

Luke 16:1-13

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Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods." 2 "So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' 3 "Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 'I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' 5 "So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So 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?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8 "So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. 9 "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. 10 "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? 12 "And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

When's the last time you juggled? My sons like to bring me 2-3 objects every now and then to ask if I can juggle them. And I do so, and for that short period of time I'm the coolest person in the world in their eyes. Of course, what they don't realize is that juggling isn't too difficult. I'd imagine most people can juggle two balls, and when you throw in a third, it's harder, but still manageable for many people. It's when you try to use four or five objects that things really start to fall apart.

Maybe you haven't juggled like that any time recently, but I know you all juggle in other ways. You juggle roles and responsibilities. Jobs, grandkids, your own children, cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking, church, Bible class, the list goes on and on of things that we all juggle every day. And these are all blessings from the Lord, truly, but I think we all know from experience, that when we add forever more and more responsibilities that we have to juggle, that's when things start to fall apart.

With this same idea in mind, Jesus gives us the parable of the unjust steward. He's addressing this tendency of ours to spread ourselves thin, of trying to juggle too much, but He's not talking about our different responsibilities. No, Jesus is teaching us about spreading ourselves thin by trying to serve multiple gods—that is, who or what we serve most in our hearts. And in this case, it doesn't take three or four or five, no, Jesus says you can't even serve two different gods without it all crashing down. **"You cannot serve God and mammon."** Everything that Jesus tells us in our text today revolves around that truth. And so, our sermon theme is: **Serve God, Not Mammon (For God Serves You).**

Now, I imagine that when I was reading this parable just a few moments ago, you were feeling like I was feeling as I started studying this text, which was: confused. You have this steward, a man who handles his master's finances, and he's been found guilty of **"wasting his [master's] goods."** That same verb is used in the previous chapter of Luke to describe the actions of the prodigal son. Of

course, you know that son went out with his inheritance and wasted it all. The difference here is that this steward is wasting money that doesn't belong to him. It's his master's money, and he's been throwing it around on parties and fun with friends, just tossing it in the wind. And he's been caught! He's facing this existential crisis, **"What shall I do,"** he asks himself. The lifestyle which he's grown accustomed to by spending someone else's money is about to dry up, and he has nothing to fall back on. So, what does he do? **"I have resolved what to do,"** he said, **"that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses."**⁵ **"So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'"**⁶ **"And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So 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?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'"**

The people he's dealing with don't know that he's about to be fired, but he's going to them with what remaining authority he has and slashing their debts. He's saving them tens of thousands of dollars in today's money. The result will be that when he's put out of his position, he can go to those same people with whom he's gained favor, and they'll feel bad for him! "He was such a nice guy, how could he be fired?" And so, they'll open their doors to him.

And then the master finds out, and he **"commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly."** And that's a head-scratcher. But he's not praising him for stealing his money, he's complimenting his faithless steward for being shrewd, for being clever. This unjust steward was facing that existential crisis, **"What shall I do?"** And he was very shrewd, very wise in securing his future.

Now, one of the confusing aspects of this parable is that typically when Jesus tells a parable involving a master, that master represents God. And then the other characters in the story represent us or the Pharisees or something like that. Not the case here. This is simply a story to express the idea that when you are facing an existential crisis, **"What shall I do?"**—that it's important to act wisely. And I wonder, would *our* Master, God, the Judge of all, would He commend us for being wise with our resources like the master of the parable was to the unjust steward?

Jesus gives us the answer: **"For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light."** A couple weeks ago, in Bible class, we discussed how this particular Greek word translated "generation" has a rather wide sense to it, much wider than just a time period as we think of when we hear the word generation. Really, it would be better to understand Jesus as saying, **"The sons of this world (or, unbelievers) are wiser in their own dealings than the sons of light (or, believers) are in their own dealings."** What are the unique dealings of unbelievers and believers? Well, unbelievers have only to live for this world, and they tend to be very wise and clever in building up their lives in this world. Believers are living for the next world, eyes focused on heaven, and we are not very wise in how we approach that.

You see, this unjust steward was facing a giant dilemma—the world as he knew it was about to end. **"What shall I do?"** So, he turned wholeheartedly to the only god he knew, money. And he dealt very shrewdly in building up the one thing he cared about—his physical well-being. We *also* are facing a dilemma—the world *itself* will be coming to an end. Everything we have in this life is temporary,

heaven is our home, we're just strangers here. Knowing that this world will end, we might ask, ***"What shall I do?"*** And a good answer would be to turn wholeheartedly to the things that really matter: church, Bible study, personal Bible reading, supporting mission work, inviting friends and family to church. That's the type of thing Jesus is referring to when He says, ***"Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home."*** Use the time and energy and money and resources that you have not to build up a better life here, but keeping your eyes focused on heaven use your resources now for the Lord, for eternity.

Do we do that? Or as we look towards heaven, are we trying to stand in two different camps? Do we turn wholeheartedly to our God just as the steward did to his, or do we spread ourselves thin between two different gods? It's easy to tell if you are, you just have to ask yourself some questions. "Is it hard for me to give an offering sometimes when I feel like I need the money for other things?" "Am I more worried about my soul's salvation, and for that matter, the salvation of those around me, or am I more worried about the outcome of the playoff game?" "Am I satisfied with what God has given me, or do I find myself always wanting more?"

This is why unbelievers tend to be much more shrewd in their own dealings than we are in ours, because they have their focus only in one direction. They can pour all of their time and energy for that one thing, for that one god. And as we love and trust our money and our time and our stuff as much, if not more than we love and trust our God, we are stuck trying to juggle multiple gods. And Jesus says, ***"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."***

I don't know if you looked at the cover of our bulletin this morning and wondered why I chose that image for the background. I didn't choose it because I wanted a nice looking picture with nice colors. I was looking specifically for a photo with two boats in the water. Any rational person, wanting to get across that lake, would hop in the first boat and start rowing. But what we try to do is get in both boats at the same time. We try to navigate through life with one foot in one boat and one foot in the other, serving God while also serving mammon, and we convince ourselves, "I can make it if I'm careful." What do you think would happen if a person tried to cross this lake like that?

Jesus says in verse 10, ***"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much."*** That's easy to understand. In an ideal situation, if you get hired at an entry level position in a company, and you're given small tasks and are faithful in them, eventually you are given more important tasks and more important roles. Theoretically, if you do a poor job in those more minor roles, then you'll not be given the more important jobs. And now we have to ask ourselves, have we been faithful in what is least? Have we been faithful in the very minor, temporary things that God has given us in this life? I know the answer for me, and then I also know Jesus is talking directly to me when He says, ***"Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"*** If I have not been faithful with temporary blessings, then why would God give me the true riches, the eternal blessings? If I have not been faithful in the things which God has entrusted to me, then why would God write my name in the book of life, reserving a spot for me in heaven? These are hard words. This entire text is the

strongest of law. And that's intentional. Jesus asks us these searching questions so that we reach this moment of existential crisis, so that we finally ask, ***"How can I be saved? What shall I do?"***

Again, we come back to the boats on the lake. There we are, feet firmly planted, one with mammon, one with God. With Jesus' difficult words, it's as if Jesus is slowly pushing those boats apart so that we can do nothing but fall. ***"You cannot serve God and mammon."*** The boats start to drift apart. ***"If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"*** He pushes them further and further. ***"If you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"*** He pushes them even further still, and we've reached our breaking point. And we fall. ***"What shall I do?"***

And then, like He did with Peter, Jesus reaches down as we sink and grabs us, and He says, ***"I will."*** ***"You have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"*** Jesus looks at you and says, ***"I will."*** ***"You have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"*** Again, Your Savior looks at you, and answers: ***"I will."*** It defies all logic! That Jesus would be willing to show this love to you and me when we don't reciprocate that love, and yet He says, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."***

Though we are weak, trying to serve two gods, Jesus catches us when we fall. ***"What shall I do?"*** we ask. Jesus says, ***"Let me do it for you."*** And in His undeserved love, Jesus is wholehearted in His service to you. He gave up everything for you. Though we struggle to give our best to God, He gave up everything to become one of us. Though we have not been faithful in what is little, He was faithful even to the point of death on the cross. ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."*** (2 Corinthians 8:9) This is how God answers those questions. God is willing to catch you, willing to serve you, willing to forgive you your idolatry, willing to give you eternal riches beyond measure. He is willing and has done so for you.

Martin Luther once wrote, ***"If a farmer, a townsman, a merchant, this woman and that maid are able to serve the devil with such diligence and allow no drudgery to weary them, why should I, too, not be willing to serve my Lord, whom I am to enjoy forever, in like manner? Why am I so sluggish and sleepy that God must drag me by the hair to [serve Him]. Why, I ought to spit at myself for not even crawling to heaven while those folk rush and run to hell the way they do."*** I see the same is true of myself, and you likely see the same truth in your life as well. Our great ineptitude at serving the Lord *should* disqualify us from heaven! But it doesn't, because the blood of our Savior is much greater than even this sin. God forgives you; and now true, spiritual, eternal treasures are *yours* in Christ Jesus.

And along with those eternal treasures, God also gives you mammon. Not just your money, but every resource that you have in this life. May the Lord help us to willingly part with it all: our time, our money, our energy—dedicating it all to the Lord for the work of His Kingdom. That alone will remain, which means that we remain the Children of Light. May God grant it to us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.