

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 9, 2013
Luke 16:1-9ⁱ

Part I

Detroit has been in the news lately. It has because the city filed for bankruptcy. What was once the heartbeat of America is now, in so many ways, a ghost town. More than a million people have exited the city. Its population went from two million to seven hundred thousand. Thousands of buildings lay vacant. Someone has put together a portfolio called "The Ruins of Detroit." Crumbling, eroding, rusting cathedrals, auto plants and shopping malls make up the portfolio.

It is all a result of "decades of denial" as someone put it. It has been decades of denial by the city managers. More money was going out than coming in. By the time of filing for bankruptcy, eighteen times more was being spent than collected. Finally the bottom fell out. The lack of foresight and failing to plan ahead was the result of mismanagement.

That is the problem in our text. The rich man became aware of the fact that his steward had mismanaged his property. It was property the rich man had entrusted to the steward. He was to take care of and improve it. In doing so, the steward was to be faithful. That is not what happened. The steward wasted the rich man's property. How he wasted it we are not told.

What is clear, though, is that the day of reckoning was at hand. The steward was going to lose his job. So the rich man called for an accounting. The books were to be opened. An audit was to be done. He was to be judged on the basis of the audit.

Part II

In the parable the rich man is God. He owns everything. Today's Old Testament reading acknowledged, "All that is in heaven and in earth is Yours."ⁱⁱ God, in turn, has entrusted you with his property. That includes your "body and soul, eyes, ears and members, your reason and all your senses."ⁱⁱⁱ It includes all that he has put in your hands; your time, talent and treasures.

God entrusts you with these gifts in your and my vocations. They are vocations like that of parent and child, husband and wife, worker and student, pastor and parishioner. In them you are to use the means at your disposal as a faithful steward. You are to see life in this way: "Everything I have belongs to God. I am to take good care of what he puts in my hands."

But what happens? We often mismanage. We do so when we think what we have is ours. Our old Adam cuts God off *as if* we were the owners; *as if* we were our own man.

This kind of thinking pervades our culture today. It does because much of our culture has, as someone said, a “closed box” mentality. That is, it thinks that this material world and everything in it is all there is. There is nothing beyond the material world; nothing outside of it. There is no God. What you see is what you get.

If what you see is what you get, then you are not accountable to God. Then you can live however you want. All that matters are your rights. Your rights trump the rights of others dependant upon you.

The same kind of “closed box” thinking gets to us, living in the world. So, we see people enjoy life. They go on their merry way. They seemingly are their own man. Our old Adam wants to join in. It likes the idea, “I’m on my own here. I’m accountable to no one. I can do with my life what I want. I can do with my own things what I want. All that matters is how I can get ahead. All that matters are my rights.”

We insist on our rights when we parents try to live our own dreams *through* our children rather than letting God develop their *own* gifts; when you children put up a fight to do a chore, rather than doing it gladly; when we spouses get tired of one another, looking for fulfillment in wrong places; when we workers chafe behind our supervisors, thinking we know better; when pastor and parishioner tire of God’s word, wanting something more exciting.

We find that we are no different than the Israelites we heard about, today, who “lusted after evil things^{iv}” in the wilderness. We, too, lust after evil things - insisting on our own rights; to be on our own; to live how we want.

Part III

...but the time for an accounting will come. It did for the steward in our text who was called to give an account. When he was, he contemplated his dilemma. As he did, he considered the two obvious choices he had. One was to dig ditches. He didn’t have a strong back for that. The other was to beg. He was too proud to do that.

Not liking either of these choices, the steward comes up with an alternative. “I am resolved what to do, that when I am put out of my stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.” So, with this resolve he plans ahead.

Then he puts his plan into action. He sits down with the master’s debtors. He cheats his master through the use of his position while he still can. He does so by reducing the debt of one fifty percent; of another twenty percent. The steward

did his master's debtors a favor. He did so, hoping that they would return the favor in his time of need.

When the rich man heard what the steward did, he praised him. He did, *not* for his dishonesty, *but* for his foresight. He knew how to look out for self. He knew how to focus on the matter at hand.

Then Jesus makes this observation. "The sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light." That is, the characteristic of foresight is *more common* among unbelievers than believers. Believers, on the one hand, are not always so focused when it comes to the faith. Unbelievers, on the other hand, put all their energy into planning for the here and now. After all, what they see is what they get.

If we get careless and adopt this belief, then, our focus does get diverted; then we live like those who see the world as a closed box. If we see the world as a closed box, one day the material things in which we trust will fail. Whatever we have in our hands will pass through them like sand.

Then, when we breathe our last, we will be empty handed. Empty handed we will be called to account. The books will be opened. The accounts will be settled. We will be declared bankrupt. We will be left out on the street, homeless and shivering in the cold of hell. It will be due to our lack of foresight, failing to plan ahead. It is what we deserve for our mismanagement of God's gifts.

Part V

...to be sure, we are all guilty of mismanagement; all but one, Jesus. God the Father entrusted Jesus with winning salvation for us poor sinners; and Jesus was faithful in all that his Father asked him to do as a child, as a man, as a preacher. He did not fight with his mother and step father when given a chore, but gladly did it. He did not look for fulfillment in wrong places as a man, but lived a chaste and decent life. He did not chafe under his superiors, but prayed for them. He did not see himself as his own man, but his Father's Son. He faithfully spoke God's word. He preached sin and grace.

...and what did Jesus get for being a faithful Steward? Many were not happy with him. They were envious of him. So they falsely accused him, condemned him, and had him executed. That's what he got for being a faithful Steward. That's not *all* he got. He *also* got your sin. God gave him your sin of mismanagement. He paid for it in his death. Paid for in full, your debt has been canceled. It is what Jesus did as a *faithful* Steward. He did what the Father entrusted him to do. He won your salvation.

Because he did, the Father did not abandon his Son in the grave. He raised him from the dead. It is the Father's stamp of approval that your books are clean; that you are no longer in the red. Then the Father set his Son at his right hand. At

the Father's right hand, Jesus is in charge of the Father's property. He is Steward over all the Father's riches.

As Steward at the Father's right hand, Jesus gives you things that do not fail. He "richly and daily forgives you all your sin^v"; and with "forgiveness there is life and salvation.^{vi}" These are treasures that do not slip out of your hands like sand. They are treasures that you have forever. They are treasures that do not fade and fray like clothes; that do not crumble and rust like abandoned buildings; that do not spoil and rot like food. They last forever. God had placed *these* treasures in *your* hands. You are no longer bankrupt, but enriched with God's gifts.

Enriched, Jesus calls you to "make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home." With these words, Jesus calls you to use your gifts; to use them as parent or child; as a husband or wife; as a worker, student, or parishioner. He entrusts you with the management of the time, talent, and treasure. He puts them at your disposal to use for the Lord's work; for your families' needs.

As you manage them, God will give you the opportunity to confess the faith. It's what using the time, talent and treasure God gives you, in the final analysis, is all about. It is about building relationships. In them God gives you opportunities - opportunities to bring your children to the baptismal font; to give a friend a book on the faith, to bring a friend to church. If just one of them is converted, how glad he/she will be in heaven. How glad they will be that you gave them Jesus.

And Jesus, the faithful Steward, is with you. He is with you to uphold you in your vocation as steward. He upholds you as he stoops down to you. He brings to you the right hand of God here in bread and wine. In them, he gives you his body and blood. They are his body and blood by which he blots your books clean. God no longer sees you in the red.

This is the right hand of God that upholds you, Jesus. Jesus keeps your eye on the big picture – not with your eyes stuck on this life, but with eyes looking to eternity. He keeps you from falling into the trap of decades of denial, but gives you the foresight you need with his debt forgiveness. **His debt forgiveness plans ahead for your eternal welfare.** Amen!

ⁱ Citations of the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

ⁱⁱ Jeremiah 15.11

ⁱⁱⁱ Luther's Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article

^{iv} I Corinthians 10.6

^v Ibid, Explanation to the Third Article

^{vi} Ibid, The Benefit of the Sacrament of the Altar