

Sermon for Trinity 9

The sermon is on the appointed Gospel reading, from St. Luke 16:1-9.

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

When David, the anointed King over Israel, blessed the Lord before all Israel, he acknowledged that every earthly blessing is that which the Lord has granted:

“Blessed are You, LORD God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness,

The power and the glory,

The victory and the majesty;

For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours;

Yours is the kingdom, O LORD,

And You are exalted as head over all.

Both riches and honor come from You,

And You reign over all.

In Your hand is power and might;

In Your hand it is to make great

And to give strength to all. (1 Chr. 29)

Power, wealth, and victory in battle are among the blessings which the Lord bestows, according to His holy will. The Lord orders all things in heaven and earth; it is thus that St. Paul instructs the Church in 1 Timothy 2: “*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*” The Christian is mindful that the Lord orders all things in heaven and earth, and therefore he prays that the Lord would bless His Church through this ordering, so that we might have the circumstances which are favorable to Christian piety—that is, to godliness.

The world, however, does not acknowledge the Lord as the source of these (and all other) blessings, and so there is discord and contention because of the violent contention for standing in the world. We do not need to look at the ordering of nations to see the disorder in the hearts of men; we can look at one steward.

The Lord spoke concerning the rich man and his steward right after He concludes the parable of the Prodigal Son. This makes for an interesting juxtaposition of stewardship. The prodigal son had asked for, and received, his portion of the inheritance—even though his father was very much alive. And he then proceeded to spend that wealth prodigally. And then Jesus said, “*But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.*” (15:14-16) Where there had been riches, there was now an appalling poverty. But the poverty was for the good in this son, for it led him to repentance: “*But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’”*” (v. 17-19) In his heart, the son acknowledged his sin, and sought to remain in his father’s household, even if it was as a servant.

When we hear of the rich man and his steward, a very different thing happens. Once again, there is an account of transgression: *“There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’”* There had been a report of wrongdoing—a wasting of the rich man’s goods—by the steward. The ledgers would be opened, and an account would be made of the steward’s exercise of his stewardship. The outcome seems to be expected beyond doubt that the man would be stripped of his stewardship.

Confronted with his sin, the steward—like the Prodigal Son—has an internal dialog regarding the course of action which he should now undertake: *“Then the steward said within himself, ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.’”*

Unlike the Prodigal Son, the steward is too proud to be a servant; he cannot dig; he is ashamed to beg. He cannot work the earth, and he cannot bring himself to live off the charity of others. Where the plight of the son had led him to *repentance*, the plight of the steward led him to *scheme*: *“So he called every one of his master’s debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ So he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ So he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.”*

The commentators have a great deal to say about what transpired here. But what we need to understand is that the steward was prepared to manipulate the rich man’s ledgers for his own benefit. And the master commends the *“unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly.”* There is no repentance here; there is only the tactics of the world: the relentless pursuit of worldly goals, *“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.”*

It should go without saying that there is no virtue in the steward’s actions. The point is that the world knows to act like the world. The goals of the sons of this world are set on the things of this world; they do not think of the things of the Triune God and do not have their hope in eternal life. Their entire concern is centered on controlling the things of this fallen world, and they commend one another for the total commitment to the pursuit of such goals. This isn’t just a matter of the accumulation of worldly ‘things’—it’s about having worldly *ends*. The ideologist who has no interest in personal gain, but wants to reorder the world toward a ‘more just’ society, or distribution of wealth or power, and is prepared to do ‘whatever is necessary’ in the pursuit of such an ideological goal, is a son of this world as surely as the seemingly soulless industrialist who doesn’t care who or what is hurt by his pursuit of wealth and power. They’re the same thing: sons of this world pursuing the goals of this world.

Why did the Lord speak to the Church concerning the rich man and his unjust steward? Because of the confusion in the minds of the sons of light. *“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.”* And it is thus that the Lord spoke the words which follow: *“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”*

And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (v. 9–13)

The contrast is clear. The unjust steward served mammon—money—as his true master. His end is eternal condemnation, because he is a fool who lives for the things of this world. But his actions are consistent with his view of the world. The unjust steward, and all who are like him, think nothing of eternal life and the just judgment of the Lord of heaven and earth. They fight and squabble for the trash of this fallen world and commend one another for their success in amassing it.

The Christian should see the disposition of the mammon as an opportunity to confess the faith—they are to be faithful in the disposition of unrighteousness mammon as testimony to their faith. Thus, what the Lord teaches here is in keeping with His words from the Sermon on the Mount: *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Mat. 6:19–21) Again: *“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* (Mat. 6:31–34)

But we need to hear these things again and again because the natural inclination of our flesh is to be drawn to the love of the things of this world. This is why St. Paul warns us in the Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 10: *“Therefore let him who things he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”* The terrible judgments which befell the people of Israel when they strayed from the faith are a warning to the Church to beware of temptations; again, in St. Paul's words: *“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the end of the ages have come.”* We are called repent of our worldly-mindedness.

It is thus that the Collect directs us to godly prayer: *“Let Thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of Thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please Thee”*. Our prayer, in faith, is two-fold: that the Lord would hear our prayer, and that we would pray aright, not fretting for the things of this world, but praying for that which the Lord has promised. As Jesus declared in Luke 11: *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”* We thus pray, in faith, that the Lord would guide and direct us by the Holy Spirit, who instructs us through the Word of Holy Scripture, to those things which are God-pleasing. As we know, we cannot by our own reason or strengthen believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with His gifts, and sanctifies and keeps us in the one true faith.

It is the Holy Spirit who guides us to repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, who paid for our sins through the shedding of His blood for us. It is the Holy Spirit who creates faith in us to believe that Jesus Christ is God in flesh, who loves us, and desires that all men would be saved through faith in Him. It is the Holy Spirit who grants us faith to believe that which is proclaimed to us: that Christ Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will

descend on the last day to gather His Church to be with Him forever in the life of the world to come. Our faith fixed on Christ, we see the mammon of this world as something to be used in service of the Lord, and count ourselves blessed in that we know Him who has saved us, and who has delivered us out of death and condemnation. Amen.