

## Trinity 9

August 1, 2021

Luke 16:1-13

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today we heard the parable of the unjust steward. Permit me to let you in on a bit of secret; not everyone loves this teaching of Jesus.

But, before we get too far into things, let's briefly define what is meant by an "unjust steward."

To be unjust is the opposite of being just – to be unjust is to act contrary to what is right, a crooked way.

When we think of a steward or read and hear the Gospel today, our first thought is probably money! The steward was bad with money.

The Greek word for steward is οἰκονόμος. So the construct of οἰκονόμος is really two words, οἶκος, meaning house, home, or estate. And νόμος, denoting law, rule, authority. So a steward is placed or given authority to rule or management of a home, estate, or even today, a business.

The steward in today's Gospel provided oversight of the rich man's goods or possessions. The debtors owed things like oil and wheat. This was commerce, but these were also needful things for life.

Many, if not all of us, have some sort of steward in our lives. We all manage our homes. Parents are stewards of their children and the aspects of their lives. Some of us rely on family members to oversee our affairs and finances as we increase in age. Others employ people to manage estates or businesses. Yet, pastors are also included in Scripture as stewards - the apostle Paul writes, pastors, are "*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*" (1 Corinthians 4:1)

In all of our vocations, we have been entrusted with the responsibility of stewardship. We are called to be honest, just, and wise with the people, possessions, and faith entrusted to our care.

I recently finished a biography on the former president of the United States of America and wartime Civil War General, Ulysses S. Grant. He was a magnificent soldier and general. His presidency, like most presidents, may be open to debate. But when it came to business ventures, he wasn't the greatest.

After Grant's presidency, his son persuaded him to join a Wall Street investment firm. Grant did so, and initially, everything was great – he trusted his smooth-talking, slick Wall Street business partner to manage the affairs of the firm in an honorable manner. Grant trusted him so much, he urged family and friends to do the same, and many of them also invested their money and inheritance.

However, things turned sour for the firm; it turns out this business partner was not as honest or just as Grant had believed. In fact, things came crashing down; Grant was told they just needed \$150,000 to save everything.

So, to save the whole ordeal, Grant humbly approached and asked the American businessman, William Vanderbilt, to see if he could get a loan to save the firm. Vanderbilt graciously gave Grant the money, but it wasn't enough to keep the venture.

Unknown to Grant, the whole endeavor was a sham, a Ponzi scheme that lacked the securities needed to protect the investments and investors. In the end, Grant was left with nothing. His family took a punch to the gut, and their lavish lifestyle was taken from them. The relationships, the friends, and the family Grant led into this investment venture were left tattered and torn.

Compelled to do what an honorable and just man would do, Grant returned to Vanderbilt, hoping to pay him back as much as he could. Vanderbilt could have taken everything from Grant and left him homeless. But in the end, Vanderbilt turned out to be a shrewd and caring man. He took the title of Grant's home but permitted Grant and his family to live in the house until his death. A death that would be closer than first thought as he was diagnosed with throat cancer. A death that further threatened the wellbeing of Grant's wife and family due to their new lot in life – they are an image of the Rich Man and Lazarus at the end of Luke chapter 16 – they went from enjoying the parties and high social status to being Lazarus, humble and downtrodden.

You may never experience anything like President Grant's misfortunes. But then again, maybe you will. We are all placed into vocations and positions as stewards in this life, even the youngest among us. If you have possessions or have been given possessions, you are a steward.

Do children eat the food placed before them or push it away, toss it to the ground, and throw a fit? Do parents see their children as gifts from God, giving their care to raise in wisdom and virtue, or are they a means to an end? Is the Church a place where you come to receive the forgiveness and salvation promised in Christ Jesus, or is it a place for unholy business and the affairs of this world to take place?

The story of President Grant also teaches us that while our focus is often solely on the monetary aspect of stewardship, when unjust stewardship takes place – it penetrates into all aspects of life – the possessions of the world, the body, and our faith.

Possessions and mammon are not evil in themselves. They are gifts from God. However, when riches, homes, land, food, or the needs of daily life become our focus and idol, we are led into sin. It is then that these things become unrighteous mammon.

Our health, our vision, and hearing, wife, and children are all gifts for us to care for throughout this life. And yet, we must guard against the allure of this faithless world – protecting our family from the assaults that wish to lead us to misuse our time and energies, permitting the devils of this world access into our homes.

God created you as body and soul – the two are inseparable. He gave you reason and intellect, wisdom, shrewdness, and an ability to suffer all in this life – even if it means you would have to dig trenches as the steward today in the Gospel says he could not do or one day beg as a poor Lazarus. But this is a portrait of the Christian life, is it not?

You are to be content with what God has entrusted to your care. If it is to manage money, then do it wisely. If it is to teach, do it with patience and joy. If you have been given to lead, then lead with charity and by being just. In these ways, you are diggers, tilling the soil of faith through your places of stewardship.

And by all means, don't be ashamed to beg before God. It is recorded that Martin Luther's final words of this life were, "*We are all beggars, this is true.*"

Why is it we are beggars in this life? Because we are unjust and in need of God's mercy. The Collect of the Day begins to reveal this aspect of the Gospel as we prayed, *“Let Your merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of Your humble servants.”*

A servant serves. A servant must till the earth through the callings they have been given from above. They are also ones who beg, and this begging leads us to God's mercy.

Remember earlier I said pastors are *“stewards of the mysteries of God?”* In the broad sense, this mystery is the Gospel. To the unbeliever, the Gospel remains hidden in the foolishness of the cross. And yet, to those who have faith, the Gospel forgives, restores, and nurtures the hope of the resurrection to come. And in a more narrow sense, begging leads you to confession and absolution. Thus, the pastor is a steward of the means of grace located in Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper – the locations Christ has promised to be present for you and reveals His great love for you and gives you life and salvation.

Being a steward goes beyond finances and commerce. Stewardship reflects the One who entrusts you with all the possessions and goods of this life. You will never be stewards of God's gifts as you are supposed to be. The math and accounting will never be in your favor. For this, you are led to the cross where your Savior has paid your debts to the fullest degree.

So be generous in all your dealings of this life, with people, goods, and with the mammon of this world – *“do good and distribute,”* trusting that God will care for you and bring you into an everlasting home with Lazarus and all the faithful beggars that look to the mercy of Christ Jesus. +INJ+

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.*

Rev. Noah J. Rogness  
Associate Pastor, Immanuel Evangelical-Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA