

SERMON NOTES

Fourth Sunday of Great Lent
The Steward

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 16:1-31

ACT WISELY!

INTRODUCTION

Luke, in the chapters preceding our reading, has been tracing the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, where crucifixion awaited Him. Along the way, our Lord taught the crowds that followed and congregated to listen to Him. The crowd was composed on the one hand of those who reacted positively to Jesus: His disciples, other would be disciples from the common people, and the outcast sinners. On the other hand, many of the ruling group who disapproved of Jesus gathered to listen as well.

Luke includes various teachings of Jesus punctuated by illustrative parables. A pattern of Jesus addressing first one group and then the other can be seen. In the last chapter (15), Jesus had addressed the muttering Pharisees who criticized His reception of outcast sinners.

In the second half of our present reading, He again addressed the scoffing Pharisees. Their hypocritical attitude toward the Law led to a selfish use of possessions. Such a life results in the horrors of Hell. But first, He had a teaching for His disciples on the positive use of possessions. This positive use is based on their love and faithfulness to God that results in being received into heaven. He began by telling the disciples the “Parable of the Unjust Steward.”

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 16:1-31

*Now He was also saying to the disciples,
“There was a certain rich man who had a
steward, and this steward was reported to
him as squandering his possessions. And 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.’*

*And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall
I do, since my master is taking the
stewardship away from me? I am not strong*

enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.'

And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And 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?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and write eighty.'

And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore, you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly

esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.'

But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'

And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house – for I

have five brothers – that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ But Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’

But he said, ‘No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

NOTES

Now He was also saying to the disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had a steward,

It was a practice for wealthy men to employ a manager for their business affairs. The manager, or steward, had complete control and made decisions and contracts regarding sales and acquisitions. The steward could make a commission from his dealings.

Sometimes the steward was a slave. Mismanagement could then result in death. In this parable, the steward is obviously a free man and so was only fired.

and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And 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.’

The term “reported” sometimes carries the idea of accusing out of malice.

φωνεω is here translated *to call*, but another nuance is to *speak loudly, to shout*. Shouted seems to fit this occasion—the rich man actually shouted at the steward.

The same Greek word διασκοπίζω (literally: to scatter) translated squandered was used in the last parable Jesus told to the Pharisees. There, the younger son had squandered his inheritance he had obtained from his father. When that was completely gone, the son thought of how he might survive by going back to his father as a hired man. But because of his true repentance and his father’s love, the young man was received back into his parent’s home as a son.

In the present parable, the steward has been reported to the rich man as having squandered his possessions. We assume that it is the rich man’s possessions that have been squandered, but the Greek reads literally: “as one who has scattered his possessions.” If it is his *own* possessions the man has squandered, the rich man would not want someone who cannot manage his own possessions in charge of the business. Either way, the steward was fired.

The rich man demands that the steward bring in his accounting books.

Like the younger son in the previous parable, the steward thinks of his survival.

And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am

ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.’

The steward assessed his options: working as a common laborer or begging. Both were discarded choices. Suddenly he hit upon an idea that would assure him of a place to live.

Who are “they”?

And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors,

”They” we may now assume are the rich man’s debtors.

and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And 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?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’

Until the steward turned over his accounting books, he was still in charge of the estate. According to general practice, the bill often included the steward’s commission.¹ He may have called in the debtors to agree on a new bill without the commission.² If this is what he did, with their knowledge, the rich man’s debtors were now separately the steward’s unsecured debtors as well. Thus they “owed” him hospitality, but nothing more in a legal sense.

The amounts of oil and wheat are very large, and so, it seems the debtors may have been merchants, and the rich man’s business quite extensive.

And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly.

Why was the steward called “unrighteous”?

This is an interpretation of *οικονόμον της αδικίας*, *steward of unrighteousness*. Below, in verse 9, “unrighteous mammon” is a translation of *μαμωνά της αδικίας*, which means literally *mammon (wealth) of unrighteousness*. An adjectival form of *αδίκω* is used in verse 11 in contrast to “true.” The idea being: “If you have not been faithful in the use of false wealth—wealth that is undependable and will utterly fail—who will entrust the true (wealth) to you?” Perhaps then in this context, we should not understand the steward to be an *unjust* steward, but rather a *false* or *undependable* steward, in the sense that he could no longer be trusted to do what was best for his master. (However, the translation *unjust* is appropriate if one sees the transactions with the debtors as dishonest. Another possibility: He was not a true steward of even his own possessions—he had squandered them.

If the steward was simply undependable, his employer was not praising the steward for a crooked scheme, but for an ingenious idea to ingratiate himself with the debtors.

for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985) p. 1097.

²² A reduction of commission is undocumented elsewhere.

the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

This is seen as a comment on the master's reaction to the steward's scheme. As a man of the world, having similar values, the master could understand and admire the quick thinking to provide for oneself. Those who have been enlightened by divine revelation are not as wise in this respect.

Jesus followed this comment with a command. There is emphasis on the pronoun **I**. **He** commanded that his disciples should exchange false wealth for true friends.

It in the phrase “when *it* fails” could refer to the false riches or *it* could refer to one's life on this earth. Neither false wealth, nor physical life, is permanent and will eventually fail but the disciples' proper attitude with respect to the choice between false riches and God will secure their future reception by their friends in “the eternal tents.”

“Make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness,” could be better translated: “Gain friends for yourselves (in exchange) for the mammon of unrighteousness.” In other words, make your choice: choose the *friends* instead of the earthly wealth.³

In Luke 16:9, Jesus is commanding His disciples that they exchange what is false (riches) for what is permanent and eternal (God and His friends).

“The eternal tents” seems to be a subtle reference to their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who were devoted to the LORD. While on earth, these forefathers were somewhat nomadic and lived in tents. Abraham's abode at the time of this discussion will be referenced in the last parable of our reading for today.

Who are the friends? In the case of the steward, the friends were those whose friendly consideration he gained in exchange for the material wealth he controlled. Whose friendship should the disciples desire? God's friendship should be valued over material wealth. The friends, then, are God and His friends.

He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. If therefore, you have not been faithful **in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you?**

Here again, by observing the contrasting words, “unrighteous” seems to have the nuance of “unfaithful” or “not true” in the sense of not being loyal or trustworthy, but of being false to someone.

³ The little preposition $\epsilon\kappa$ is not used by Luke in the rest of his gospel in an instrumental sense. Therefore the possibility that the correct translation is “by means of” is not strong. Luke is more likely using what is called a periphrasis for a genitive of price or worth. In this case, for would be the proper translation. For example, the landowner of Jesus' parable in Matthew 20 agreed with the laborers that they would work an entire day for a denarius—the usual price for a day's labor. The land owner would rather have the day's labor than the denarius. See Acts 1:18 for another example of Luke's use of this type of periphrasis. Judas gave up the price of his betrayal, thirty pieces of silver—he threw it back at the priests—and in doing so, in a sense, *acquired* the field where he committed suicide. The priests took the money and bought the field in which to bury strangers (Matthew 17:1-8).

“In the use of” is the translator’s interpretation of the preposition εἰς. He could have chosen “in reference to”, or “with respect to.” This choice would have suggested that one who is faithful (to God) will be faithful to God with reference to worldly riches and with reference to spiritual riches. The one who is unfaithful to God with reference to worldly riches would be unfaithful to God with reference to spiritual riches.

The idea as interpreted by the translator is that the one who proves to be the sort who is careful in small responsibilities will also be careful in large responsibilities. And the opposite is true. The management of earthly possessions (false wealth) is a small responsibility. If we are not careful to properly manage that, we cannot expect responsibility for true wealth—that which pertains to God.

“Faithful” implies that there is someone to whom we owe loyalty and who has given us a responsibility. If we are faithful, we can be trusted to perform the responsibility.

And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?

Again “in the use of” is the translators interpretation of εἰς, and maybe illustrated as follows: Parents, who have seen that their wasteful child cannot be trusted to handle their inheritance, will often put it in a trust fund for more responsible people to manage.

Choosing to translate “with reference to” (instead of “in the use of”) suggests: If one is not faithful to God with reference to the least (false or impermanent earthly possessions) that are not ours—these things really belong to God—God will not entrust us with the greatest (true wealth, His friendship) which can be ours to have eternally. The next statement reveals how one can be unfaithful to God with respect to possessions. If we love possessions, we are unfaithful to God.

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

If a man has two competing persons who claim his total loyalty, one of them is going to suffer. God and earthly possessions are in competition for our total loyalty. We must choose to serve one and not the other.

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him.

The Pharisees, listening to this advice to the disciples, were continuously jeering at Jesus. Luke plainly tells us that the Pharisees had chosen earthly wealth over God. They pretended to love and serve God, but it was only a guise. They, in fact, loved and served false wealth, their earthly possessions.

And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

Jesus’ discussion focuses once again on the Pharisees.

Jesus exposed the Pharisees for what they really were. They held themselves up as the standard of holiness for the other people who only see the outward person. But God was not fooled; He knew they were hypocrites; their outer holiness without inner holiness was detestable to Him.⁴

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is **forcing his way** into it.

The Pharisees and their companions, the scribes, proclaimed themselves as the most knowledgeable about the Law; they taught and protected it. Jesus unveiled their hypocrisy.

The problem with the translation; “and everyone is forcing his way into it” is a matter of interpretation. The verb βιάζεται is the same in the middle and in the passive voice. In the middle voice the verb means to act forcefully. The translators have chosen this option and their meaning is unclear.

The passive is the better choice. In the passive, the verb means *to be invited urgently*.⁵ Jesus is saying that “all are urged insistently to come into the kingdom.”⁶ This is the purpose of the preaching. One’s positive response to the preaching is a matter of life and death. Citizens of the kingdom inherit life. Thus, He invites everyone urgently to respond positively to His preaching.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.

“But” is a conjunction of contrast. The graciousness of the preaching is contrasted with the inflexibility of the Law. The Law will be fulfilled perfectly. Even the little embellishments on the written letters will remain until the end—hyperbole, of course, but the point is made concerning the permanence of the Law.

Seeking to avoid, change, or manipulate the Law was useless. But the very Pharisees who paraded their knowledge and protection of the Law were guilty of seeking to alter the Law and its verdicts. A case in point follows.

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

⁴ What is detestable to God is not clear. “Highly esteemed” is literally *lifted up*, or *object of pride or value*. Something is lifted up in men. Is it wealth? If so, then, their making a god of wealth is what is detestable to God.

⁵ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, A translation of the fourth revised and augmented ed. of Walter Bauer’s *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) p.140

⁶ E. Schweizer *The Good News According to Luke*, translated by D. E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) p. 258, quoted by Darrell L. Bock *Luke, Vol 2: 9:51-24:53 Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) p. 1353. See Bock, pp 1352-53 for a discussion of other options.

An interesting use of βιάζεται is found in 4th Maccabees: “Therefore conducting one’s life according to the Law, even if one is a lover of money, a person is immediately constrained [βιάζεται] in regard to his or her way of life, lending without interest to those who ask and reducing the debt when the seventh year comes around.” The quotation is from Donald a. DeSilva’s *4 Maccabees, Introduction and Commentary on the Greek Text in Codex Sinaiticus Septuagint Commentary Series* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006) pp 6-7. The Pharisees listening to Jesus may very well have been familiar with this text and been struck by His application of the concept to His preaching of the Kingdom.

The Pharisees, backed by one of their most famous teachers, Hillel, promoted the idea that a man could divorce his wife for ‘burning the toast’ and immediately marry another. The Pharisees were in this way promoting adultery, prohibited by the Ten Commandments,⁷ and were blatantly contradicting the Law.

Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

An unnamed someone put (or threw) an ulcer ridden beggar at a rich man’s gate.

In the story of the prodigal son, in his starving state, this exact expression was used of the son’s desire to fill himself—the son from the stuff the pigs were eating, Lazarus from what fell from the rich man’s table. We are not told if Lazarus was given any of the crumbs.

Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

But when he died angels carried him away to Abraham’s bosom.

Abraham’s bosom is only mentioned in the Bible this one time. Some scholars suppose that this is a euphemism for heaven.⁸ The Jews rightly see Abraham, a man called out by God for the special purpose of establishing a covenant with his descendents to be their God, as their forefather. Since Abraham is greatly beloved of God, the abode of his soul must be heaven.

Other theologians speculate that before Christ was crucified, those souls belonging to God at their physical death went to a temporary haven known as Abraham’s bosom. After the resurrection of Christ, these scholars believe the souls in Abraham’s Bosom were taken to Heaven.

No mention of angels for the piggish rich man.

And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.’

Jesus uses this parable to describe Hell as being a real place of horrible suffering.⁹

The ethnic relationship is recognized by the use of “Father Abraham” here, and Abraham’s response: “Child.”

The one who showed no mercy to the beggar in agony at his gate now calls out for mercy.

But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your

⁷ For a more complete discussion of Jesus’ views on divorce, see the Sermon Notes for September 23.

⁸ An example is R. C. H. Lenski.

⁹ For other mention of Hell, see Matthew 5:22, 29, 39; 10:28; 22:23; Mark 4:43-48; 2 Peter 2:4. For the Lake of Fire, see Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15.

good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.

Things in the afterlife are reversed, but not simply to be reversed.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.’

Though the man could have helped Lazarus on earth, there is no way that Lazarus could now help him.

And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’

After first seeking help for himself unsuccessfully, the man considers his brothers who presumably are living the same way he did.

But Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’

We now come to Jesus’ point to the Pharisees. They have Moses and the Prophets. They have the very messengers of the word of God but they are *not* hearing.

But he said, ‘No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’

Now the man wants to disagree with God’s method. He also subtly insinuates that this is all God’s fault; perhaps if some one had come from the dead to *him*, he would have repented and not come to this place.

But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

But Abraham points out the truth. Jesus has demonstrated to the Pharisees that for all their claims, they have not heard or obeyed Moses. If they had heard and obeyed, they would have truly loved God and their neighbor. No miracle can change the heart of one who refuses to listen to God.

APPLICATION

It’s not easy to act wisely. We are constantly being drawn by our culture to act unwisely, to put value on all the wrong things, and disregard the true riches. We chase what will very soon disappear, and ignore what will last forever. Our reading today warns us of the dangers of this lifestyle and points us to God’s will for our lives.

In the last year before His crucifixion, our Lord increasingly devoted time to training His disciples and those who desired to learn from Him what God expects from us. Although forgiveness is freely given when we truly repent, actually following Christ is a costly affair. It is not easy to lay aside our own will and say “Thy will be done.” One of the most difficult areas of our lives to relinquish to God’s control is our material possessions. But Jesus commands that we do so. The pros and cons of obeying Him is the subject of our reading.

The parable of the unjust steward, as it is called, is a difficult passage to understand. The story is clear enough—a steward is fired by his boss and in order to provide for his future security, the man reduces the amounts debtors owe to his boss. He thus ingratiates himself with the debtors. The problem for us comes at the end of the parable. That the boss praises the steward for his actions seems odd. How Jesus is using the parable is another puzzle.

It is best, perhaps, to take the parable as simply an example of acting wisely when it is clear that things as they are, and have been, are soon to end. Jesus noted that the worldly people are more adept at this sort of wisdom than are His followers. The steward is a prime example and his boss, a fellow man of the world, can't help but admire the ingenuity the steward displayed.

Jesus commanded his disciples to act wisely as well. We are to make an all important choice about what we truly treasure. If we value our material possessions, our “wealth, above a relationship with God, and devote ourselves to the care maintenance and increase of those possessions, we will lose our eternal place with God. But if we value God more than all that we have, and choose to serve Him with all that we are and possess, we will find a wonderful welcome in Heaven when this short life on earth is finished.

We cannot be totally devoted to both God and our wealth. We must choose which we will serve. This conscious choice is a test of our commitment. In God's eyes, the wise handling of material possessions is a very small responsibility. However, our actions and attitude with respect to that responsibility indicates whether or not a person is a trustworthy follower of Christ.

The cons of not acting wisely with regard to material possessions, is illustrated by the second parable of our reading—the parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” The story is told for the benefit of the money-loving Pharisees, who jeered at Jesus' teaching on this subject.

The Pharisees were the religious elite who were educated in the Law of God. Yet, they regularly promoted its abuse, as Jesus demonstrated was the case in their handling of issues of divorce. Their commitment was not to God or His Law, but to their own selves. The Law taught the will of God and demonstrated His character of justice and love, but the Pharisees were not listening. They were simply living off of the Law. The common people were starving for an understanding of God and His word—for the salvation it offered, but those educated in it gave them nothing.

In the parable, the rich man had the Law of God but ignored it. It commanded to have compassion on the poor, but he let a poor beggar, Lazarus, languish at his very gates, while he himself feasted daily, dressed like a king. The personal enjoyment of his material possessions was far more important to the rich man than were the commandments of God. He completely ignored God. This attitude toward God and His Law landed the rich man in Hell.

God will not share His place in our hearts with an idol, be it wealth, or something else that we value more than we value Him. We must choose, and Jesus cautions us to choose wisely. Possessions are only temporary; God and His Kingdom are the true and lasting wealth. Choosing God means that we will act as good stewards for Him with all that we have, seeking His guidance in all that we do. His reward is great and eternal.