

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

Today in our Gospel, Jesus delivers a very odd and very challenging parable about the shrewdness of a dishonest servant. This parable may leave us at first glance, scratching our heads and searching for a clear path to righteousness because this is how we usually interpret parables. But in this parable before us today, there is no easy line that can be drawn that will separate *US* the righteous ones *from THEM* the sinners. I have said it before and I will say it again, I love parables! And this is why I love this parable because we cannot draw a divisive conclusion about this parable based on our assumed self-righteousness and *everybody else's* sins.

Let me explain what I mean about the divisive lines we draw from our self-righteousness in order to separate them from us. We all know the story of the Good Samaritan who helped the man who was beaten and robbed and laying naked by the roadside. We look at this parable and we quickly conclude that the lowly Samaritan who helped the beaten man is the hero and the others who passed him by are the villains. We then see ourselves as the Samaritan because we have done some things we assume are “nice” or we have done this or that and what we have done is very similar to this scenario within this parable. By this, we then conclude that God loves the Samaritan and will condemn the priest and the Levite who passed the beaten man by. And of course, anyone or anything that does not agree with us or our way thinking and living is placed into that priest or Levite category who we assume God will condemn. But how many of us really are like this Samaritan?

Think about this story in our own context, how many times have we stopped and helped someone on a dark city street or helped someone broken down along the side of a desolate road as we rushed to get to our appointment or event that we are already late for? The reality of this parable about the Good Samaritan is that we are just like the priest and the Levite who safely and cautiously pass by the beaten man. But here is the power of the parable. It teaches us to ask ourselves...if I am either the priest or the Levite, is there grace for me because I certainly cannot obtain it by myself in my cautious selfishness...nor can I earn it with my righteousness simply because I have helped that man who has been beaten and robbed. In the end, the priest, the Levite, and us, are all children of this age...children who have scurried by the wounded person, children who are beaten, broken, and vulnerable and laying by the side of the road of this life in our own selfishness, our caution, our wounded brokenness, and our fear. We are all children of this age who are in need of grace that comes to us through a Samaritan we know as Jesus Christ and lifts us out of our injured and broken situation, makes us a child of the light by taking us to that place where there is healing and comfort.

But today's parable has us struggling to draw our divisive lines because Jesus has already done that for us in this parable. We can only resolve our confusion about this parable today by saying, Jesus can't be serious in telling this story, can he? Surely, he must have told this parable with a wink and a nudge. But Jesus delivers a parable that leaves us with no easy way to draw sides but at the same time, we are not left without grace and forgiveness.

And like the divisive lines we draw within parables, we generally conclude that if the story has a master, a rich landowner, or a gardener of some sort, this character is God. Well, in today's parable

that is before us, we have a rich man or a rich landowner who we may NOT want to assume to be God...but is God. And if God is the rich man in this parable, is God then commending the thievery of a lazy, dishonest manager? Where now, do we draw our divisive lines that separates us in our self-righteousness from those sinful others? Since we cannot do this, Jesus does it for us today, God or wealth...what will you serve? And when it comes down to it...whether we like it or not...we serve wealth.

I know some will take offense to this, but this is nothing new. We hear it today in our first reading. Amos in ancient Israel is crying out against greed and corruption in the government and the marketplace. And still today that same kind of corruption and greed is the cause of so many problems in our world – poverty, illness, wars, injustice. We all fall into the trap in one way or another. And as we seek out the moral high ground within the parable that is before us today, Jesus cleverly reminds us nonetheless that, we love our money more than we love God and our neighbors. Again, are we willing to risk helping someone we find wounded by not only helping them medically, but also, then paying their medical expenses as the Samaritan paid the inn keeper. Which do we honestly serve, God or wealth?

Like it or not, we are tempted by money and live under the influence of wealth and we see the effects of greed all around us. But as I have experienced in the past few weeks when visiting folks in the hospital, I saw clearly that the money we so love will not buy us another day on this earth nor will it buy any of us better health. But it seems to be that when we are confronted with our own mortality, we then begin to see things more important than money. The things we notice when we are confronted with our own mortality is that life is not about money lost or gained, it's now a question of love and faith, such as...have I done enough or do I have enough...faith?

So perhaps we ought to change the paradigm in which we try to understand this parable before us today. May we then think in terms of faith and grace and NOT money and wealth. Perhaps in a paradigm of faith and grace we may begin to see a clearer picture. Let's begin by being brutally honest: We are not very nice people, you or I. We lie, we steal, we deceive and take advantage of other people. In short, we sin. Yet thanks be to God, there is Good News.

God, just like the rich man today, has sent His shrewd manager, Jesus Christ. A shrewd manager who takes advantage of the rich man's *wealthy grace* by extending mercy to us all by easing our debts...debts of our sins that we can never repay in full.

Today this parable shows us that WE cannot use God's teachings to divide, rather the parable shows us that there is something in the heart of God that enables God to love not just good people which we are not – but also the sinners who we are. This parable has no real clear-cut righteousness to claim, but we learn that we are all cheating the rich landowner by accepting the grace that the “dishonest manager” – Jesus Christ gives to us all. Like it or not, at the heart of this parable is grace being given to all...not just to us...but to all who owe as much as we do, and...by any means in which it can be given. This is what makes us uneasy about this challenging parable...we learn that all are cheating the rich man by what the shrewd manager does for us all.

With this in mind, perhaps it would serve us well NOT to attempt to understand this parable by starting with ourselves, our prejudices, our dislikes, and our paradigms such as money and wealth,

but to try to think from a perspective of faith and grace that all are given freely. But what we are uncomfortable with in this parable is that it shows us that, you and I are sinners and we...like all those we point our fingers at...are the ones who are indebted to the master. Within this parable, Jesus brings to light our distrust in God's grace by making it very apparent that if we don't believe there is forgiveness of the debts of those we don't like, then we probably don't believe in forgiveness at all.

Whether we like it or not, the Good News is this, God through Jesus Christ loves sinners...or debtors, and he died for sinners...or debtors, and has promised a kingdom to sinners, or debtors. This is something that we will never know nor figure out, this is something that does not fit into our mortal paradigms, but this is the heart of God that enables God to love not just good people – which we are not – but also, the sinners or debtors like us.

This parable today is difficult to hear and to understand because it is the story of ALL PEOPLE...all debtors. Jesus cleverly shows us today in this parable how humanity works and how it steps on each other to elevate ourselves. Yet as much as we attempt to incorporate our judgment into this parable, or use it to point our finger at others, this story says nothing about condemnation, it says nothing about LOSING our salvation...it just points out that our debts are eased by a shrewd manager who goes to great lengths to seek out our friendship when he is let go. May we then forgive our debtors as our debts are forgiven.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*