

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus was a master storyteller, but that doesn't mean that Jesus' stories are easy to understand. In perhaps the most famous of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Sower, the disciples didn't understand the meaning. They asked Jesus to explain. Happily Jesus did. But Jesus also explained that the reason he told the stories was so that "*seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*" (Matt. 13:13).

The parable that Jesus tells in today's gospel is certainly not easy to understand. Scholar Kenneth Bailey noted that "this parable is the most difficult of all the synoptic parables" (Kenneth E. Bailey. *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Combined edition)). Scholars have been debating its meaning through the centuries. Bailey noted that "the problems are so complex that both" 16th century Cardinal Cajetan, one of Luther's opponents, and 20th century German scholar "Rudolf Bultmann declared them insoluble."

That doesn't sound promising for today's sermon. It rather makes one wish that the disciples had asked Jesus to explain this parable to us. They did not, and Jesus didn't supply the easy answer. Indeed, from a cursory reading of the parable, it certainly seems as if Jesus is commending dishonesty—that would be a difficult thing to accept. In fact, that cannot be. So what is Jesus teaching here? I'll have to rely on others more erudite than I to help us discover the meaning of this parable.

Now Jesus seems to speak this parable right on the heels of the three parables in chapter 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin (which you heard about last Sunday) and the prodigal (or lost) son. δὲ καὶ Luke writes — "and also," meaning this is what came next. Moreover, since those parables were spoken in response to the Pharisees' grumbling about Jesus receiving tax collectors and sinners and eating with them, this one likely, too, addresses their grumbling.

This parable, however, is spoken expressly to the disciples with the Pharisees listening in. This parable, therefore, it seems to me, moves the focus from the manifest sinners to the Pharisees. "*The Pharisees ... were [the] lovers of money.*" The Pharisees along with the other Jewish leaders were the ones given a stewardship of the people of God, and they were the ones squandering it to enrich themselves.

The parable goes like this: There was a rich man who had a manager, a dishonest manager, who had been squandering his master's possessions. The master caught wind of it and called the manager to account for his management. "*Bring in the books,*" he said, as he fired the manager.

The manager went away thinking about what he might do to survive, but he must have known that worse things could have been in store for him if the master had wanted it. He could have been arrested and thrown into jail for his stealing. “*What shall I do?*” he asked himself. “*I know,*” he said. And we hear how he engaged in a bit more dishonesty ... so it looks.

He had to act quickly before anyone knew that he was no longer the manager. He called in one of the master’s debtors. “*How much do you owe?*” “*A hundred measures of oil.*” “*Quickly ... write fifty.*” He called in another. “*How much do you owe?*” “*A hundred measures of wheat.*” “*Write eighty.*”

The manager brought the books in to the master. The master looked at them and commended the manager ... for his dishonesty? That’s the way it sounds to western ears, but not to the Oriental, says Bailey. No, not commended for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness, his wise judgment, to trust in the goodness and mercy of the master. The master could have thrown the manager into prison; he didn’t. Perhaps he won’t again, the manager thought, especially as this move brought glory and praise to the master. His trust was well founded.

How much more so when applied to our God. Bailey applies it this way: “If this dishonest steward solved his problem by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help you in your crisis when you trust his mercy.”

Of course, the sinner’s crisis is his own sin, that is, our sin, our unrighteousness! But, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love is our God (Joel 2:13). Showing sinners mercy is what God does; it expresses His nature. Showing mercy, giving life, saving sinners is God’s proper work. This is what we heard last week from St. Paul: “*that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost*” (1 Tim. 1:15).

To be sure, punishing sin is also God’s work. God hates sin—trampling on the needy, mistreating the poor, taking advantage of the poor and needy, dealing deceitfully with them—“*Surely I will never forget any of their deeds,*” says the Lord through the prophet. But God’s work of punishment Luther called God’s alien work.

God’s proper work is mercy and grace, again as we heard from St. Paul last week: “*I received mercy ..., and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus*” (1 Tim. 1:13-14). Again, our forgiveness and life and salvation are God’s proper work — because of the ransom price Christ paid on the cross. God desires the salvation of all people, as St. Paul says in our epistle today. Christ came to save sinners, not just tax collectors and manifest

sinner, but the Pharisees also, “*kings and all who are in high positions*” also, indeed all people.

Therefore, our trust, too, is well founded when it is placed in our Lord, for we have been given a stewardship also. We have been given time and talents and treasures to manage; we have been given a message to proclaim. But how often do we mismanage them. How often have we done things that we know are wrong and failed to do the things we know are right? How often have we remained silent when we should have confessed Christ before men and set before others our merciful Lord, our “*one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*”?

One day, we too will be called to an accounting of our stewardship. The books will be opened (Rev. 20:12). Shall you stand there with trepidation knowing your mismanagement of the Lord’s things? Or will you stand there with confidence, trusting in the Lord’s mercy? Will you place your trust in unrighteous mammon or in the God whose proper work is our salvation?

God grant to you, who by Holy Baptism have been called out of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9) and been made “*sons of light,*” that you will continue to walk in the light by faith, and that you will let your light so shine before men in good and faithful works, that others will give glory to the Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Be about the tasks that the Lord has given you. And knowing your failures and mismanagement, seek not to justify yourselves, but trust in the Lord and His mercy with all your heart, soul, and strength.

Friends, not your labors nor your begging nor your unrighteous mammon will avail you on the day of your accounting. So, be quick and be shrewd. Now is the time to trust in Jesus and His word, to trust in His mercy, His sacrifice, His forgiveness for you, so that when the things of this world fail—as they will—He will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Lord, grant this faithfulness to Your people, in the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.