

September 18, 2016  
Luke 16:1-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I mess up all the time. For instance, when I was in seminary a friend of mine asked me to take her physically and mentally challenged brother to the doctor. The appointment was scheduled at 8:00 a.m. so I went to bed and set my alarm to get up in time. Amanda had just started back to work teaching; however, school for the kids and I had not yet started so we were still on our summer sleep schedule. Well, you can see where this is going. Not only did we not get up but it turns out I set the alarm for “pm” instead of “am”. By the time the phone rang it was already too late for me to get to his apartment and then to the doctor. I felt horrible. I had acted irresponsibly. I had squandered both of their time and the time of the medical professionals. I apologized to both but part of me wondered if I had just ruined our friendship. I hoped she would forgive me. I was worried when she did not return my voice mail. But then, a while later, I got a text stating, “It’s alright. We all make mistakes and I accept your apology and forgive you.” Wow! What a relief. Suddenly, I could breathe easier. While I was still upset with myself it was a huge burden lifted when I saw those words. My friend didn’t have to forgive me. She could have let me sit and

stew holding this over me for a while. But she didn't and by this act our friendship was reconciled.

Forgiveness is a key component in all the gospels but it is of particular importance in Luke's Gospel. Theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer describes it like this: "It's (forgiveness) a moral of great emphasis for Luke: FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all."<sup>i</sup> Forgiveness must also have significance in the world today as well because a Google search on the word resulted in 64,100,000 hits. I didn't have a chance to look at all of these but I did look at a few of nearly 1,670,000 hits that focused just on "forgiveness quotes" and I came across this one by Desmond Tutu. "Without forgiveness, there's no future."

Forgiveness permeates the parable of the "Shrewd Manager" or "Unrighteous Steward." At first, that may not be the theme we initially hear and plenty of scholars, pastors, and theologians have written many a word about this parable. Many believe the primary thrust of this parable is that there are times we will be faced with decisions and like the steward we need to act decisively and perhaps shrewdly. Some choose to simply bypass the parable and concentrate solely on verse 13. Some focus on being responsible stewards of the gifts God has given us – primarily financial gifts. It's not an easy parable and at face value it's hard to figure out why Jesus tells a story of a wealthy landowner commending a scrupulous, irresponsible manager for mishandling his property

and finances so badly he ultimately fires him. And then it gets even better because after the steward has been fired for his mismanagement of the company books he then acts in desperation in an attempt to save face with the peasant farmers he has most likely been cheating out of their hard earned money and settles the owner's debts at a substantially reduced rate without his approval. The response from the landowner is certainly one we don't expect.

Commended???

He is commended and to find out why we have to ask ourselves what is it that the steward does? Point blank – he forgives. He cancels the debt of the peasants. His actions may have been selfish. They may have been done without the authority of the master. They may have been foolish but his action of forgiveness ultimately opens the door to his future, the peasants' future, and the landowner's future. By this single act he has gone from scum to saint. By this single act he has reconciled a relationship with the landowner and with the peasant farmers. This single act of mercy has lifted a tremendous burden off the back of hard-working peasant farmers who more than likely were already in debt from paying exuberant rent to the steward and landowner. In the eyes of the peasants he would have been viewed no longer as the enemy but as an ally. The same goes with the landowner who clearly the peasants would have viewed as the one making the decision to ease their burden in forgiving a portion of their debt. Clearly, the landowner caught wind of this. He heard the praises and

adoration of the peasants and this is why he commended the steward and more than likely retained him as manager.

This parable and most of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God are complex. In this life, we will never fully grasp God and God's Kingdom. However, we can grasp forgiveness. Each of us knows what it's like to make mistakes. Each of us knows what it's like to squander the resources and gifts God so freely has given us and use them in ways that don't further God's Kingdom to the best of our abilities. Each of us knows that no matter how hard we may try we live in a systemic culture and society that breaks down and often leads to acts of injustice. Each of us comes to the foot of the cross carrying our own burdens, shames, and debts desperately in need of mercy, grace, healing and forgiveness. Each of us in one-way or the other comes as an unrighteous steward. And it is here in the outstretched arms of Jesus Christ that we see a glimpse of the kingdom in His promise of forgiveness to all who believe in His name. It is through God's grace in Jesus Christ and the free gift of forgiveness that our future is secured from the hand of death to the eternal hand of God. We forgive because God first forgives. To quote Breuer one last time, "Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every possible arena – financial and moral – can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace."

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper\\_20\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper_20_year_.html)