Second to Last Sunday of the Church Year

Luke 16:1 – 9

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager
1He 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. 2And 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.' 3And 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. 4I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' 5So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' 7Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' 8The 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. 9And 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.

Dick Fuld was a successful businessman. He led the once highly successful investment bank Lehman Brothers until it collapsed in September 2008. According to the investigation report, shortly before the end of each quarter Lehman temporarily moved around $50 billion in debt off its balance sheet and then brought it back a few days later. In this way, investors and regulators were deceived. Shortly before the final collapse, Fuld even sold his villa to his wife for ten dollars.

Jesus also knew stories about dishonest businessmen. The parable he tells us today shows that Jesus was well aware of such things, with a certain twinkle in his eye. Yet this parable is somewhat unsettling. Jesus does not launch into a furious condemnation of such businessmen. Instead, he uses precisely such a case to teach us something: Be as shrewd as this clever manager who knows what to do when the books are being audited!

We must state very clearly, however, that Jesus is not teaching us how to conduct business. The point of comparison lies solely in the fact that the manager assesses his situation soberly and therefore knows exactly what he must do to save himself from disaster. That is where Jesus directs our attention. And somewhat wistfully he says: If only the children of light were as wise as the children of this world! When Jesus speaks of the children of light, he means us Christians.

In what way are we Christians unwise? First of all, we fail to recognize that we are guilty. We deceive ourselves when we think that we live our lives without guilt. Like the manager in Jesus' parable, we are merely stewards. We do not truly own anything. Everything is only on loan. This includes the gifts God has given us from birth, as well as the earthly possessions we have received.

The idea of using all these things for our own benefit is intriguing. For our spiritual lives, however, this idea is dangerous. The things of this world can become idols. An idol also possesses a certain fascination. It promises power. It promises security and comfort. Therefore, it is desired with passionate devotion. People place all their trust in it. They hope in it: for a better life, for the respect of others. This is a way of thinking, in which we justify ourselves. Quietly we think that we have handled life quite well, and this is exactly where the foolishness Jesus addresses is hidden: we no longer reckon with the Judge of the world. After all, we have managed to make something of ourselves.

So, Jesus calls out to us: Do not be foolish but be wise like the dishonest manager! This means nothing other than recognizing with sober clarity that the final accounting is coming. And it is coming soon. During this season, when the leaves fall from the trees and the days grow dark, the church year directs our thoughts precisely to God's judgment. We remember that our lives will come to an end and that we must give an account. The first thing Jesus teaches us is this: Be wise! Realize that your life has an end and that you will have to give an account sooner than you think.

Jesus tells us this parable so that we understand: your money, your possessions, your intellect, everything belongs to the Creator. It has only been entrusted to you for a short time. And the Giver of these gifts wants to free you from their grip today so that your heart will not become attached to them. Despite all our complaints, we live in relative luxury. And those very complaints show that we no longer see things realistically. We no longer view them as gifts from God, but as rights that belong to us and that others want to take away. That is unwise.

In the second step, Jesus explains what we should do. The dishonest manager clearly recognizes that the reckoning is coming. He also knows that he has no chance of standing his ground. He neither denies it nor tries to cover it up. Since he cannot do hard labor and is ashamed to beg, he devises a plan. He summons all his master's debtors and forgives a large part of what they owe. These debtors are now indebted to him. He can rely on them to treat him favorably in the future.

Jesus summarizes this dishonest action of the manager with a remarkable statement:

"Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

The behavior of the dishonest manager, whom Jesus sets before us as an example, demonstrates clear realism. Jesus is by no means out of touch with the world. He does not say that we should hide somewhere in the wilderness so that worldly things cannot influence us. On the contrary, we are to make use of the things of this world, namely wealth itself. Jesus does not say, "Throw wealth away!" Rather, he says: Let it serve you. Use it for something meaningful. What a free and generous attitude!

Jesus topples the idol from its throne by making clear to whom everything belongs and who the Judge is. From that moment on, we are set free from its terrible power. If someone has money, he can use it for something worthwhile. If he has none, that need not make him anxious, for our hearts belong to God!

When we understand that we and our hearts belong to God, the thought never even occurs to us that we must purchase freedom with checks or buy eternal life with money. We simply give, freely and without calculation. And in this lies the whole Gospel. This is also what distinguishes us from the rogue who selfishly provides for his retirement. For we know full well from whose account all our possessions come.

It is no coincidence that the parable of the dishonest manager immediately follows the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son is like the dishonest manager: he knows his guilt and his misery. Yet he still counts on the love of his father.

Through the parable of the dishonest steward, Jesus shows us that he knows our distress. He understands our human limitations completely. Faced with our total bankruptcy, Jesus could have done one of two things.

As the righteous steward, he could have pronounced the devastating verdict:

"Do you see? You simply cannot do it. You are bankrupt! And you have no hope whatsoever of escaping this misery. Away with you! I want nothing more to do with you!"

Or he could have said:

"I have discovered thousands of mistakes in your account. Now you must work twice as hard to correct them and make sure you never fall into debt again. And if you really try your best, perhaps God will forgive one or two mistakes, or overlook the places where you failed."

But no, Jesus does not do that. Precisely by showing us how radically indebted we are, he is gracious! Jesus knows how desperate the human condition is. And for that very reason he shows us that we can only be saved through someone else's account. That is exactly why Jesus came!

Jesus knows that no one can come to God by his own strength. He knows that no one can make himself righteous. He also knows that no one can love God with all his heart or love his neighbor as he ought. And that is precisely why Jesus tells us this radical parable. He wants to say to us:

You cannot make yourselves righteous before God. You are bankrupt! You absolutely must seek another way, or you will face judgment.

And that other way is Jesus himself. Amen.