

“Shall we steal and lie?” Luke 16:1-13

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.” And the manager said to himself, “What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.” So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He said, “A hundred measures of oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.” Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” He said, ‘A hundred measures¹ of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

Today we have our mission Sunday, and what a strange Gospel reading we happen to have for today. About this shrewd manager and his master. What is Jesus teaching His disciples? Is there anything that can be useful for mission?

In the early church, when it grew and flourished in hostile Roman empire, some of the opponents of Christianity used this text arguing that here this Jesus teaches His followers to steal and lie, and when they are caught, to steal and lie even more.

Is that really what Jesus was teaching? This is not a tricky question. Of course, not! Yes, but how should we understand this strange parable? And it is strange and obscure, not doubt about that.

With this parable Jesus teaches us something that is extremely important for us Christians to understand. Especially as we are sent to share the Good News about Jesus with those who don't know Him yet.

Jesus teaches us, that when it comes to our salvation, we are to put our trust in the gracious God only, to rely on Him only, on His merciful character, and not on our

imaginary goodness. Jesus teaches, that your salvation is undeserved gift of this gracious God, and not your salary for your exemplary life.

In this parable the main character is not the shrewd manager, the main character in this parable is the rich man, the master. Jesus uses the character of the master to teach us something about our God the Father.

Let's take a look at the master's character and then we'll see what can we learn from it on this mission Sunday. If this parable was made into a movie, that could be quite a thriller. So much tension in the air. How will this all work out?

The rich man had received reports that his manager was wasting his property. We can picture the rich man as an owner, and his manager as an executive who oversees all his possessions, who makes all his deals, and to whom the management of the whole property is entrusted.

Besides, he enjoys complete trust of his master. Now this manager had betrayed the trust, he had wasted the property, most probably the problem was not simply a neglect of his responsibilities, but rather a theft.

Here we have the first hint about the rich man's character. If you are very rich and greedy, no one will care if someone steals from you, instead they may quietly rejoice that, yes, he gets what he deserves.

Not in this case. Obviously the master was loved and respected, people in his community actually cared about him. They were concerned that someone is abusing his trust and wasting his property.

Now think about this – what do you do, when you find that a person, who has an access to all your money, is stealing from you? First thing you do is to block the access, to protect what is left, right?

What did this rich man do? He called his manager and asked: “What is this I hear about you?” Here again we can see the character of the rich man. He could have just arrested his manager, obviously the reports were quite serious.

Instead, even in that situation he is still patient and gracious, he still gives opportunity to the manager to explain things. “What is this that I hear?” In response the manager says ... nothing.

He knows his master that he is gracious, and that's why he is still there, and not in jail. But he also knows that he is just, he won't tolerate lies. His silence is like a confession. “Yes, I am guilty.”

The manager knows his master's character well. If he admits his sin and repents, his master will be faithful and forgiving. Thus the manager keeps silent. And he is right. His master keeps acting graciously. Instead of commanding guards to capture

the thief and to throw him in jail, he simply fires him and demands to return all the books.

And this is where the shrewdness of the manager shows. To give him a bit of credit, he actually considers several options. He is realistic about his prospects. He could work on the field, but he is not healthy and strong enough.

Begging is another option – but he is ashamed of that. Then he comes up with this brilliant plan. He will do something that will make others to offer him job, when he is fired. And this is his plan. He will bet on his master's gracious character.

He knows he has just a little time. So he sends quickly for his master's debtors one by one. So far no one knows that he was fired, as his master did it gently and graciously speaking with him one to one. The manager uses this situation.

He brings in the debtors and asks them about the size of their debts. These are some very big numbers that they are dealing with there. In our currency it would be hundreds of thousands of dollars.

What is he doing? Because in the eyes of the debtors, he is still in charge of the rich man's property, they think that that is him, who has arranged these great deals for them. That's him, the manager. What a great guy!

He works quickly, clock is ticking, stress is enormous, if he is caught that's the end. So he meets with all the debtors of his master and essentially makes them if not his friends, then at least his debtors.

For that's him, who has just arranged these great deals for them. Then he packs the books and turns them in. And then the master commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. What?!

This is what at first may be hard for us to understand, for we live too far from the culture of that day. But it is rather simple. Society in Jesus' days was very much community oriented. When something significant happened, people would share and discuss it right away. Especially something that significant.

It was like SA government would announce that for this year all taxes are waived, all of them, for everyone. Wouldn't that be a big deal? It would be huge. The same way the word about the unusual generosity of the rich man would spread like fire.

In eyes of the community, the rich man had just made their day, more – their year. Great celebration was due and probably already had begun to praise his generosity and care for the community. What a great and generous man!

By the time the manager turns in his books, the rich man already receives reports that the whole community is grateful and excited because of what he has seemingly done. Now he has two choices.

The master could choose to tell the truth and ruin the whole party, to take back the joy and gratitude that is overflowing, or – he can pay the price and allow the community to continue their celebration.

And this is where the shrewdness of the manager lies. He knows the master. He knows he is gracious and merciful man. He is sure that the master won't want to hurt others because of what the manager has done. And he is right.

This is why the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. He didn't commend him for his theft, nor for his lies, nor for wasting even more of his possessions. He commended him for the manager understood what kind of person the master was.

Then Jesus adds: "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." So what can we learn from this parable? How is this useful for our mission?

The point that Jesus is making is that people in this world are often more shrewd in their actions than we are in our relationships with our Father in heaven. The manager risked his life putting everything on the gracious character of the master.

We are to do exactly the same when it comes to our salvation. To put all our trust on the character of God. For He is merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ..." (Exo 34:6-7)

We tend to forget it. We tend to rely on our own actions. We want to be in control. We want to justify ourselves. We want to be that good, so that God would owe us for our great lives.

We don't want to admit that sin has corrupted us through and through and that we justly deserve God's wrath. That we need His forgiveness, that we can live only from His grace and forgiveness.

But this is exactly the message that Jesus brings us. Don't look at yourself, don't judge yourself wondering whether you have been good enough. It's a waste of time. That's clear, your haven't, you can't, and the Good News are - you don't have to.

Instead, put all your trust in God, in Jesus. He did what we can't. He was innocent, righteous, holy, he was a perfect man, fulfilling God's holy will, – loving God the Father more than anything and loving us as Himself.

And because He was innocent, and because He was true God, He took the blame for all your sins upon Himself. Now all your guilt is taken away. Our gracious Master has paid the price, now you are forgiven and can have a good conscience.

Forgiven, beloved children of your Heavenly Father. This is who you are. Don't look at yourselves and don't worry about your goodness, it doesn't matter, for all your sins are forgiven, and the gift of eternal life is yours.

Just put your trust in your Master, for He is gracious and faithful, He will give you what He has promised, - forgiveness of all your sins and eternal life. Not because you deserve it, but because of His own gracious character.

How is this important on our mission Sunday? Because this is the message our gracious God wants all people to know. Everyone knows that they are accountable for their lives. Our conscience tells that much.

And people think that by not killing, by not stealing and by doing a few good things they will earn God's favour. On our own, without the Word of God we are blind when it comes to our sin.

Like people with schizophrenia don't realize they live in a phantasy, the same way we are not able to comprehend our sinfulness. All people need to hear God's holy will, they need their eyes to be open.

To see that God's wrath is what we deserve. And only then, once they know what's wrong with them, once they know their diagnoses, they are ready for God's medicine. The Gospel about Jesus.

Then they are ready to hear that there is God given solution. That gracious and merciful God has done everything to receive everyone in His eternal Kingdom, we just need to be humble enough to repent and to accept His gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Trusting not in our goodness, but in the goodness of our Master and Saviour Jesus Christ. This is what we can learn from this parable. Put your trust in God's grace. Tell others about this gracious God and teach them to put their trust in Jesus.

This is why we are here, isn't it? And may the Holy Spirit guide us and bless us with His wisdom, as we continue this wonderful work – searching for the lost, and bringing them here, into God's family.

And the peace of God that surpasses all our understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.

Amen.