

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity; Luke 16:1-9

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

The Parable of the Unjust Steward

1. This is truly a Gospel for priests and monks, and will bring them money, unless we prevent it. Before entering upon the consideration of it, we must accustom ourselves to the language used, especially the word mammon. The Jews were acquainted with this word from the Hebrew, and it has come down to us, just like other Hebrew words, as Halleluja, Amen, Kyrie eleison. In German mammon means riches, not simply riches, but a superfluity of riches, whatever is beyond our needs. However, that which is called mammon and that which is not called mammon are distinguished in a twofold way. First, if the estimate be according to that of our Lord God and of the truth, there are many who possess mammon. But if the estimate be that of the world and of man's mind, there are few who possess it. For our leaders in thought have taught in the high schools and even from the pulpit, that everyone should see to his station in life, what he needs, and adjust his possessions accordingly. If he be a man with wife and children, he needs more, for where many persons are there much will be needed. And when we reckon thus, no one has anything to spare, but everyone would rather have more. If one has two thousand guilders he says, this I need for my family, to support myself, my wife and children.

2. In the second place they have taught that one is not bound to help, except in cases of the greatest need. Such teaching entirely overthrows the Gospel, so that no one has been helpful to another; but they have in the meantime built churches; and yet in doing so they did not even wait for the greatest need, until the arches were rent asunder and churches became roofless, but they gave to great excess, spreading their gold upon the walls. To sum up the whole matter, mammon properly means, that a man has more than he needs for his support, so that he can help others without injuring himself.

3. Hence the Lord calls it "The mammon of unrighteousness," because it is daily made use of by the wicked; as it is said: riches develop courage, and the heathen have also called it irritamenta malorum, riches tempt to evil. Again St. Paul says, I Tim. 6:10: "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil," whence cometh strife, pride, war and bloodshed. Therefore it is also called here the unrighteous mammon, because it is applied to such evil uses, and is a great cause of evil to men.

4. Nevertheless it is God's creature like wine and corn, and the creatures of God are good. Why then does he call them evil? Because they tempt us to so much evil, as Paul says to the Ephesians, 5:16: "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." Not that the time or days in themselves are evil, but because great evil is done in them. He also says to the Romans, 2:5: "The day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Although the day is good, but because God's wrath will be revealed on that day, the day must take its name from it. And thus, since mammon runs into the service of evil, Christ calls it mammon of unrighteousness, namely, that which we have above our needs and we will not use in helping our neighbour; for this we possess unrighteously, and

before God it is stolen goods, for in the presence of God one is bound to give and lend, and suffer himself to be deprived of it. Therefore as the saying runs, the greatest owners of property are the greatest thieves; because they possess far more than they need, and give the least possible to others. So much on the meaning of the word; we now return to the Gospel.

5. We take this parable in a common sense way, without seeking any subtleties in it, as Jerome has done, for it is not necessary to seek a subtle meaning, the pure milk is sufficient. The parable in itself teaches how the steward deprived his master of his property, and artfully, but deceitfully and falsely, appropriated it to himself. For it is riot right, that he, who previously cheated his master out of his property, should also act most deceitfully to secure for himself easy days all his life; let us abide by this explanation. For the Lord concludes that the unjust steward did wisely. He does not praise the thing in itself as good, but blames him for previously squandering his master's goods, and afterwards shrewdly appropriating his property. This however the Lord commends, namely, that he did not forget himself, praising nought but his cunning and shrewdness. Just as when a flirt draws the whole world after her, and I say: she is a clever flirt, she knows her business. The Lord further concludes, that just as the steward is wise and shrewd in his transactions, so should we also be in obtaining eternal life.

6. And that you may understand this, take the passage of St. Paul to the Romans, 5:14, Adam a type of Christ. How can the Apostle compare Adam to Christ, since Adam brought upon us sin and death, and Christ brought righteousness and life? He compares Christ to Adam in regard to origin and source, but not in regard to the fruit and work. For as Adam is the source and chief of all sinners, so Christ is the source and head of all the saints. For we have inherited from Adam nothing but sin, condemnation and the eternal curse; but from Christ we have obtained righteousness and salvation. Now these two are not alike, for sin is punishable, and righteousness is praiseworthy. But he compares them in regard to their origin; just as by Adam sin and death came upon all men, so by Christ righteousness and life come upon us.

7. Thus he compares here the unjust to the just. As the unjust man acts shrewdly, though wrongly and like a rogue, so we also should act shrewdly but righteously in godliness. This is the proper understanding of this parable. For the Lord says: "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." So that the children of light should learn wisdom from the children of darkness or the world. Just as they are wise in their transactions, so should also the children of light be wise in their transactions. Therefore he adds, "in their generation." Here are truly three great questions, in which our adversaries quote this Gospel against us, when the Lord says: "Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles."

8. From this they try to conclude, that we must first of all do works to become good. For they say, here we read: "Make to yourselves friends," and this surely means to do works. Secondly, they say, that God here even desires to praise works, and not only that, but also to reward them. For here we read of work and its reward, and nothing is said of faith. In the, third place they claim that Christ here wishes to establish the comfort and help of the saints, when he says: "Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, when it shall fail, may receive you into the eternal tabernacles." Thus Gospel is made to directly oppose us, for it says: "Make to yourselves friends." That is, do good works, that they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles. This appears to mean that we should previously merit our reception by them into the eternal tabernacles. These

three points the Pope and his priests have claimed strongly for their side, and he has even called his indulgences the mammon of iniquity, mammon iniquitatis, unrighteous mammon.

9. If they thus attack us we must answer. Above all things it must be remembered that there is indeed no doubt whatever, that faith and love are the only source, as you have ever learned, that through faith we become inwardly pious, and we outwardly prove our faith by our works of love. For I have often said, that the Scriptures speak of man in a twofold manner. At one time of the inner man, and then again of the outer man. For the Scriptures properly make distinctions, just as when I speak of a foot, I do not mean a nose. So the Scriptures at one time speak of us as of the Spirit, spiritual, how we must stand before God by faith, for this purpose he sends forth his Word to which we hold, and afterwards he follows or endows with his Spirit. Thus the tree must be good beforehand, as you have recently heard.

10. This godliness cannot be attained by anyone without grace in his heart. If I am to make for myself friends by means of mammon, I must first be godly. For compare these two statements: A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit, and again, a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit. From which judge for yourself: if I am to do good and give away mammon, I must indeed be first good at heart, for God looketh upon the heart, and as he finds the heart, so he estimates our works. This I say, that men should not cram works into the heart, but let the heart first be good through faith, that the works may flow forth, otherwise you do no one any good; for if you have before given a person anything, it did not come from the heart. Hence the conclusion is, that I must first be good before I can do good. You cannot build from without inward, you do not commence at the roof, but at the foundation. Therefore faith must first be present.

11. Hence the Scriptures speak of us as the outer man, as we in our flesh and blood live among men. Now, that I am good, you do not know, nor do I. Hence I must establish my faith to the satisfaction of myself and of the people, and I must do good to my neighbour in order to prove my faith; thus the outward works are then merely signs of the inner faith. Works do not make me good, but show that I am good, and bear witness that the faith in me is genuine. In this manner must you understand the Scriptures here also, when they say: Give of your mammon and thus make to yourselves friends; that is, do good, that your faith may become approved. So we must also distinguish what pertains to the Spirit and what is the fruit of the Spirit.

12. Luke has described the fruit of faith thus: Give to the poor and make to yourself friends. As though he would say: I will not now speak of faith, but how you should prove your faith. Wherefore do good to your neighbour, and if you can give from the heart you may be assured that you believe. Thus the Scriptures speak at one time of fruits, at another time of faith. Again, they also speak of fruits, when they teach, Mat. 25:42, how the Lord will speak to the lost on the last day: "I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was athirst, and ye gave me no drink," and the like. This means, you have not believed, as I will prove to you by your own works.

13. The Scriptures in some passages speak of the outward conduct, and in others of the inner. Now if you will apply that which is said of the outward to the heart and confuse matters, you pervert it and do wrong. Hence you must let the distinction remain, and observe it. These expressions: I have been hungry, thirsty, shelterless, naked, sick and in prison, and you have shown me no work of mercy, refer to the external conduct, and signify as much as: you have never exhibited any outward conduct by which you have shown your faith; and to prove this, I appeal to the poor as witnesses.

Therefore, faith alone must be present first to make us good, after that good works must follow to prove our piety. This now is one point, namely, concerning works.

14. The second point is far more difficult, when the Lord says: "Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles." You say, our adversaries cry: you say a person shall not do good works to obtain eternal life; behold, here it reads differently. Now, what shall we answer? There are many passages here and there, showing how we wish to have merit on our part. By quoting these passages they intend to disprove to us God's mercy, and to lead us to satisfy God's righteousness by our good works. By all means beware of this, and insist that it is nothing but pure grace and mercy alone, and say: I am a poor sinner, O God, forgive me my sins, gladly will I say nothing about my merit, only say thou nothing of thy judgment! Thus David said: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight no man living is righteous," Ps. 143:2. And just for this reason Christ is given to us as our Mediator. If we wish to enter into judgment before God with our good works, we cast Christ aside as our Mediator, and cannot stand before God. Therefore let him remain our Mediator and abide thou under the shadow of his wings, as Psalm 91:4 reads: "He will cover thee with his pinions, and under his wings shalt thou take refuge." Therefore speak thus: O God, I would not merit anything before thee by my own works, but will employ them only to serve my neighbour, and I will depend only upon thy mercy.

15. You must hence remember that eternal life consists of two things, faith and what follows faith. If you go and believe and do good to your neighbour, everlasting life must follow, although you never think about it. Just as when you take a good drink, the taste will follow as soon as you drink, even though you do not seek it. So it is also with hell, the damned do not seek it, but it follows unsought and undesired, and he must inherit it whether he will or no. This St. Paul also says, I Thes. 2:15-16, of the persecutors of the Gospel: They "drove out us, and pleased not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved; to fill up their sins always, but the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost." As though he would say: They only persecute us to fill the measure of their sins and fairly to deserve hell, and ever urge their sins more and more until they become entirely hardened, and finally have no regard for either God or man.

16. Thus the Scriptures declare here, that we should do good, so that we may be saved; and this is not meant to say, that we must first earn salvation by our works, but that we must believe, and it will follow of itself. Therefore mark well, that you do not take what follows for what goes before, and keep yourself free from the merit of works. Should God give us heaven for our works? No, no, he has already given us heaven freely, out of mere mercy. Therefore give unto the poor, in order that the eternal tabernacles may follow, and not that you may merit them by your works.

17. Observe then that these passages are explained in two different ways. First, that a man should seek salvation by works, which is false. Second, as a consequence of faith, which is right. Therefore, you are not to seek heaven with any kind of works, but only to do the works freely, then the result, eternal life, will follow of itself without your seeking. For if I should see heaven standing open and could merit it by picking up a straw, I would not do it, lest I might say: Behold, I have earned it! No, no, not to my deserving, but to God be the glory, who has given me his Son to abolish sin and hell for me.

18. In the third place, you should faithfully hold fast to the following words: "That they may receive

you into the eternal tabernacles." Behold, they say, here it stands written that they receive us into heaven, how then can you say that we dare not place the saints as mediators before God, and that they cannot help us to heaven? Here observe, that we have but one Redeemer before God, and he is Christ. For thus St. Paul speaks, 1 Tim. 2:5: "For there is one God, one Mediator also between God and man, himself man, Christ Jesus." Again, Christ himself in John 14:6 says: "I am the way, no man cometh unto the Father but by me." Therefore we must not seek our consolation in any of the saints, but in Christ alone, through whose merits alone we and all Saints are saved. Therefore I will not give a penny for St. Peter's merits, that he should help me. He cannot help himself, but whatever he has he has from God by faith in Christ. Now then, if he cannot help himself, how then can he do anything for me? Consequently I must have another, who is Christ, God and man in one.

19. But how can he say: "Make to yourselves friends, that they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles?" This passage we understand from Mat. 25:37-40, where Christ tells us how the King will answer them who will say on the last day: "Lord, when saw we thee hungry, athirst, homeless, naked, sick and in prison? Verily I say unto you," he will say, "inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, ye did it unto me." Here the Lord shows who those friends are, namely, the poor and needy. As though to say: when you make them your friends, then you have me as your friend also, for they are my members.

20. Now one thought remains: How will they receive us into the eternal tabernacles, as the text here says? Will they lead us in by the hand? No, but when we come before the judgment seat of God, poor persons whom we have assisted here, will stand in heaven and say: he has washed my feet, he gave me drink, food, clothing and the like. He will certainly be my friend and a witness of my faith, whatever words he may use to declare it. Then a beggar will be more useful to me than St. Peter or St. Paul, for there none of these can help. But when a beggar comes and says: 'My God, this he has done unto me as thy child! that will help me, for God will say: Whatsoever you have done unto these, you have done unto me. Therefore these poor people will not be our helpers but our witnesses so that God shall receive us. By this I would not object to your honouring St. Peter and other saints, for he is a member of Christ and of God. But you do better by giving your neighbour a penny, than by building a church of gold for St. Peter. For to help your neighbour is commanded, but it is not commanded to build a church to St. Peter. Now everything is twisted the wrong way, one goes to a certain passage in St. James, another to Aix-la-Chapelle, another to Rome, to seek help from the departed saints. But the poor people, who are the real sainthood, are left behind lying in the streets. Let this be sufficient on this Gospel.

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