

Luke 16:1-15

When the prophet Elijah gathered the people together at Mt. Carmel, he put this question to them: *“How long will you hesitate? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”* No third option was given: *“Follow both the Lord and Baal,”* for such a thing was impossible.

We don't hear of Baal today, except in church. We would be hard-pressed to find Baal worshipers anywhere in the world, let alone in East-Central Missouri...unless we understand that Baal has changed his name to money. When we handle money, we are handling something that is an idol and god for many people.

As Christians we know, as the Apostle Paul points out in 1 Cor. 8, that *“there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.”* And so we can use money, even as we use food, to serve our bodies. But for many, money is not their servant; it is their master. It has become a god and idol to them. Anyone who is mastered by money does not have God as their master. The people could not follow both God and Baal. Jesus puts it this way in our text: *“No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money.”*

The parable Jesus tells of the dishonest manager is a comparison of opposites. This manager was dishonest in his heart, and the way he used his master's money gives evidence of this fact. First he wasted his master's possessions. Then, when he was about to be fired as manager, he stole his master's money by secretly lowering the debts of those who owed money to his master. He did this for his own selfish reasons without the approval of his master. This parable teaches us the opposite of how we, as Christians, are to live.

You and I are managers just as the man in the parable. We are not the owners of anything in our life. Our money, our time, our possessions, even our very life, does not belong to us, but to God. We are managers of these things while we live in the world. When we act like the man in the parable, we show that our heart, like his, is dishonest and selfish. We act like him when we use what God entrusts to us in an unrighteous manner.

We should see ourselves as travelers here on earth. When you take a trip and stay at a hotel, the attitude that you have toward your hotel room must be the same that you have in all of life. What I mean is that when you open the door to your room and unpack your bags, you see yourself as a guest in that hotel and not as the owner. You make use of the bed, the table and chairs, the television, the coffee maker, but you do not take these things with you when you leave. That would be stealing, for they do not belong to you. But it's not stealing to sleep on the bed, turn on the TV, and use the shower while you are there. In fact, that's what it means to be a guest; you are to make use of these things.

Now some hotel guests trash their rooms while they are staying in them. They burn holes in their bed lines with their cigarettes, they break chairs, they put holes in the walls. This is comparable to the man in Jesus' parable. He used the possessions entrusted to him in a dishonest manner. He acted like his master's money was his to use for his own selfish purposes.

Every day of our life we are staying as guests in the hotel room that God owns. He is gracious in blessing us, not only with our basic needs, but also with many amenities. We like lots of amenities when we stay at a hotel...free breakfast, swimming pool and Jacuzzi, free shuttles...these and other amenities make our stay more enjoyable. Have we stopped to consider all the amenities in our life with which God blesses us? These we take for granted, and along with life itself, we see ourselves as the owners of all that we have from God, and not as hotel guests.

And this becomes a problem for us. Martin Luther puts it this way, "*Our possessions should be in our hands, not in our hearts.*" He nails it. God wants us to use all He gives us as guests, and so He puts these into our hands. But when they move into our hearts, we become the dishonest manager in the parable. We become the owners of the hotel. And we become servants to these idols which have taken over our hearts.

When our possessions move from our hands to our heart, there is no longer room for Christ to live there. "*You cannot serve two masters,*" He tells us. We cannot have both God and money in our hearts. So which will it be? Elijah puts his question to us: "How long will you hesitate? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if money, follow it."

We're quick to say the Lord is God, but do our actions always agree with our words? If the Lord is God of our heart, then why do we act as if our time belonged to us? If the Lord is God of our heart, then why do we spend money lavishly on ourselves, but give so little to the Lord? If the Lord is God of our hearts, then why do we act as though our bodies and our talents are not God's, but belong to us, and so we begrudgingly serve Him within His church? "*No one can serve two masters.*" Daily we must ask ourselves, "Who, or what, really is the master of my heart?"

Now if I were to end the sermon here and leave you with this, I guarantee that not much would change. The Law convicts us, but does not change us. We may make a few changes in our life for a while, but these would be for the wrong reason, out of guilt, and not from love and joy. The Law we just heard is necessary to cut away at our sinful hearts, but only the Gospel can put Christ in our heart.

"*God knows your hearts,*" Jesus told the Pharisees. Within their hearts they were lovers of money. God is no lover of money. Money is in His hands to give you what you need, but you are in His heart. Jesus did not hesitate. He made it clear that He was not serving two masters. He came to serve you. There was no place in His heart for the things of this world; there was room only for you. He turned away from Satan's offer to give Him all the glory and wealth of the world. He refused to help Himself by His own miracles. Jesus emptied that which was even in His hands, for He came not to take, but to serve. And so with you in His heart, He opened His hands to be pierced with nails. The cross of Jesus gives evidence of what is in God's heart: love, mercy toward you.

Jesus took your bill, like in His parable, and He lowered it to zero. Making money our master, we had a debt of sin too great for us to pay. Jesus paid it for you. He carried your sin. He suffered your punishment. He did this to be Lord and Master of your heart. He who was your Servant has now become your Lord. As your Lord, He forgives you. There is no guilt, no sin charged to you. And He gives Himself to you. Here in His Sacrament He enters you through bread and wine so that He alone is the Master of your heart and Lord of your life.

With Christ in your heart, you are free to serve with your hands, for your hands, now, are the hands of Christ. With Christ as your Master, your hands now use the money God places there to love your neighbor, to serve within Jesus' church. Because Jesus is the Master you serve, you freely and cheerfully give back to Him whether in the offering plate, or also in how you use your time and talents.

Friends, it is so difficult, in fact it is impossible for us, when God puts possessions in our hands, not to make idols of these and move them into our hearts. But God does the impossible. He keeps drawing you here to His Word and His Sacrament to keep putting Christ into your heart. And with Christ reigning there, no rival is able to enter and become your master. May God grant this to all of us for Jesus' sake. Amen.