

“Domine, volumus Jesum videre,” John 12:21.
“Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam,” Mark 9:24.

THE SHREWD STEWARD, CALLED TO ACCOUNT, TOOK COMMENDABLE ACTION

Gospel Sermon Text – Luke 16

¹Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

³“The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg—⁴I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

⁵“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶“‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

⁷“Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

⁸“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”



Do you like to spend money? (I see some spouses gesturing, giving nonchalant glances.) Do you like to spend other people’s money? Let me put it this way: **Are you so good at spending money that you would like a job spending someone else’s money?** Interior designers get to spend people’s money. Architects choose materials with people’s money. Event planners select venues, hire caterers and entertainers with other people’s money. Personal shoppers can earn quite a bit spending other people’s money. The best example of someone spending someone else’s money may be ... the government! They spend our money all the time.

But did you know that Christians do this, too? You already have that job. We knowingly spend Another Person’s money. Do you know whose? **Everything we own belongs to our closest friend. Everything we own belongs to God.** Psalm 24:1, “*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it—the sea, and all that is in it.*”

An L.A. Times article said that the average home has 300,000 items; 10% of households have storage units. **But none of it belongs to them. It’s all God’s.** When our children start talking, what is one of the first words they learn? “Mine.” Where did they learn that? Their parents. But they didn’t need to be taught *how* to say “mine.” Children find any number of things to refer to with the word. The sinful nature persists and plays out in every generation. We have iPhone, iPad, iPod, and iTouch.

But according to our parable today, we should really get used to saying: hisPhone, hisPad, hisPod, hisTouch, hisWealth. It will help us know who really owns our wealth.

Jesus told us in Luke 15 about how He goes and finds the lost—lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son. Now He talks about how each Christian can take part in that effort. In today's parable, each Christian is like a steward, or a manager. So we use the word "stewardship." In the Bible, the word can mean "director" or "treasurer." The steward, like any Christian, is in charge of his master's wealth. And the Christian has "wasted" it. The word "waste" is that same word in Luke 15 when the prodigal son "wastes" or "squanders" his inheritance.

The Owner or Master has caught wind of it and plans to call the steward or manager into his office. The guy's job is on the line.

Have you ever heard of Larry Page? He had a dream in 1996—not too long after the internet had gotten really big—in which he was able to see the internet differently than anyone else. He woke up and, because of his dream, developed the algorithm for a search engine he called BackRub. The name didn't stick, but he renamed it Google. This is Larry Page. So Larry Page is really the Steve Jobs of Google in many ways. And by 2001 he was looking around his company, wondering why no one among 40+ project teams was working on his projects. **So in 2001, Larry Page was about to fire all his project managers.** He felt like they were all getting in between him and his engineers. **Really, he felt like they were getting in between him and his projects.**

Are you like one of those project managers? When the Lord looks around this room, does He see anyone working on His project of saving sinners? **Have you ignored your Master's project? Have you wasted your Master's wealth?** Have you been greedy along the lines of 1 Timothy 6, chasing after riches, worried about the world, falling into a trap, piercing yourself with many griefs? Have you refused to help those in need? Have you looked for luxury items for yourself before considering the needs of others? Have you coveted something someone else has? Have you stolen something little or large?

Earthly goods are uncertain, unreliable riches; sometimes they come, and sometimes they go. They don't bring true and reliable peace to your heart, but much effort and worry. It is dangerous to deal with them because they're like thorns—no help in the day of death and judgment. And because we are guilty of these sins, we are being called to account. **The jig is up and our job is at stake because we are sinners in greed, gluttony, ugly giving, laziness, and wastefulness.** How could God *not* see these things? Our accusers are many: Moses and his law, our own conscience, the holy angels who give a report. Even the devil approaches God with accusations day and night. Our sins cry up to heaven and the stones in the walls cry out.

On a very emotional day in 2001, Larry Page fired all his project managers. But other corporate heads of the company overturned the decision, because they said a company *needs* project managers. Well, God doesn't need us *per se*. But there does need to be a messenger. **God still uses us.** How could that be?

The steward in our parable got shrewd. First, he called in the olive-oil-man. Take your bill and make it half. Then he called in the wheat man. Take your bill and write away 25%. He took the bills from those guys, the olive-oil-man & the wheat man. He had them write off a deep percentage, without any reasons whatsoever. We can all guess what the crowd around Jesus was thinking. This steward was going to get in trouble now!

But instead, the master praised him. **The steward knew what he was doing wouldn't save his job, but he provided a network for himself. The steward would have friends after he was fired, and job security for a future.** And what Jesus says, we know is wrong. He says to be like the world. Imagine Jesus taking us to a place where there's buying and selling, trading and back-stabbing, conniving and networking. Jesus walks us right into Wall Street and He turns around to say, "Why aren't you more like this—but about things that matter?"

So brothers and sisters, think about it in terms of law and gospel. Your job **here** trying to save yourself will end with God's law. We're guilty; we all know that. We covet and steal, get greedy and get rich, get lazy and waste God's stuff. But your job **there** begins with the gospel. Get friends and start showing them how each sin is written away, percentage after percentage, amount after amount, violation after violation, is not counted against you. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself for that reason.

The parable doesn't speak about so much about our Mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony at its proper time. But just when we were guilty and learned about the accounting God demands of us, God gives us His good news of Jesus Christ to take away our sins. Who knows better how to cut His losses and mark down other people's debts than God? He loved us to the point of sending His Son – who died unfairly, being perfect God and righteous man in One, to His own loss. He rescued us at a very deep cost.

Add to that, **the One who rescued us desires our help to rescue others.** So now that we live in Jesus through that gospel, we take chance after chance with friend after friend and share it. We tell them little by little how the gospel eases our burdens until our burdens are gone. **God still uses us.**

Larry Page once hired a programmer for Google named Wesley Chan. Wesley Chan was supposed to put together a Google toolbar that could help people make a Google search without using Microsoft internet Explorer. After working on this toolbar for a while, Wesley Chan realized that people wouldn't like the thing and it wouldn't take off. But Chan did notice it could double as a pop-up ad blocker. He shared this idea with Google's owner, Larry Page. But Larry Page laughed at him. "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard. Where did we find you?" Overnight, Chan snuck in and secretly installed the toolbar on Larry Page's computer. Later, Larry Page told the execs and programmers he was getting fewer pop-up ad blockers. Chan got to take the opportunity to tell him why, and Google launched the toolbar.

God, who demanded our jobs, wants us to be trustworthy in our new job with the gospel message. **It may take time and money to gain a conversation with friends. It may take special talents. It will take a great deal of faith in Jesus.** But God wishes to test us to see if we treat these worldly goods according to His will. After we have received forgiveness and are reconciled with God, He has appointed us as caretakers who must give an account.

Is that realistic? I think I know what it's like. You give 10% for years and years, and it doesn't always look like it's doing any good, so you're tempted to give 8%, maybe 5%, and then little by little, you're not even giving pennies. **Discouragement sets in.** It doesn't make sense to give! Not if you're after worldly wealth, earthly success, and the master known as money, or *mammon*.

But what if you're after souls? What if you want to fill heaven? We all have friends we cannot wait to see in heaven: Grandma, aunts and uncles, a son or daughter, maybe Mom and Dad. What about the wealth of friends who, when they see us, will see Jesus pointing His finger and saying, "That person poured out his heart and pocket-book so you could join Me and be with us here. You didn't even know it, but that member of Bethlehem Lutheran Church gave things up for Me, for you. It didn't make any earthly sense, except that it was done *hoping you could just be in heaven.*"

With your church offering, do you ever think about the person who will thank you in heaven for what you have given?

An early Lutheran, John Gerhard, ended his church postil on this text with a story about three friends. I'd like to share the same story. **You have three friends: One you share everything with.** Your friend gets cold, you give her your jacket. Your friend is sad, you're there for her. Your friend needs food, you give her your plate, and you even throw in the dessert. Does she have no place to stay? She can sleep in your house, in fact, in your bed. You'll take the couch. You'd give her the shirt of your back. You give this friend everything. **The second friend you share many things with,** but not quite as much as the first. He tags along and you value the friendship, but you wouldn't do everything first for the person. **The third friend you really don't share much with.** You're not even sure how this person is a friend. You wouldn't give him anything.

Then you are summoned to court and accused of a crime. When you ask the first friend for help, share with her as you did, she says, "I won't help you," and hangs up. The second friend has walked you to the courthouse, but, when you ask for help, turns around and goes home. Although you are ashamed to ask, the third friend comes to your rescue, argues your case, even pays all your fees, and wins all your legal battles for you. He gets you off the hook, innocent as a dove.

Here's the meaning: **The first friend is your body.** You care for it always and give it everything, luxury beyond need. It eventually wears out in the end, dies, and leaves you with nothing. **Your second friend is your family.** They bury you, but then they must turn back and go home, because they can't help you anymore after that. **The third friend, your best friend, is Jesus.**

Our closest best friend is the Lord God and his beloved Son, Christ Jesus. He has shared with us all we need and more, and it's only by His overflowing lovingkindness and care for us. We befriend Him with true repentance and conversion, by true faith and uprightness. John 15:14, "*You are My friends if you do what I command You.*" But since things don't always happen as they should with our money, we plead His mercy. Week after week, we need a Savior who can take away our sins of greed, gluttony, wastefulness, and laziness.

We need Him to fill us with the desire to look beyond life here and look ahead to where stewardship really pays off, in relationships. That's how we use time, talents, and treasure.

So brothers and sisters, with faith in your heart, I simply ask you to look again at your finances, your calendars, and your abilities. Reevaluate what you put towards your God and your church. They say you should make big decisions in a graveyard. I recommend that you make them with an open Bible. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also, with ...

YOUR CLOSEST FRIEND AND HIS WEALTH

Amen.