

Luke 16:1–9 [10–13]
9th Sun. after Trinity
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
August 6, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,” Jesus tells us in Matthew 10, “so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt 10:16). Oftentimes we’ll consider the second part, the innocent as doves part, and recognize that a Christian ought to be gentle and not cause too much of a stir. For many, it’s easy to be as innocent as doves, to keep our mouths shut and let things unfold as they will, according to God’s will. But the first part, to “be wise as serpents,” can be a bit trickier. To be as “wise as serpents” means we have to think like the enemy. We have to think like the dragon, that ancient serpent, also called Satan or the Devil.

From the beginning of the Bible on, serpents aren’t exactly considered in a positive light. It was in the form of a serpent that the Devil tempted Adam and Eve to fall into sin: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.” “Crafty” here could just as well be translated as “shrewd,” or “clever.” As a serpent can squirm into and out of any situation, so can a shrewd person handle almost any situation. When Jesus says to be as wise as serpents, He is *not* saying to be as wicked as serpents. He’s saying to use that wisdom, or that cleverness, not for evil, but for good. And that’s exactly what Jesus is telling us in today’s parable as well: “The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.” So “make friends for yourself by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into eternal dwellings.” Be clever, not for evil, but for good.

The parable of the dishonest manager, as the heading in the ESV translation has it, is perhaps the most perplexing of our Lord's parables. If your focus in this parable is only on the manager's dishonesty, then it can be difficult to understand. This parable is not teaching us the best way to make a comeback after losing everything in a shady business deal. The manager in the parable broke the seventh commandment. He stole from his employer by wasting his employer's possessions in the first place, and then by canceling debts he had no right to cancel. And so the dishonest manager would be held to account. But if we focus on the dishonesty of this manager, we'll miss the point Jesus is making.

The older way of referring to this parable is "the parable of the *shrewd* manager." That is, the parable of the clever, or wise, manager. When you understand that Jesus is not commending the manager's dishonesty, but his wisdom, then the parable makes much more sense. Martin Luther says this would be like encouraging someone to watch, pray, and study by saying: "Look here, murderers and thieves wake at night to rob and steal, why then do you not wake to pray and study?" The example is not in the crime but in the diligence. The point is not to imitate the steward in his dishonesty but in his cleverness, in his shrewdness. If the sons of this world are clever in attaining their goals, how much more ought Christians be clever in attaining their goals. The worldly-minded seek after wealth in this life. They want ever more possessions and income and are prepared to deal in dishonest ways to achieve that end. Or they do honest work, but only so they can live it up, go on a nice vacation once a year, have a nest egg to retire on, and then die as happy as can be. The worldly-minded always have a final goal in mind and they order their life accordingly.

So what about Christians? Jesus says: "the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." The worldly-minded tend to put Christians to

shame in their clever tactics to attain a certain goal. The children of this world, the crass unbelievers, show great skill in their personal interactions. Politicians, businessmen, high-ranking officers, rulers, and the wealthy in this life oftentimes understand better than most the practical wisdom of goal-setting. They know that a secure earthly future depends on how you treat people today. Successful people float to the top and stay there because they have learned how to organize, how to pay attention to people, and how to invest wisely. They understand good business tactics, how to handle finances, and how to navigate all circumstances. The sons of this world have a goal in mind and they stick to it.

But the point of this parable is not to teach you lessons you can find in any self-help book or leadership development course. The point of this parable is that God wants you to seek eternal goods with the same eagerness and resourcefulness as you see the children of this world seeking after temporal goods. If even the unbelievers can use their resources wisely to achieve their ends, how much more can we Christians, who have an eternal reward awaiting us? The shrewd manager used his wits so that he would have somewhere to live after he was fired for his mismanagement. His focus was on his earthly future. But Jesus wants us to focus on the eternal dwellings, our life in the world to come, our heavenly future. Jesus is saying to manage the gifts God has given you in this life with a view to life eternal.

So how do we do that? How do we live our lives here with our eyes fixed on the goal, on eternal life in the world to come? The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: “let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1b-2). So for starters, we focus on Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.

Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:8–9). As God, Jesus literally had everything. All things, whether in heaven or on earth, visible or invisible, all things were created through Him and for Him (Col 1:16).

Yet He did not count equality with God a thing to be held onto. Jesus was willing to forego his divine rights by making Himself nothing, taking upon Himself the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of sinful men (Phil 2:6–7). The Son of God gave up everything by becoming man that He might offer up His life for the sin of the world, for your sin. He kept His eyes on the goal, the joy set before Him: your salvation and the salvation of the world. As a shrewd manager, Jesus took the debt you owe and He forgave it not just by half or by eighty percent, but completely and entirely. And as God He had that right. Jesus wasn't fudging the numbers when He forgave your sins at the cross. He paid the entire price on your behalf, in full, with His very life. Focus on Jesus and on what He did for you, and everything else will start to fall into place.

As the sons of this world put all their time and energy into achieving their ultimate goals, so ought a Christian focus all time and energy into attaining eternal life, no matter the expense in this life. We are to set our minds on the things of God, not the things of man (Matt 16:23), the things that are above, not the things that are on earth (Colossians 3:2). What then are the things of God? The means He has given to create and sustain faith. Seek not the bread that perishes but the bread of God's Word. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. Treasure it for what it is: the words of eternal life. Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ. So stay in the Word of God, where the Holy Spirit is working to sustain your faith and to prepare you for eternity. Confess your sins, publicly and privately, and receive the Absolution, the forgiveness of sins, publicly and privately. Come to the Lord's Supper with repentant hearts, seeking the

forgiveness of sins that comes in eating our Lord's body in the bread and drinking our Lord's blood in the wine. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation, now and forever. Many people, even in the church, think they have little or no time to attend to God's Word and Sacraments. Many people become lazy and negligent in dealing with the things of God, but you, dear Christians, have tasted and seen that the LORD is good, so diligently focus on continuing to receive the good gifts God has prepared for you.

Jesus continues: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." The earthly goods God has given you can have an eternal impact. The unrighteous wealth of this life is connected to the eternal dwellings of heaven. When Jesus calls wealth "unrighteous," He means that all our material blessings on this side of Heaven are tainted with sin. Our financial resources are tainted by sin because we are tainted by sin. Just as the days are evil, but we can redeem the time, so can we redeem our unrighteous wealth by using it for righteous purposes. We can use the wisdom and the resources God has given us in this life to further God's Kingdom, to feed the hungry and clothe the poor, to advance the Gospel in all the world. We can use the time God has given us in this life to study His Word and proclaim that Word to others.

You are a steward of the things God has given you, so use those resources shrewdly, with all wisdom and self-control, not selfishly but for God's purposes. Focus your attention in faith on Jesus Christ and the goal of eternal life, that when everything in this life fails, you will still have all things in Him. Then you, too, will hear those words of Christ as you enter into His eternal glory: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt 25:21). In the name of Jesus, Amen.