

Forgive Us Our Debts

9/18/22

SJN

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

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle lesson where we hear these words once more: "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... 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. I have decided what to do... so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'... (And) the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness." (Luke 16:1, 3-4, 8a) This is the Word of the Lord.

On the surface, today's parable in Luke's Gospel text commends a hired hand for acting dishonestly... in order to save his own hide. And unless we understand what is going on around this parable... one is likely to walk away from it thinking it is a lesson on dealing with finances and investments in this world in order to win friends and influence people... for the sake of the kingdom and some heavenly reward.

But as always, beloved... when reading the Scripture and hearing the Word of God... if all we get out of it is what we have to do... we leave ourselves on the outside of heaven's window looking in... So what is really going on here?

The context of the reading has Jesus turning away from addressing the Pharisees to now speaking to His disciples... as he tells the tale of the parable of the "steward of unrighteousness." However... we must also remember that the Pharisees are still present... listening in... as Jesus teaches His disciples... catechizing them.

But this parable, friends... is one of those difficult and cloudy texts... but purposefully so. So 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."
John 5:39-40

Likewise... let us remember that earlier in chapter 9 of His Gospel Luke indicates a point in Jesus ministry where He clearly is heading to Calvary and needs to prepare His disciples for that day yet to come.

"Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him (Jesus) to be received up... that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face . . . to prepare for Him. "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives... but to save them." Luke 9:51- 56

Now... getting back to the setting of the parable... we have Jesus catechizing His disciples - preparing them for His death on the cross - and His subsequent departure... which will leave them in charge of proclaiming and spreading the message of the kingdom of heaven. And so He does this with a parable so that in hearing it... 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... the key to this parable.

Finally... also keep in mind how Jesus concludes His little explanation of the parable to the disciples – again - with the Pharisees listening in... You cannot serve God... and money. All of this being said... surely Jesus has the stewardship of a far greater currency in mind.

So, let's take a little closer look at the story Jesus tells. For today, though... rather than getting all caught up in the details in the middle... I'd like to focus on the beginning and the end of the story... for 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.

First... Nowhere in the parable do the charges become fact borne out by evidence.

Second... The person - or persons - making the charges... are never revealed.

The word for "accusation" here is the same word from which we get the devil's name. to slander... falsely accuse. 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.

For now... let us take a quick look at how Jesus closes the parable Luke writes: "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness.

Here the word so often translated "shrewd" is better perhaps understood by us as "prudent"... or even "wise." It is something the opposite of a euphemism - an ironic, even sarcastic term Jesus employs... because in the eyes of the Pharisees... Jesus was the dishonest one - claiming to be the Son of God - yet eating with tax collectors and sinners.

What was so prudent - so wise - about the steward's actions toward the debtors? It could only be... the forgiving... of their debts. And here is the nugget of the story, brothers and sisters... that prepares the disciples for what is to come... that journey to Jerusalem to which Jesus had steadfastly set His face... that He might be received up on the cross... to forgive the debts of a sinful world... that owes the Master - the Lord God Almighty - their very 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. And 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 and was falsely accused - became sin for us so that He could pay the price... and wipe out all our debt before His father... the rich man and Lord of Heaven to whom we all owe our very lives and all that we have.

On the cross... Jesus the Christ became THE steward of unrighteousness. For our sake he made him to be sin... who knew no sin... so that in him WE might become the righteousness of God. [2 Corinthians 5:21] In essence... Jesus managed the unrighteousness of our sin... and bore its consequences for us. He 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 this: that all accusations the evil one brings against them... have been wiped clean as well.

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 and house 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 second of all... we are stewards of unrighteous mammon - the riches of this world - by which we ensure that the means of grace have... a home... a called servant of the Word - or 2 - to administer them... and the means to take them out into the world.

That we may be faithful stewards and set our faces to the cross with Jesus, the disciples, the prophets and all the saints... our Lord catechizes us to be disciples as well.

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."

And that is because we, beloved... have been forgiven first... by the steward of our unrighteous sin and debt... Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord... who in His grace, love and mercy... has given us the name that we bear upon ourselves... and as we go into the world - the name of the Father... and of the Son... and of the Holy Spirit. Praise and thank God... that He forgives us... our debts... that we too... may forgive others. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.