

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Dearly Beloved,

Today, for our consideration, the Church presents to us one of the most bizarre and confusing of Jesus' parables. The parable of the unjust steward is found only in Luke, and it ought to baffle us that the master, who in all of Jesus' other parables is representative of God, praises his steward's dishonesty at the end of the whole episode.

The key to understanding the parable is to think of ourselves as the unjust steward. We are that person in the parable who misuses his own office, and then draws others into his sin. We have squandered the gifts that God has given us: some of us in illicit loves, some in sloth and laziness, some in avarice, others in gluttony, nearly all of us in pride. What is more, apart from the children present, most of us know of some era in our lives in which we wasted God's blessings for a long period of time, perhaps months, years, even decades.

And that is really the point of the parable: since we have misused God's gifts, we should find others who will help us get to heaven, poor people who also debtors of God, but not in the same way that we are. We have knowingly offended God; they, in their God-given innocence, have ceased offending him (or never began) and so they are merely paying off the debt from original sin or their personal sins. Is this obscure? It ought to be, in a way. But I will try and clarify what I am saying.

Our Lord tells us at the end of the parable to use money (the mammon of iniquity) to gain spiritual benefits. When we do good to others by way of money, they will welcome us into eternal dwellings, either because they have lived righteous lives with the help of God's grace and will welcome us into heaven, or because the Lord will receive us in their place with the words: I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me. So the clearest meaning of the parable is that we ought to use our money (if we have any to use) to help those in need bodily and spiritually.

The obvious implication is that we should give money or goods to those who lack the basics of life, and ask their prayers for us. We do them a bodily good; they pray for our spiritual good. The difficulty is that so often the poor of today's age are not religious and do not care about spiritual things; in those cases Christ rewards us in their place with spiritual benefits and mercy. The less obvious implication is the use of money to help the souls in purgatory by way of Masses. This interpretation of the parable is infallible in that the holy souls have ceased to sin, and therefore can no longer offend God; they also are poor in that they cannot help themselves: they rely upon our spiritual charity to speed their entry into heaven (whatever that means). Most certainly when we free souls from purgatory by way of having Masses and other prayers said for them, they will welcome us into eternal dwellings, because unlike the poor we meet on earth, the holy souls definitely care about spiritual things and will be in heaven when their debt is paid. Imagine, then, the line of persons that will greet each of us when we arrive in heaven, greeting us because we did them good while we were on earth, and therefore they prayed that we be converted and be forgiven our sins.

Even if we don't have money to make use of, the parable is still applicable in regard to spiritual goods. The simple lesson would be: we should know who to turn to when we are in trouble. The Saints are the first ones, beginning with the Mother of God. Those Saints to whom we were devoted in this life will welcome us into the eternal dwellings insofar as we have been faithful to them, and shared the blessings they gave to us with others. On earth, we should turn to the humble and pure of heart. Practically speaking this means asking spiritual help from children, and adults who have the heart of child, lacking ambition and guile, in love with the Lord.

A story to illustrate this: Roy Schoemann, a famous American convert from Judaism, had a mystical experience while he was searching for the truth. Our Lady appeared to him in a dream. She said very little, but exuded a purity that filled him with extreme awe and peace. She also permitted Roy to ask questions. Perhaps trying to fill time, he asked her to tell him her favorite prayer. She replied with the text of a Portuguese prayer that Roy

later learned Brazilian mothers teach their children to say throughout the day as they go about their work and play. Thus Our Lady was pleased with the prayer not because of its erudition or even because of the understanding of the one who uttered it, but because of the purity and humility of the children who prayed. In the same way, the prayers of the single hearted are more pleasing to the Lord than the prayers of those of us who fall into the sins of pride, sensuality, murmuring and especially lack of charity.

Another example: in a monastery there are a variety of personalities: those with many natural gifts of intelligence, wit, drive, etc., and then there are those who are more focused on God, less worldly, and oftentimes less attractive in personality. Whom should we ask for prayers? The latter person, the person whom we may find harder to understand, but whom we are sure possesses a pure heart. Ask the poor man who trusts God and prays and lives in a humble manner.

So, the parable tells us, albeit in a curious way, we who are endowed with many gifts but who struggle at the same time with pride and self-will, should turn to those who are more child-like than us and ask them for the help of prayers for our spiritual needs. This is the sure economy of salvation: the proud will be crushed by the humble. But if we, knowing our sins and our pride, willingly humble ourselves to ask prayers from others, Christ will congratulate us at the end of our lives for our ingenuity. And then all of us, those in need of help and those who provide such help, will be united in the New Jerusalem, where our debts will be wiped away, as will our tears, and we will rejoice together at the vision of the Most Holy Trinity.