:

"The point is simply this: worldly people, such as the unrighteous steward, have a certain practical wisdom in the pursuit of worldly ends. The unrighteous steward wasted no time when the crisis came, and used all his worldly skill to save himself from disaster, and prepare a comfortable place for himself.

*The lesson Jesus is teaching in telling this parable is simply this: As worldly people -- "the children of this age" -- are prudent in doing what is necessary to attain their worldly ends, so should "the children of light" be prudent in doing what is necessary to attain "everlasting habitations". The unrighteous steward used worldly goods -- "the mammon of unrighteousness" -- to provide himself with a worldly refuge. The children of light must use their worldly goods, which must finally fail, in such a way as to prepare for their everlasting habitation. The lesson is this -- Christian wisdom, Christian prudence, will use this world's goods for everlasting spiritual ends."*²

As is often the case, Jesus pleads with those who are following to listen to him to give up their worldly possessions. To give to those less fortunate, and to lessen their own attachment to money and goods. Being generous and not greedy is a blessing both to you and to those you give to. If you can be faithful in the littlest of things, Jesus says, then you can be faithful in the greater things. If you are unrighteous in the least of things, you are likely also unrighteous in the bigger things. How then, can we expect to be righteous at the Last Judgement at the pearly gates of Heaven if we were not first righteous in our lives on a regular basis?

St. Paul writes in today's Epistle that we should not be idolators, we should worship and put our faith in God only, and nothing else. We shouldn't place our faith in our worldly goods, but in God himself who is the maker and provider of all things. We are trapped all the time by idols in our lives: our cell phones, our TVs, money, housework, the list goes on. In reality, *anything* that takes our attention away from God is an idol, and we are surrounded by them. St. Augustine, the early Church theologian believed that to unlock Scripture, "The key is to love God as the perfect goal and end, and then to love all else as means."³

We want to follow Jesus and be found right before him at the Last Day. We want to love God as the perfect goal, and not be allowed to stray into the wilderness and fall under the power of idols. How do we do this? How do we love God the most? St. Paul tells us that one of the ways is through participation in the Holy Communion: partaking in the bread and the cup.

As we have been hearing week after week through this Trinity season, we must love God and pray for the ability to live according to his will. Jesus tells us that we cannot serve two masters of God and money. Let us, therefore, choose to serve God as our master and ask for his release from the idolatry of money and worldly goods as Jesus asks us.

¹ For example, see Walter L. Liefeld, "[Luke](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 987.

² Robert Crouse, "Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity" (Lectionary Central)

³ W.J. Hankey, "The Ninth Sunday after Trinity" (Lectionary Central)