

Lenten Reflection on the Unjust Steward

Reverend Clergy, beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Our reflection tonight will be on this upcoming Sunday's theme of the Parable of the Unjust Steward. A steward in ancient times was a manager of a wealthy man's household and property. The Steward in the parable was accused of wasting his master's possessions and was informed that he was to give an account for his stewardship. It's no wonder the Church uses this parable as one of its Sunday themes during the Great Fast because through it our Lord speaks directly to us.

What have we been entrusted with by our Lord and Master? We pray in the Divine Liturgy, quoting the words of St. James, "For all good gifts and all perfect bounties come down from above, from thee, the Father of light..." Therefore everything we have comes from Him. Have we been good Stewards of His possessions? Or have we squandered these divinely granted gifts? Has God given us money? Are we using it to help build His kingdom by supporting His Church and feeding the poor? Has He given us organizational skills, the ability to teach, or the ability to listen? We all have gifts we can use for Him. This parable leads us to reflect upon these questions, and where our Christian life is found to be lacking, it is meant to lead us unto repentance, for someday we will be called to account for our own stewardship.

St. Nerses the Gracefilled in his book "Jesus, Son Only Begotten" comments on this parable that the Church has been made the Steward of God's Word. It is our Church leader's obligation, especially the Catholicos (says St. Nerses), to instruct us in God's truth. It is our obligation to listen and learn from them, and then to share God's Word with others by our life and words. As the Sharagan for this Sunday prays to the Lord: "You who have built Your Church highest of all in mystery and have ordained in it the preacher of the Word of truth as steward; we bless Your inconceivable power!"

Getting back to the parable, the Steward does a surprising thing. Inspired primarily by self-preservation, he goes around to all of his Master's debtors and substantially reduces their debts. His hope in doing this, the Gospel tells us, is to befriend these people so that after he is fired, they will welcome him into their homes. When the Master learns of his steward's shrewdness, surprisingly, he is

delighted by such foresight and in turn commends his Steward for his diligent effort.

Our Lord then gives us one of the lessons of this parable when He states, “the sons of this age are more shrewd in their own generation than are the sons of the light.” “This is meant as a lesson for the sons of light, [we] Christian believers, who ought to be as shrewd about [our] pursuit of godliness as unbelievers are about their own businesses” (The Orthodox Study Bible).

Another lesson of this parable, besides that of good stewardship, is the importance of almsgiving. The three main pillars of the Great Fast are: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. The money we save by fasting is meant to be shared with the poor.

Our Lord offers us a second lesson of the parable when He states, “I say to you, make for yourselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness, that, whenever you fail, they might receive you into the everlasting tabernacles.” Mammon is an Aramaic word meaning “wealth.” Our Lord calls this mammon or wealth “unrighteous” as “a warning about the dangers of money, which can corrupt” (OSB). Of course money is not evil. It can be used for good or for evil. It is “the LOVE of money,” St. Paul warns, which is a root of all evils. This is why Jesus states in this parable unequivocally:

“Not one household slave is able to serve two lords; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to the one and despise the other. You are not able to serve both God and mammon.”

Not only this but almsgiving is given an eschatological dimension by our Lord, one that refers to the Last Judgment. In a sense, life, as the Steward knew it was about to suddenly end. Realizing this, he made haste to prepare for the “next life” he was about to begin. He made use of “unrighteous mammon,” the riches of this world, to befriend others in hope that as he entered his “new life,” they might welcome him into their tabernacles or homes.

Our Holy Orthodox Fathers of the Church tell us that we can do the same. Like the steward, we know that the world in which we live has a definite end. We too, like the steward, can use the unrighteous mammon or riches of this world to prepare for the next life. Our Holy Fathers say, if we befriend the poor and needy in this world with our abundance, by giving alms, this favor will be returned to us in the next life. Our help and concern for them now will redound to our own credit later at the Last Judgement.

Thus the great 4th century Latin Father, St. Ambrose of Milan states, “‘Make for yourselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness,’ so that by giving to the poor, we may match the grace of the angels and all the saints for ourselves.” And the 11th century Byzantine Father, Blessed Theophylact of Bulgaria states, “Let us make friends for ourselves of this wealth. Thus ‘whenever you fail,’ [our Lord here means], ‘whenever you all shall depart from this life...’ [if at the Final Judgement], we should become fainthearted, these friends [will] welcome us into their heavenly tabernacles.” In other words, those whom we help in this world will be our good defense before the awesome judgement seat of Christ. As the Orthodox Study Bible states, “At death, these poor friends will be the first to welcome us their benefactors into the eternal Kingdom.”

In closing, the Church like a loving mother presents this parable to us every year during the Great Fast as a warning and an invitation. It’s a warning not to misuse the gifts and possessions from God which we’ve been entrusted with. It’s an invitation to use these possessions and all of our gifts for the good of others and thereby to help ourselves in life everlasting. This yearly reminder is our chance, like that given to the unjust steward, to do something to rectify any mismanagement of God’s gifts.

Let us recall the words of the Archangel Raphael in the Book of Tobit: “Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and righteousness. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a fullness of life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies.”

May our Lord Jesus grant us to be good stewards: For all good gifts and all perfect bounties come down from above, from Thee, the Father of Light, and to Thee is befitting glory, dominion and honor, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Given during the Great Fast of 2005
Sdn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian