

Luke 16:1 –9

THE MERCIFUL MASTER

And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee ? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

'The lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely'.

It has been said that the most important question we face as human beings is: How do we stand before God? With that goes a further most important question: Who is the God before whom we stand, and how does He regard us?

Jesus told many of his parables to answer those very questions. But his act of telling them was not just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. These are life and death questions, and the one who told the parables has been called 'the Author of life' (Acts 3:15). As we hear him speaking these words, we are confronted in our own lives with these life and death questions: How do we stand before God? Who is the God before whom we stand, and how does He regard us?

The story Jesus told was of a man who had failed. He was inefficient, irresponsible, and wasteful of other people's resources. I don't know if you have ever been in that position yourself, or have had to deal with someone like that. In a sense, this is true of the whole human race –all of us. Look at what we have been given, and look at what we have done with it. The gift of life to be lived, and a whole creation to care for –how well have we done with these things? Where would we stand if we were called to account for it?

And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.

That makes sense, doesn't it? The man doesn't deserve to remain in the master's service. He is fired, and he needs to hand over the books. Note that the steward makes no reply to the master. Normally in this setting, Jesus' hearers would expect the steward to come up with a whole list of excuses and objections, but he does not. His silence is an admission of guilt. This is not a case of unfair dismissal. He knows he has deserved it. He knows he does not have a leg to stand on.

That is part one of the answer to our big question, How do we stand before God? It is an indispensable part, for all of us. All of us, sooner or later, need to come to the realisation that this is how we are before God. Isaiah the prophet came to it when he had a vision of God in the temple:

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts! (Isa. 6:5).

Peter the apostle came to it when the Lord Jesus blessed him with two boatloads of fish:

Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord (Luke 5:9).

The thief on the cross came to it as he hung beside Jesus, and said to his fellow criminal on the other side:

Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds (Luke 23:40 -41).

Before God, without excuse –without a leg to stand on. It is never a comfortable position to be in –in fact, it is quite devastating. But, having said that, it is a good place to come to. There is no pretence, and no dishonesty. No excuses. At last we are being straightforward with God. And there is a sense of blessed relief about that.

Especially when we realise that we are still standing there, before God –we have not been written off, or wiped out. The steward realised an amazing thing about his master. In other parables and sayings of Jesus, anyone in his position would have been thrown into gaol (see Mat. 5:25; 18:30), and recompense demanded. None of that happens here. The master does not take it out on him. He does not say, ‘Now you must pay it all back’. He does not send him to the debtor’s prison. He does not even scold him. The master is just and righteous, and requires a high standard of honesty and reliability. But the master is also merciful, and incredibly generous.

This is vital to know in order to understand rightly what the steward does next. It is also vital for us to know, with regard to the God before whom we stand. For it is on the basis of this knowledge of the master that the steward now stakes his all, and acts wisely. What does he do? In the short time he now has before the books need to be handed over, and before anyone else knows that he has been dismissed, the steward acts in haste and secrecy. He calls in each of his master’s debtors in one by one. It appears that they are renting land from the master for a fixed amount of the crop at harvest time. The steward agrees with each one of them for a markedly reduced amount owing –in some cases up to 50%! He is able to do this, because the tenants still believe that he is acting on the authority of the master. He is being extremely generous with the master’s resources, and they appreciate the master’s generosity. They are also gratefully indebted to the steward.

What is the master going to do when he finds out? Is he going to say to all the tenants that he is not as generous as the steward has made out? Is he going to demand that the original amounts be reinstated, and that the steward pay compensation and damages? The steward has risked everything on what he has already seen of the master’s mercy and generosity. And, in the story, it pays off. The master bears in full the cost of what the steward has done –not only the cost of his wastefulness, but also the cost of his later generosity on the master’s behalf. The master actually commends the steward for seeing that the master is that way –supremely merciful and generous – and for having the wisdom to act on that, decisively and wholeheartedly.

It’s a crazy story –no self-respecting worldly master would ever let him get away with it. Jesus’ hearers would have found it laughable –a highly comical situation. Most of Jesus’ stories, I am convinced, are told with the style and incisiveness of a good newspaper cartoonist –with notable exaggeration and an absurd sense of humour. I am sure we take Jesus’ stories much too seriously –I would love to have seen the twinkle in his eye as he told them!

But this story underlies the importance of the questions with which we began: if we want to know how we stand before God, we need to know the nature of the God before whom we

stand. Like the steward, we have failed. We are unrighteous, and dishonest, and we have been caught out. How is God going to regard us now? It all hangs on the kind of God He really is. Are we prepared to take Jesus' word for it, as he tells us in this story, that we have a heavenly Father who is supremely gracious, merciful and generous, and for the rest of our lives to act on that decisively, wholeheartedly, and with everything we have got?

If we don't think God is like that –if we have the idea that God is much more mean – spirited and cagey and calculating than that, then we will pussyfoot and tiptoe around the issues of life, and most likely get them wrong. But if we are prepared to trust that God is really the way the steward found out the master to be, and if we are prepared to act on that as he did, all unrighteous as we are, by pressing in on our heavenly Father's gracious mercy and vast generosity, then we may come to hear God's commendation of us when the judgment is made: 'You've got My measure! You have true wisdom. Well done, good and faithful servant!'

It all hangs on the nature of the God before whom we stand. Are we to take Jesus' word that He is this way? We have more than Jesus' word to back this up. We have his action as well. What did we say the master did with regard to the steward's misdemeanours? The master himself bore in full the cost of what the steward had done –not only the cost of his wastefulness, but also the cost of his later generosity on the master's behalf. Where is it that God has borne in Himself the horrendous cost of our squandering of His gifts, and the wonderful cost of underwriting every human act of mercy and generosity done in His name? It was when God did not withhold His only Son, but gave him up for us all to our disgrace and death and judgement on the cross. We believe on Jesus there, and trust that in him there is all the mercy and generosity of God our heavenly Father, and then we can accept and act upon what he told us in this story. We refuse to believe on Jesus there on that cross, and the story still won't make any sense to us.

It is what Jesus was going to do on that cross that gave him the right to tell this story in the first place. It is what gives him the right to be heard and obeyed here this morning, as we receive his good news to us in this story, and act upon it – decisively, wholeheartedly, and with everything we have got.