

In the crowd gathered to hear Jesus are some Pharisees and scribes who mutter and question why Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners and tax collectors. They want to discredit him.

Jesus responds with four parables. Today's parable is the fourth in the series. The previous three parables are the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of a son lost to the lure of the world – known to us as the parable of the prodigal son. All are directed to the Pharisee's and scribe's complaint, and each holds the teaching that God seeks those very persons the religious establishment has disregarded, dismissed, and demeaned.

Then, Jesus speaks to his disciples a warning parable of an absent landlord and a dishonest steward – a situation his all listeners would have found familiar.

Many of us may have known someone rather like the dishonest manager or steward – someone who always lands on their feet regardless of whatever calamity that appears to overtake them. This is different: it is a crisis of life with eternal consequences.

In the parable, the Rich Man demands: “give me an accounting of your management. You cannot be my manager any longer.” We overhear the steward's inner thoughts. ‘What will I do?’ He asks himself. He knows himself and what he is capable of; ‘I am not strong enough to dig and I

am too proud to beg.” He chooses to continue in his dishonesty: cheating his master once again, he gains the favor of his master’s debtors by significantly reducing their debt.

The landlord praises the dishonest steward for his quick thinking and cleverness. For by cancelling so much debt, the steward has endeared himself to those whose debt has been reduced. What is more, the landlord is put in the position of not being able to punish the steward without appearing unjust nor can he reinstate the debt.

The parable presents a picture of a man, a dishonest man, in the crisis of his life! He must make a decision – urgently. He must act quickly before it is known he no longer holds his position, and all is lost. Jesus is presenting to his disciples – and all - the urgency that is required: the kingdom of God is at hand, choose between the world and God, life lived in tune with the world or a life lived faithful to God.

The Pharisees and scribes know that Jesus is alluding to them as the dishonest steward. The parable speaks to Israel’s failure of stewardship of the knowledge of God entrusted to them. As written in Isaiah 43:10, wherein they were charged to be God’s witnesses to the world by word and example. But they did not. It speaks to the corruption that had crept into the leadership in both temple and Sanhedrin, in and to a growing burden

of taxes and obligations on the people that are increasingly heavy, strict, demanding.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples and all who listen: “The children of this generation are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

The life of faith must be awake to the harsh reality of life with all its devastating dangers and temptations. Faith acknowledges the wickedness and foolishness that destroys lives, and faith brings to it the wealth of the gospel, the knowledge and sharing of God’s love and healing grace – the eternal consequences of how life is lived and how we die.

As stewards of the gospel (disciples) we must not deny the difficulty of dealing with the harm that the dishonest, the violently inclined, the corrupt, unjust, and the merciless impose on the vulnerable. As stewards of the gospel – and we are all stewards of the gospel – we are to be prepared to deal with life by offering the love, forgiveness, and grace of God in concrete tangible ways.

“Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth,” Jesus tells them, speaking of the material wealth of this world. Do good to those in need. In general, the majority of us are so used to having what we need - and then some – so as not even to be aware of how very much we have. Be

trustworthy with whatever worldly wealth you have, so that you will be worthy to receive what is your own – the true riches – the kingdom of God.

The great wealth we each have is our life, the creation, our homes, our church, our family, friends, and neighbors. All have been entrusted to us to care for as good and faithful stewards. Ask yourself: how am I managing, so far?

You probably won't be called to address the U.N. about starvation and injustice, or called to lead a group of volunteers into a war zone to deliver medical aid, but you will be presented every day with some small mercy to give: a moment to share a bit of encouragement, give hope, comfort someone lonely or in distress, share a bit of food, or lift a burden.

How does this parable relate to us and what we have been entrusted with – as the church, in our community. We have been given the role of steward. As in 1 Peter 4:10, we are to be: “like good stewards of the manifold grace of God...”

The parable of the dishonest steward concludes with a warning about trying to serve two masters. Jesus flat out tells them, it cannot be done. . Although our lesson did not include it, the gospel then reads, the Pharisees and scribes scoffed at Jesus. Certainly, they scoffed because they knew wealth, and thus power, is at the center of how the world

works. We know that too. And so did Jesus. He did not give them an impossible choice. He spoke to them of a final reality we will all face.

Again, ask yourself, how am I managing so far? Am I good steward of all that has come to me – including my own life? Mary Oliver's poem, 'The Summer Day', asks a question: "...tell me, what you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" The last line of the parable in today gospel is, "you cannot serve God and wealth. My fellow stewards let us each be prepared to answer when our Holy God asks, 'tell me what you have done with your one wild and precious life?' Amen.