

Luke 16:1-15

I'm sure that many of you have played the game Hot Potato. For those who haven't, all the players assemble in a group and pass, or toss, an object such as a small bag of beans to each other. They do this while music is playing. When the music suddenly stops, the one who is stuck holding the hot potato is the loser. Obviously, the players do not want to hold on to the object that is passed to them. They treat it like a hot potato and quickly pass it on because they do not know when the music will stop playing to end the game.

Jesus' parable before us, and the axioms following it, point out that we are playing this game and have been for some time. Yet not with an object such as a bag of beans. We play it with money. Yes, money is the hot potato. But the interesting thing about the way we play the game is that we are reluctant to pass the hot potato to others. We like holding on to it, treating it not like a hot potato at all, but like a treasure; one that is ours and that we intend to keep.

Several times in our text Jesus refers to money as "*unrighteous wealth*." Not because money is evil, but comparing it to the "*true riches*." Money is neutral. It's not good or evil. Yet the way it is used is either good or evil. And the one who has money, whether a little or a lot, cannot stay neutral towards it.

This is why money is a hot potato. It's not ours to have and to keep. It's on loan to us from God. He passes to us unrighteous wealth, and it's a test to see what we do with it. Will we use this hot potato wisely and for the good of others, passing it on to them, or will we hoard it for ourselves as if our life revolves around it?

The latter is what happened in Sodom. We are well aware of the wickedness of Sodom and how God destroyed this city. But do we know that their wickedness included hoarding and holding on to money? Listen to the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 16: "*This was the guilt of Sodom; she...had abundance...but did not help the poor and needy...Therefore (God) removed them when (He) saw it.*" The people of Sodom were not destroyed for being less than generous. But the sinful use of their unrighteous wealth was a symptom of a serious and fatal disease. They chose money instead of the Lord as their god.

"*You cannot serve God and money,*" says Jesus in our text. You cannot have them both as your master, but only one. If we do not master the money God loans to us, it will end up mastering us, and it will become our god.

So we must never let money enter our heart. It must stay in our hands, because Christ dwells in our heart, and money will take over and drive Him out if allowed to enter there. In our hands, money is useful. It can be passed on to others to help them. It can be used to spread the Gospel. And so Jesus ends His parable by saying, "*Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth.*" Use it for the good of others, and win friends of Christ with it. For one day the music will stop playing.

Now the text before us is Law...sanctification...how we are to live as Christians. And we may not much enjoy hearing it. The Pharisees certainly did not. They ridiculed Jesus after hearing the same things you are hearing. But they, it says, *were lovers of money*. They were failing to pass

the test, weren't they? Jesus had the true riches for them, but they loved unrighteous wealth. Unless they repented, they would be caught holding the hot potato in the end and would lose the game of life.

How are we able to live differently from them? By the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Through the Law, which we need to hear, for we are sinners who fail daily as stewards of what God loans to us...through the Law the Holy Spirit works repentance in us. He shows us how we do choose to make money our god so often. We all fail in this way. There isn't one of us here who is beyond the need to repent of how we have used unrighteous wealth.

And there isn't one of us here who is beyond hope. Jesus came to suffer and die for us because daily you and I do fail the test. But He did not fail. Jesus was not caught holding onto unrighteous wealth, but He died holding on to a cross, because His heart was reserved for you. He was no lover of money. He gave everything away, even His own life, because it's you He loves. Jesus is devoted to you. He serves you and your needs. He loans to you what you need for this life, but much more, He gives you, not as a loan but as an eternal gift, the true riches. These riches are yours right now. In your baptism, Jesus made them your own, and nothing can take them from you.

Your place in the eternal dwellings is not determined by how you use unrighteous wealth. Your place there is pure gift in Christ. These words of Jesus about money in our text are sanctification not justification. These words on the use of money are about how we want to live as Christians, but not about why we are Christians. You are God's child, a Christian, through your baptism. You are forgiven of all your sins, and not because you try to live rightly as a Christian. God forgives you purely from His merciful heart. He forgives you because Jesus suffered and died for you.

And for this reason you want Him, and not money, to be your God. For this reason you want to use money in a way that is pleasing to God. He will help you. And when you fail, He forgives you.

One day the music will stop playing and the game will end. And we will not be taking our money with us. But we will take with us the true riches. That's why money is for our hands, but the true riches we have in Christ belong in our hearts. And by God's grace, may they remain there in each one of us always. Amen.