

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13

The Jewish disciples who heard Jesus' story of the shrewd steward understood it far easier than we might, especially verse 9 which concludes the parable and frequently leads Bible study leaders to educated comments such as, "Hunh?"

Bible commentator William Barclay says that the Rabbis of Jesus' time would say, "The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come." He adds, "It was a Jewish belief that charity given to poor people would stand to a man's credit in the world to come." So, the Jews who heard Jesus' words knew that He was challenging them to put their possessions to work for the kingdom of God rather than to build up wealth in their own pockets.

We see Jesus' teaching from this side of the Cross, so we can better understand than the Jews that we cannot use our wealth to purchase a place in heaven, but we are commanded by God to use the gifts that He gives to us in a wise manner. Do we see our gifts as a means of lining our pockets and building our own wealth, or retirement fund? Or, do we see our gifts for what they really are, an investment of God's property in our stewardship abilities?

In our culture, it is not easy to follow God's instructions about investment. Our society is slowly changing but still reserves its most excited praise for the "success" stories which involve building great wealth, great houses, and great businesses. The Ted Turners of our news stories are not known for their faith in God or for helping to build His kingdom. Tragically, most of God's gifts are squandered in a tendency to worship them as gods instead of using them to proclaim the true God.

Jesus' challenge to His followers of twenty centuries ago remains the same for us. "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [worldly possessions]." Are you investing God's gifts in building *His* kingdom, or are you investing God's gifts in building your own? He is ready and able to help all of us to get it right!

Join a Bible study to learn more about "investment."

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee.)



18th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13

1. What was the predicament of the manager in Jesus' parable? How did he protect himself? What was the response of the master? (vs. 8)
2. Who are the people of the world and people of the light? (vs. 8) See also John 12:35-36; Ephesians 5:8.
3. What are true riches? (vs. 11) What riches have we received through Jesus?
4. What are the two masters referred to in vs. 13?
5. Which master are you serving?
6. Reflect on your management of all that God has given you. Are you celebrating all your possessions as gifts from God? Are you wisely investing in the Kingdom?



Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Isaiah 55:6-9

When must we lose hope in the midst of our sinfulness? When does the day come that God can no longer forgive our failure? How can a God Who is holy and just keep on forgiving? How can He have compassion on me?



Isaiah 55 is the account of God pleading with His people to return to Him. In the first part of the chapter God asks the people why they keep doing senseless things? Why do they turn away from Him and toward “what does not satisfy?”

Starting in verse 6, it is as though God finds in His people a feeling of hostile hopelessness. They seem to believe that they cannot return to God; that they are trapped in their chosen path. They are ready to continue rejecting God, pursuing a path of “success” that seems more “reasonable.” But the prophet proclaims that if God’s people will let Him, He will still love them. It is not too late!

Most of Isaiah’s hearers rejected his words. They did continue to turn from God and were conquered by their enemies. They chose their own wisdom; their own sinfulness, reason, and rebellion. They couldn’t believe that God could do what He said or that He could so totally love. How could God be this way? How could He just keep on loving?

People today like to think that humans are the peak of knowledge and wisdom. If there are others who are wiser and smarter, they are just evolved further, but we will catch up someday. Nothing could be more wrong. God is not just a super-developed human.

God says, “...My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, ...For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts higher than your thoughts.” God can forgive us all of our rebellion, but we will never really know how. Oh, we know that Jesus died for our sins, but we really don’t understand how He could love us that much. We cannot understand how God thinks, or works, or how He can love us. But we can know that He always loves us, and we can know that He has the power and the desire to forgive us and hold us in His arms, no matter what.

Grow in Christ through a Bible study this week!

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Isaiah 55:6-9

1. How is the Word of God like rain and snow? (vs. 10-11)?



2. How is the promise of vs. 11 helpful to the pastor preaching the sermon, to the Sunday school teacher sharing a lesson, to the parent sharing a Bible story, or to anyone else sharing God’s Word?

3. According to vs. 8-9, why is God’s thinking different from ours?
4. How do vs. 8-9 help us in those situations that we can’t understand?
5. What adverb describes the word “pardon” in vs. 7? How do we find this same emphasis in Romans 3:24?
6. We know that it is always God seeking us (note the Small Catechism explanation to the 3rd article of the Apostles’ Creed). How can we explain the encouragement of vs. 6? (See also Jeremiah 29:13-14)

18th Sunday After Pentecost

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Jeremiah says that he went out to speak God's word to the people assuming that he would find repentance and agreement. He did not realize that the greatest agreement among the people would be that the prophet should die for his words! Anathoth was Jeremiah's home town. Some of those who sought his life may have once been his friends.

It's hard for us to identify with Jeremiah's call for vengeance (well, let's just say that it's hard for us to understand God's servant calling for vengeance), but the more important thing to note is that God did not tell Jeremiah to keep quiet so that he could live in safety. He told the prophet to proclaim His word, even though He had also ordered him not to pray for the rebelling nation. The prophet was to let God worry about his safety and the path ahead.

In our nation, we have never had to worry about being killed for telling people about Jesus or living out our Christian beliefs. But we do face the pain of ridicule, mistrust, and misrepresentation. We are thought of by some as narrow-minded, ignorant, and uninformed. Many Christians will even skip worship rather than explain to friends or relatives that worship is important enough to cause them to be late for an appointment or event. Sometimes living our faith is just too hard.

Jeremiah's witness was not easy; he risked losing friends, the respect of his peers, the love of his family, but he was willing to endure it all in order to remain faithful to his calling as a servant of God. Almost 600 years later, St. Paul suffered beatings, stoning, and finally death for his witness, yet he proclaimed that the joy of knowing Christ outshined all that he had ever possessed.

God promised Jeremiah that He would defend the prophet in the face of challenge. He wants to do the same for us. He wants us to *live* our faith in Christ; to proclaim by our words and our actions that He has a better way than the world can offer. He promises us that it will be a journey of love and joy.



Renew your walk in Christ through a Bible study this week!

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

18th Sunday After Pentecost

Jeremiah 11:18-20

1. It is necessary to read Jeremiah 11:1-17 to understand the context of our text. According to vs. 4-5 what were the terms of the covenant God had made with His people?
2. What had been the response of the people of Judah? (Note especially vs. 8,10, and 13)
3. According to vs. 11-13 what message from God was Jeremiah to share with his audience?
4. According to vs. 18-19 how was Jeremiah's message received by his hearers? Why would "his name be remembered no more?" (vs. 19)
5. Would Jeremiah be deterred or distracted by those who opposed God's message? (vs. 20)
6. Has your witness ever been challenged or ridiculed by others? What can we learn from Jeremiah?

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:4-7

In Amos' time it was important to take time for rest and worship. Once a month the feast of the New Moon and the weekly Sabbath provided times for both. However, many businessmen could hardly wait for the rest and worship to end so that they could get back to "more important" things—making a profit. The word "trample" literally meant "pant upon" as an animal might pant in its effort to bring down prey. The poor and those who could not repay debt on time were sold as slaves. One commentator says that there was a custom then of giving one's sandals as a guarantee on the sale of land, so the greedy businessman may have both sold the debtor into slavery and confiscated his land.

The problem here is two-fold. First, these men considered rest and worship in the presence of God a boring waste of time better spent elsewhere. Second, they were breaking the moral laws of the covenant. Their attitude was one of profit first, comfort first, wealth first, and if there was room in the heart for more, perhaps God and caring for the poor could be squeezed in. Theirs was a sin-filled life, but they did not recognize it! To them, God was off in the unknown and had little to do with "reality." Trusting God to guide a business was just plain foolish!

Today we live in a world with much the same attitude. Even many Christians fidget through worship and cannot imagine taking time to rest in the presence of God. There is too much to do that is more "important." Not spending time with God invites sin to overtake our lives. It is through our fellowship with Him that we celebrate our redemption and begin to understand morality, kindness, and caring. We will never be perfectly unselfish. Selfishness is too much a part of our sinful nature, but through Jesus we receive forgiveness. What a joy to know that every morning we can start clean, and that the Holy Spirit will guide, call, and inspire us throughout each day.

Learn more about kindness and trust in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:4-7

1. Who was prophet Amos? (Amos 1:1; 7:14-15) Why was he an unlikely prophet?
2. What group of people was being mistreated in the time of Amos? (vs. 4)
3. What evidence is of inattention and "abuse" is offered in vs. 5-6?
4. Is God unaware of our greed and injustices? (vs. 7)
5. The Good News is that God also does not remember our sins of omission and commission. (Jeremiah 31:34). Why has God forgotten?
6. What injustices do you see in your world? How God calling you and His church to respond to those in need? (Research the ministry of Lutheran World Relief and other responses to those in need.)

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 1:1-11, 19-27

The writings of Paul sometimes frustrate readers. How could he be so confident? How could he expect anyone to live up to all of the expectations that he puts forth? In today's lesson there is a verse that is key to answering both of these questions. He writes in verse 6, "*I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

Paul's bold words were never based in his own strength or in his own knowledge. He could say that whether he lived or died was of no concern to him because either way he was in Christ, and he could mean it. He believed that the same confidence could be ours because this knowledge was not from his own heart but had been made clear to him by God. Christ had paid for Paul's sin. He had given Paul salvation and He was able to keep him in God's grace, no matter what the task at hand.

God also began our walk with Him through His grace and love for us; a grace and love that we did nothing to deserve. He continues to grow our faith and our ability to serve Him even though we stumble and grumble at every advancement. As Paul commands right behavior and right attitude, he knows that no Christian is able to fulfill his instructions on their own. It is only because the Holy Spirit lives within us, guiding and strengthening us, that we are able to even try to emulate our Lord, Jesus.

In verse 1, Paul calls us "saints." "Saints" implies someone set apart; assigned to be different. We are saved for a purpose and Paul felt this truth to his very core. His purpose had been stated to him by Jesus as Paul approached Damascus to arrest Christians living there. God's announcement of your purpose has probably not been accompanied by such an astounding event, but your purpose is no less important in God's eyes.

While going about our daily tasks, it is important to consider who we are in Christ; who we are by His love, His encouragement, and His enabling.

Learn more about Jesus' power in our lives in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 1:1-11, 19-27

1. Who was God's author for this letter? To whom was it written? Using the introductory notes from the Concordia Self-study Bible or other reference find out more about this letter.
2. How did Paul feel about the church in Philippi? What was his prayer for these Christian friends?
3. According to vss. 7 and 14 what was Paul's earthly situation? Did that situation affect his joy? Why not?
4. According to vs. 21-23 what was Paul's struggle? What would be better for Paul? What might be better for the church in Philippi?

For Family Reflection

5. For whom do you say "I thank my God every time I remember you"? Share your thanksgiving with God and with the individual(s).
6. What was Paul's prayer for his Christian friends (vs. 9-11)? What is your prayer for your family and for your friends?

18th Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:16-4:6

Chapter 3 begins with words on the tongue and the dangers involved in its use. Remembering this, we look at today's passage.

As James begins his instruction on the "envy and selfish ambition" that every one of us has experienced at one time or another, there is a compelling urge to remember the times that our tongue has acted out those two ever-present aspects of our personalities.

Each of us can remember times when we showed an arrogant satisfaction in opening our mouths to make ourselves look more powerful or more wise, even within our church family. We all fidget in our seats at the thought and want to quickly turn our minds to more pleasant things, but by remembering those times, we can hone our ability to be on guard against our envy and ambition when they begin to rise up.

Some people solve their problem of envy, ambition, or even anger, by just dropping out. If I don't get involved, I won't be tempted. If I just stop serving in the community, my family, or my church, I won't take the chance of acting like an idiot—again.

James, however, would not approve of dropping out of the battle and into the cocoon of self-protection. Remember, he is the saint who wrote so strongly on pursuing a life of good works, staying involved, and living out our faith!

James says that the answer to our dilemma of self-promotion via our uncontrolled tongue is to seek wisdom from the right place. We are not wise on our own. Every time we are tempted to speak in correction, condemnation, or callousness, we must be on guard! We must stop and think—Are my words coming from Christ? Are they "pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy?" (vs. 17)

We end with that question today. In next week's verses James continues to hold our feet to the flame, so to speak, but he also offers answers. The most comforting of the answers is this—God's grace, power, and love pour over us as we take on the daily task of representing both His love and His urgent concern in our world. He can enable us to change how we react to life.

Learn more about honest truth and honest grace in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

18th Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:16-4:6

1. James (beginning with 3:14) describes the effects of "envy and selfish ambition." What effect on personal relationships and on general order do these sins have?
2. Read verse 17. What is the contrasting life-style of those whose wisdom "comes from heaven"? What is the true source of the heavenly wisdom (Galatians 5:1, 22-25)?
3. Is it possible to live in two worlds (living for God and living for one-self)? Why not? Which world are you living in? How do we live in God's world?
4. What does James mean when he says that God gives us "more grace" (vs. 6)? Hasn't God already given us the fullness of His grace in Christ? Don't we have all the grace we need in our Baptism?

For Family Reflection

5. Who is the perfect example of humility (Philippians 2:5-8)? What does His humility mean for us?
6. It's the harvest season! What does a "harvest of righteousness" (vs. 18) look like? How's the harvest in your home?

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

1 Timothy 3:1-13

It is a rare Christian who cannot recall hearing someone criticize a church pastor or leader for their weaknesses or their sin. As we read Paul's letters in their entirety, what does he intend that we do concerning leaders in turmoil? What would Jesus do?

If we use Paul's words regarding the faith and character of leaders as a hammer to keep our pastors and leaders "in line," is that God-pleasing? What else can we do? After all, God's word must be taken seriously.

One can understand the importance of Paul's instruction and the reasons behind it. Satan delights in pointing a finger at church leaders and accusing them of being untrue, unkind, uncontrolled, unhappy, and all the other "un" words in his vast vocabulary. The witness of our churches today is failing. We live in a culture that loves Jesus and hates Christianity! We in the church must take at least part of the blame for this. We just do not live as we ought.

But, back to Paul's demands upon leaders. Condemning one who fails to maintain these strict demands does nothing to help our leaders whom God has called! Nor does it lift up the church's ministry in the community. While it is easier to go to a church leader and accuse him of failure than it is to extend the hand of love and help, is it better? Will condemnation help a brother overcome family disputes, anger, addiction denial, or drift from doctrine?

To be what Jesus wants us to be in difficult church situations means dedicated prayer, honestly searching one's own heart and motives, acting solely out of love, asking an elder (or a fellow elder) to assist, knowing God's word, and acting as Jesus would act. Paul never said to use his instructions as a tool by which to cast a fellow Christian aside. We are to first build one another up, helping one another become stronger in faith and ministry.

When we face the prospect of being involved in the life of a leader weakened by Satan's schemes (and we all will), let us pray that we will act as Jesus would act—and demonstrate to the world a better way. When appropriate, discipline is to be loving and hope-filled. A healing Christ is always brought to repentant sinners and leaders.

Learn more about dealing with contention in a Bible study this week.
A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

1 Timothy 3:1-13

1. This text addresses church leadership. What's the difference between an "overseer/bishop" and "deacon"? How are the spiritual requirements similar?
2. Are any of us ever fully qualified to serve in the church? Who forgives us, calls us and equips us to serve? Why are there seemingly higher standards for public church leaders?
3. Why are the family "qualifications"—manage the household, husband of one wife, etc.—so important for public ministry?
4. Paul is sharing these divine directions for public ministry with the young pastor Timothy. Why were the directions especially appropriate in that context? Why are they appropriate in our ministry contexts today?

For Family Reflection

5. How do these divine directions apply to your pastor(s)? How do they apply to your Board of Elders or other congregational leaders?
6. Who is the example for pastors, elders, and for each of us as we serve in the church? Ephesians 5:1-2; Hebrews 7:26-28.

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 18:21-35

“But Jesus didn’t mean me.” How often have we read Jesus’ instructions on forgiveness only to silently reject His words? When Jesus told Peter how often he was to forgive someone’s sin against him, He wasn’t presenting a number beyond which forgiveness was not expected. “Seventy times seven” to the Jew meant “forever.” Seven was a special number to them—it meant completion. In this case it meant forever. Peter had challenged Jesus with this question in hopes that he would not have to totally change his outlook on some in his life.

We all have that challenge from Jesus. We ask silently, if not loudly, why we should forgive someone who has wronged us, especially when that person has apologized time after time and still hurts us in the same way. There are times when we have to ask, “Why should we?” How can we expect to forgive one who has murdered or abused a loved one? One Christian woman, whose daughter was in the midst of an abusive marriage, said that if she knew she wouldn’t be caught, she would kill the man. No one claims that forgiveness is easy. But, is it even possible?

On a simpler note, there is the story of the lad who asked his mother to leave the room while he prayed. She said that he should not be afraid to tell her of any sin of which he would tell God. She also would forgive him. To which the boy replied, “Yes, you will forgive me but you won’t forget. God does.”

As human beings with normal human reactions we find it virtually impossible to truly forgive, even small infractions against us. The relative, for instance, who always snubs us, as well as the felon who has “ruined” our lives.

God is the answer to this dilemma. He always offers us an answer to His commands. He can enable us to move on. Jesus has taught us to pray, “...forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” Turn your pain over to Him who really does understand, and who really can heal the wound.

Is Bible study a part of your Christian walk?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 18:21-35

1. What question stimulates Jesus’ story? What is Jesus’ simple answer? How does Jesus illustrate His answer?
2. How did the master initially respond to the servant’s situation (vs. 27)? How did the servant respond to the master’s grace (vs. 28, 30)? Who is the master in the story? Who is the unmerciful servant?
3. According to vs. 32-34 what act of our Master models forgiveness for us? Do we forgive because God demands that action on our part?

For Family Reflection

4. How and when have you experienced God’s forgiveness? How often has God forgiven you?
5. Is there someone you have difficulty forgiving? How does this story encourage you to respond with forgiveness?
6. Are we to count the number of times we forgive others?

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:2-16

Mark turns to Jesus' words on divorce. Why did God allow a certificate of divorce if He hated divorce? In all probability the "hardness of heart" of some men toward their wives moved God to limit men's power over their spouses. Though the certificate of divorce may seem harsh compared to today's standards, it was a vast improvement for the Jewish women of Jesus' time. Bible commentator William Barclay's historical anecdotes add to our understanding: He says that the "indecent" cited in Deuteronomy 24:1 at first included adultery, period. By Jesus' time "indecent" included "if the wife spoiled a dish of food...if she talked to a strange man...if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's relations in his hearing..." One rabbi even taught that the wife's indecent could include, "if a man found a woman who was fairer in his eyes than his wife was."

In verse 12 Jesus' refers to a woman divorcing her husband. This could be done, with difficulty. Jesus' words refer not to what should or should not be legal, but to God's moral standard. Marriage should never be ended except for the most serious circumstances. However, Jesus would never command a spouse to remain trapped in an abusive situation. Too many spouses may endure abuse because they think God wants them to—not so.

In verse 15 Jesus is speaking of an attitude of the heart in His words about entering the kingdom "as a child." A child accepts a father's loving direction (well, until those teenage years hit). A child trusts a parent to do what is right and to care for the family needs. A child believes that being with the parent guarantees safety. A child believes that God is perfect and loving. It is the "maturity" of adulthood that pulls us from God because in our "maturity" we grow jaded; self-dependent; untrusting; jealous of our status as lords of our lives. Contrary to the value system of so-called sophisticated adults, Jesus says that it is the heart that can see Him as a child sees Him that finds joy in the kingdom. May our hearts turn to Jesus, our Savior.

Ask your pastor about starting a new Bible Study in your church.

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:2-16

1. According to vs. 6-9 (see also Genesis 1:27 and 2:24) what was God's plan for marriage? Why is God's plan especially important to review in the context of many societal trends?
2. Why had God seemingly allowed a procedure for divorce in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:1)? How does God respond to divorce today?
3. Compare the three Gospel accounts of Jesus blessing little children (Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17). How are the accounts similar? What differences do you note?

For Family Reflection

4. Has your family experienced divorce? How do you share God's grace with one another after divorce? How do you recommit all your relationships to Christ?
5. What does it mean to be "like a little child" (vs. 15)?
6. How does your family take children to the arms of Jesus? How does your congregation take children to the arms of Jesus? Are there any children in your community who are not yet in Jesus' arms? Who's bringing them to Jesus?

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31

At the end of today's passage Jesus [speaking as Abraham in the parable] says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." Who are "they"? "They" would not have been persuaded by the resurrection of a poor beggar, or the resurrection of the Son of God. What was the sin of the rich man that would prevent him from seeing the truth of the gospel, even in light of the resurrection?

Of course the rich man had much money, but that did not cause his inner blindness. The cause was his attitude. He lacked any compassion for Lazarus, who had begged to eat crumbs, but was refused. Even in the midst of his punishment for his lack of compassion and his greed, the rich man could still not understand that what he had done was wrong. Rather than showing remorse for mistreating the starving man at his door, the rich man pleads not for forgiveness, but for relief from his own discomfort. He calls on Abraham to "send Lazarus" to comfort his suffering "for I am in agony...." When Abraham refuses his request, he pleads that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers so that they could avoid his fate. To the rich man, Lazarus was forever a servant, never an equal or even worthy of consideration.

Self-indulgence, self-trust, and self-centeredness may be the most dangerous traits in mankind. They keep us from recognizing the truth. If I believe that I have no need; if my life is under my control (in my mind) how can I see Jesus? If I cannot see Jesus, how can I see the plight of those around me? Even more importantly, in my self-dependence and self-righteousness I may not recognize that I am a sinner in need of forgiveness.

"They", the Pharisees, who were always listening to Jesus' teachings in hope of finding ways to discredit Him, heard Him say through this parable that in their arrogance they had rejected God and condemned themselves to eternal separation from Him, and even the resurrection of the Son of God would not penetrate their hearts. May God open our hearts to see His grace and our eyes to see the needs of others.

Invite a friend to Bible study!

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 16:19-31

1. Summarize the earthly life of Lazarus. Describe his eternal situation. Was he saved because of his poverty? What saved him?
2. Summarize the earthly life of the rich man. Describe his eternal situation. Was he condemned because of his wealth? What condemned him?
3. Is our eternal fate negotiable or changeable after our death? How does this story emphasize eternal permanence?
4. What request did the rich man have of Father Abraham? Could his request be granted? What other messenger is suggested?

For Family Reflection

5. What is Jesus referring to when He mentions "Moses and the Prophets"? Do we have "Moses and the Prophets"? What else do we have?
6. Will you be at "Abraham's side"? Who else do you want there with you? With whom might we share the Good News of Jesus?