

Sunday, August 9, 2009 Luke 16:1-13

Do you remember finishing high school, and perhaps with tears in your eyes vowing to your closest friends, "Let's stay friends forever." Some people actually can do it – well, at least they stay friends throughout the rest of their earthly lives. Many of us, however, finally give in to the fact that we establish lives and families, jobs and careers that take us into new relationships, and "friends forever" is just another faded line in an old high school year book. But what if you could have friends forever, literally, forever? With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we'll look at Jesus' parable as He teaches us, **"Use Your Earthly Life to Make Friends Forever."**

In Jesus' story, an absentee landlord left his affairs in the hands of an estate manager. But in time the manager began to waste the master's possessions. **"Give an account of your management,"** the landlord demanded, **"because you cannot be manager any longer."**

What is Jesus teaching us so far? Aren't we but managers, or the old English word, "stewards," of God's gifts to us? "Oh no," my sinful nature objects, "I worked hard for what I have. I own it all – the house, the car, the business, the bank account. I can use it any way I want!" Oh – do we really own anything? How quickly all these things can be taken from us. How suddenly a storm can turn our possessions into rubble. How quickly a recession can consume our savings. In the end we'll die, and then who will control what we today call "mine"? The Egyptian Pharaoh's ensured that beside their mummified remains treasures of gold and food were placed for them to use in the after-life. Obviously they never got used! There are no U-hauls behind hearses! There are no ATM machines in caskets! Indeed, we are simply stewards, managing these things for just a little while as a trust from God, who owns it all.

What else can we learn from what Jesus taught so far? One day we shall be called to give an account of our stewardship. God created the world and put humans as managers over all He had made. But our first parents sinned. Now due to the corruption of our sinful nature, greed, envy, coveting, waste, fraud, theft, laziness – and a host of other sins affect our stewardship. Adam and Eve sinned, and they lost the management of the beautiful Garden of Eden. Saul sinned, and he lost his kingdom. David sinned, and he lost authority over and unity in his family. Moses sinned, and he was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. Sometimes sin disqualifies us for stewardship during our life, and the wages of sin is death. It removes us permanently from the job of managing God's possessions here on earth, bringing us to the final accounting before God.

"Oh, oh," you must be thinking by now, "My mother was right. I should have eaten *all* my vegetables and not wasted a single crust of bread!" What if God punishes me for the way I have wasted so much of my life and misused so many of the things He entrusted to me!" Do you want to hear the good news? Let it fill you with relief and joy, for God's Spirit has revealed in Scriptures that Jesus true God and true Man came to be the perfect Manager in our place. He never wasted a crumb. After feeding the 5,000 He instructed His disciples to pick up the leftovers. He never wasted a moment's time. He said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work." He has given us His perfect holiness in exchange for our sin. That's right! He took all our sin upon Himself and suffered God's just punishment for it. He was willing to be accountable to God for you when He suffered and died, for every minute lying on the couch when you could have been helping your spouse or parent, for every penny you ever wasted, for every time you selfishly said, "Let someone else do it," when it came to an opportunity to do good for others. So now God forgives you for Jesus' sake. That's how much He loves you! So in that final accounting the Lord Jesus, who saved us, will be our judge. "Come, you who are blessed by my Father," He will invite you and all who trust in Him. "Well done, good and faithful servant," He will commend you. "Come and share your Master's happiness." And in heaven we shall live forever!

So as you live here, a Spirit-blessed child of God, holding to Jesus as He comes to you in Word and Sacrament, Jesus says, “Be a wise steward, for you are manager of your time, ability, money, and property for the Lord!

How shall we use all God has entrusted to us? Look again at the manager in our lesson. Although he was unjust, Jesus does commend him for his careful planning. He realized his predicament. “What am I going to do?” he thought. “I’m not strong enough for manual labor. No way am I going beg for a hand-out!” “I know what I’ll do,” he decided. “I’ll turn the money which I am still managing into friendships. Then, when I lose my job, my new friends will take care of me.” So he called his master’s debtors together and cut what they owed substantially – making new friends who would later provide for him when he lost his job.

The Lord is *not* telling us to imitate his dishonesty. But He *is* telling us to wisely make plans to use this world’s wealth, whether in the form of money, talent, or time, to make friends. Jesus adds a sad commentary: **“The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light”** (v 8). The prudent business owner of the world examines the use of every dollar in his business and puts every available talent to use in building his business. In the business world, money, time, and abilities may be expendable, but souls are not. Let’s re-examine the use of our gifts and become wiser in investing them for the Lord’s work.

Jesus also gives us a beautiful promise, **“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”** Jesus does not imply that we may purchase our way into heaven. Jesus went to the cross and paid the debt of sin for us all. The joys of heaven are ours by the grace of God through faith in Jesus as the Holy Spirit calls and enables us to trust in Him. And how do we respond? God’s grace in Christ makes us cheerful givers and wise managers of all the Lord has entrusted to us.

How about our time? Sometimes just five minutes listening to someone who is sorrowing, and then speaking a promise of God’s Word can make a friendship forever as that person’s faith in Jesus grows. How about our money? Our offerings support our church and school ministry, where the Holy Spirit by the Gospel makes us friends of Jesus and friends forever. Some people far away don’t know Christ as Savior of the world. Through the offerings we bring missionaries can go out with the message of salvation. How many of our children or grand-children have moved away from this area – to places where there would be no WELS churches for them without our home mission work? Sometimes our offerings for missions end up helping the very people we know and love to have a Bible-based congregation when they leave home, keeping them friends forever in Christ.

How about our talents? Many adults can look back to a Sunday school teacher, a Lutheran school teacher, a vacation Bible school teacher, a Pioneer or youth group leader, remembering how that teacher or leader brought them the love of Jesus and made them friends forever. I’m sure you could find examples of making friends forever from any area of serving in congregational life.

Maybe you can try to stay friends for life with your old high school pals, but only through faith in Jesus can we be friends forever. So picture this beautiful scene: All those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith, either through the direct gospel witness you have offered, or when you sent others in your place with your offerings and prayers, are with you in heaven, experiencing God’s perfect love! You look at Jesus. He smiles. You look at one another and smile in a way that can only mean – Friends forever! Amen.