

Our Gospel lesson for today is a bit... odd. I mean on the surface, there's a very easy to understand moral lesson to it: Those who can be trusted with little can be trusted with much. It is good and godly to be a trustworthy person.

But is that really the spiritual lesson that Jesus is teaching us in this parable? He goes to an awful lot of effort just to say, "Be honest." And this manager who ends up being praised by his master really isn't all that honest in the end. He has still cheated his master out of quite a bit of money for his own gain. He has made friends by means of unrighteous wealth.

And Jesus says point blank that this is a good thing. Something that will get us into heaven. What?! The Pharisees ridicule him for saying such a thing. And if this weren't Jesus talking here, I think we might be tempted to do the same.

So let's unpack all this, shall we... We have here a master. This is a wealthy man, wealthy enough to have his hand in several different industries. Olive oil, wheat, and so on. He's got a lot of money and a lot of resources at his disposal. And he wants to keep it that way. Which means investing it. Specifically, in loaning it to other individuals and businesses who pay it back with interest.

But managing a business like this is tedious. I mean, what's the point of being rich if you spend all day dealing with poor people? So he hires a manager to handle his investments. Evaluating and making loans. Setting interest rates and repayment schedules. That sort of stuff.

And the manager, as was common in that time period, he kinda pays himself. He has the full disposal of his master's money and resources. And so when he makes a loan and he goes to the person and says that they owe 10% interest on the loan, in the back of his mind he's thinking, "8% for my master, 2% for me." That's how he gets paid. And as long as his master is happy with 8% interest, the manager has done his job well.

Except that this master is not happy with his manager. He doesn't really say why. All we know is that the master hauls him in to his office and fires him on the spot.

So now the manager is thinking, "What am I going to do? I'm a loan shark. Everybody hates me. I'll never find another job. Except, maybe, digging or begging. And who wants to do that?"

But then he has an idea. He's already fired. He's never going to see his cut of the loans he's made. That person he charged 10% interest is not going to ever pay him his 2%. He's going to pay the next manager his 2%. Which means he's better off giving it away as a gift and earning that person's gratitude.

So that's what he does. Before word gets out that he's been fired, he runs all over town reducing everybody's interest rates. So that everybody loves him. And then in a few days, he'll spread the word that he's been fired. And because he's such a nice guy, he'll have a stack of job offers waiting for him.

Now, his former master could have been furious about this. It's a pretty shady move, after all. The manager's been fired. He doesn't have the authority to rewrite these loans. But the master is also impressed by his shrewdness. And he realizes that maybe he was a bit too hasty in firing him in the first place.

It's an interesting story. A little slice of ancient Jewish culture. It was obviously a familiar practice to the people of Jesus' day. And, honestly, when you spell out all the details, I think it makes a lot of sense to us too. In fact, I would imagine there are modern day versions of this going on at JP Morgan Chase and Goldman Sachs all the time.

But is Jesus really commending this kind of practice? Well, yes and no. What Jesus commends is the manager's shrewdness. Even though he's a "son of this world," he commends how the manager has sized up the situation and how he has sought out the greatest long-term profits, rather than only looking at the short term.

And the reason that's important is because we as Christians often need to look at things in terms of long-term good, rather than just looking at the short term. That's really at the core of interpreting this parable and its characters.

Because the master in this parable is God. In every parable, the master is always God. And the manager is us. You and me. And every other person on this planet. We are all managers of God's wealth. He hands us this world. He hands us our very lives. And he makes us managers and stewards. He tells us, "You have full disposal of all that is mine. Just use it wisely."

But we didn't. We disobeyed God. We broke his law. We abused his gifts. And so, he fired us. He threw us out of the garden of Eden. He told us we were no longer his managers.

And that left us with a choice. There is no profit for us left in this world. There is no interest that we can collect from it. Because, in the long term, we're all gonna die. And the master is going to take back what was his. And we'll be left digging in the bowels of hell or begging at the gates of heaven.

In short, we'll have nothing to show for our lives. Our entire existence will have been a complete waste. Because we were only looking at the short-term gain of our sin.

Or, we can be like the shrewd manager. We can look around us at all of these things that seem to profit us. Money and possessions and pleasure and family and friends and all of this stuff that fills our lives. And realize, "Nope. I'm a sinner. I've already been fired from this job. None of this was ever mine. None of this will ever be mine. And one day I'll die and God will take it back and I'll be left with nothing."

But that just means I'm free to give it away. I can give it away to those who can help me. To those who can help others. To those who can make a long-term difference. An eternal difference.

I can give it to my church so that I can continue to receive Word and Sacrament on a weekly basis. So that I can learn about God's love for me. So that I can hear those words, "I forgive you all your sin." And know without a shadow of a doubt that when I come to heaven's gates as a beggar, I will be invited in as a son.

I can give it to other ministries. To missionaries. To seminary students. To outreach organizations. To food pantries. To disaster relief. To all these people doing God's work and sharing God's Word. And one day I can look around in paradise at a whole crowd of people who call me their friend because I chose not to keep that 2%. And I have earned their eternal gratitude.

You can give it away. A little of it. A lot of it. All of it, if you want. And know with confidence that the master will not consider you an unrighteous manager of his kingdom. But, instead, a shrewd one. Who looked at the long-term and realized he couldn't keep it anyway.

He will look at you as a shrewd manager. He will commend you for it. And he will say, "Guess what? You're rehired. Come into my new kingdom. My new heaven. My new earth. And be a manager for me once again. Be my steward. And share in all that I have."

The famous missionary and martyr Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That's the core message of this parable. You can't keep this life. You can't keep anything in it. Ultimately, no matter what you do, you will lose it all.

Because we are sinful people, who have been unfaithful, untrustworthy, and dishonest in so much that God has given us. We have served the wrong master time and time again. And yet God continues to give us so much. In His grace, he pours out his forgiveness on us. Entrusts us with the keys to his kingdom. And asks only one thing from us: that we act as shrewdly in the things of God as we do in the things of men.

That we look at the long term and not just the short term. That we lose what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose. God's Word in our hearts. God's children brought into his family by Holy Baptism. God's very Body and Blood on our lips for the forgiveness of our sins.

God's peace of resting in His salvation. And the joy of knowing that we helped bring others into His kingdom. For these are the true riches of God's grace that lead to eternal dwellings with him. Amen.