

## **“Assume God’s Mercy”**

### **Luke 16:1-15**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When you assume too much, you often are made to look like an utter fool. That is, after all, the way the old adage goes about assuming, right? I won’t repeat it here, but if you don’t know, it’s all about the one assuming and the one being assumed equally looking as foolish as the other. You make all kinds of assumptions as you go about our daily lives. You assume that the sun will rise. You assume that work will begin at 8:00am. You assume that traffic will be horrendous on I-35 or 183. You assume that dinner will be eaten sometime around 6 or 7 pm. And you assume that you will have the chance tomorrow to make all those assumptions all over again.

In our text this morning, Jesus tells a parable about a steward who has not taken good care of his master’s estate. This steward made the assumption that despite his failures, he was in the clear. He was safe from accountability and consequence and would never have to be put in a position of want or need. But not so fast. The master comes and demands an accounting of his management, knowing that he has failed in his duties, and he removes him from his position. His response to this declaration is a natural one. It is one of fear and worry. “What shall I do since my master is taking the management away from me (Luke 16:3)?” His assumptions were all wrong for such a long time. He assumed he was untouchable, unable to fall away from grace in the eyes of his master. After being reprimanded by the master, does recede into hate and contempt for the one who let him go? That would be most people’s reaction to such a situation. But, instead, the steward decides to assume the grace of the master and spread that grace to others. He has taken a great leap of faith. His master has taken away his authority to manage his affairs, and he decides to go about his duties anyway. But he does so in a way that benefits others under his master’s care, and not just himself.

That’s just not the way people behave in our society today. We live in a world full of fear, sin, and death, and the result of that is selfish pride and selfish gain. The scourge of sin is borne by all according to the flesh. Adam’s transgression has extended to all mankind making every inclination of the heart evil on its own. A “good steward” in societal terms would have taken the master’s rebuke a different way. In the eyes of a lost world, the right answer is not to lessen what the master receives from his debtors, but to increase it. A “good steward” should have increased the bill and demanded more for his master to prove his worth and ability to keep his job. Now let’s think about that in terms of the faith, because parables are always about the kingdom of God.

This is what we have seen rampant in the neo-evangelical circles of Christianity today, Catholicism for centuries, and Judaism for millennia. The idea that there is always more that you should give to God to earn his grace and favor is thwarted by our Gospel lesson. There is no steward—papal, rabbinic, pharisaical, or otherwise—whose job it is to pull as much as possible out of the people of God on behalf of their master. They take the stance that it is up to them to secure people in their good works for the Lord, that if they just do a little bit more than what He requires of them, then they will receive the favor of the One who has bought them. Think about the repercussions of such an approach in the context of Jesus’ teaching this morning. If the steward was to take offense to his firing and take it out on the tenants of the master’s land, would he have been commended? Or even worse, taken those bills as a reward for himself as a “parting gift?”

The world would say that is what he was owed. He deserved his pound of flesh for the master’s injustice. But the master is not unjust. He is the righteous One, the very God who made all things and given life to all men by the blood of His Son. He is very just, and yet He is merciful. Jesus is not appealing to you to give Him more and buy His favor. He is not commanding that we do the things that the steward could not, who was “not strong enough to dig,” and “ashamed to beg.” You are not called upon by Your Lord to dig your way out of a hole. It is He who lifts you up out of that hole by His grace. He has not called upon you to beg for His forgiveness as one who must prove their worthiness of His mercy. He has called upon You to repent as one who is confident in the forgiveness which He has won for you. Therein lies the difference.

The world’s answer is to assume the worst, and take all for yourself. The proper Christian answer is to assume God’s mercy, and show it to others. There is no worth to be achieved or work to be done before you are able to fulfill the duties to which you have been called. Everything about your work as a Christian rests on God’s grace in Christ Jesus, which is yours according to His blood shed on the cross, and affirmed and concretized in His resurrection from the dead. And that is the goal—to use the gifts He has given as a tool of the proclamation of the Gospel, so that all would “come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4),” and join you in resurrection to eternal life on the last day. This, too, is part of wise management of your possessions in this life.

Through means of “mammon,” the riches and goods of this life, make friends for yourselves, as Jesus says. Not in the sense that you use them to buy favor with them, thus courting favor with God, but in the way that through your vocations you are able to interact with others and proclaim your faith. This is not a call to have worldly friends by way of your worldly means and separate them from your life of faith. Too often

people interpret Jesus' words this way. This approach leads to being double-minded, which Jesus warns of here in verse 13, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." Paul also warns of this to the Church at Corinth, where he writes in 1 Corinthians 10:21, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." He does not call upon you to make friends through your vocations to "split our time" or give you a "break" from all the Christian aspects of your life. You are called to live a life in Christ at all times, and by way of your vocations and the witness to your friends and family "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26)." You cannot have one foot in God's boat, and one in the world's.

You are called to use them to make friends that are also in the faith, so that you would be received together in the heavenly dwellings. Sometimes that means through your witness, your friends come to faith in Jesus, and other times you find those of like mind and you connect. Jesus is not telling you to abandon friends and family who don't believe, only to use the opportunities given to you to "lessen their bill" by proclaiming repentance and forgiveness. They are forgiven for their sins the same as you have been. By the blood of the Lamb who was slain, they have access to the eternal dwellings. If they would only lift the cloud of rejection from their hard hearts, the Holy Spirit desires to give them faith and work salvation for them just as He has for you. By sharing the good news of Christ's redemption, they see that their bill to the master is not only lessened, but wiped clean. The ledger is balanced because of Christ's payment on their behalf, and not their own. There is the message of proper use of your possessions in this life, both for your possessions of faith and the daily bread Your Lord provides for you.

The Lord provides many good things for His people. But we must never forget what Job proclaims in 1:21 after losing all of his earthly possessions and family, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." According to his divine will and purpose, the Lord will give, and He will also take away. Where will you turn in those times when you are like the steward who has his management removed, or Job who has his whole earthly life upended? Will you assume that the Lord has abandoned you in your time of need, or that He has looked upon you with contempt and issued His wrath upon you? I pray that you will do as the steward in Jesus' parable. Assume God's mercy and shower that grace upon others as the gift that it is. It is His grace and His mercy, not yours. But even in the seemingly darkest of times, when the confidence in your faith may be

shattered by your failures, that is when you must turn to Christ and lean upon Him all the more.

Only by His gift of grace, which you extend to others with no expectation of a return, will you be welcomed into the eternal dwellings. It is not the steward's shrewdness that gains him the favor of the master. He is commended for such generosity, but the gracious nature of the master is the reason he is welcomed with those who are now his friends. Take care of the gifts which God has given you. Manage your possessions shrewdly and wisely, and "make friends for yourselves (Luke 16:9)" along the way. Share with them your greatest possession, the gift of salvation which is for all men, as Paul says in our Epistle lesson from 1 Timothy. Show them that the blood of Jesus has covered their debts, and it is His gracious mercy that invites them to be free of them. It is theirs because of Christ's work and by His death they are redeemed. The Holy Spirit works through us to share the blessed news of God's objective justification, and faith receives it when He works it in the heart of those who hear.

Do not assume you can't be a part of God's plan of salvation. Your faith is always personal, but it is never private. It is a possession that belongs to God, and even a little giving from that faith is seen as a faithful act in His sight. Be one who is faithful in a very little, for in doing a little you are faithful in much. Do not assume that you have nowhere to go when it seems like you have failed your faith. In those times of weakness, lean on your faith and assume God's mercy for your failures. Assume that He will declare you justified now and on the day of judgment. Assume the truth that His body and blood are present here in the Sacrament to appropriate His gracious mercy in the forgiveness of sins. Declare the truth of His salvation to all who would hear, and live as those who have the greatest possession the world can possibly know. Your greatest possession is eternal life in Christ Jesus. You will be welcomed into the heavenly dwellings along with your friends in Christ, and there you will dwell in the light of His heavenly glory, face to face with your Master, whose grace is everlasting. Assume God's mercy, because that is His promise to you. Let us go forth in confidence, proclaiming as David in 2 Samuel 24:14, "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercy is great." Amen