

## *The Parable of the Shrewd Manager*

Luke 16.1–14 for Stewardship Emphasis: Possessions and Parables on October 15, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Jesus said, *“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings”* (Luke 16.9). That does not sound right. Jesus is commending a dishonest businessman and telling us to use worldly wealth to gain friends. This is the opposite of what we would expect from the Lord who said, *“You cannot serve God and money”* (Luke 16.13). So, which is it?

### **The Parable**

When we look at the large context of Luke sixteen, we notice that Jesus is speaking to *“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him”* (Luke 16.14). Contrary to popular belief, the Pharisees were not considered evil men, but righteous. These were the ones who followed God’s law, did the right thing, helped their neighbors, and appeared to most people to be the closest people to God, the most religious people around.

So, Jesus gives them a model to follow and the model is a crook. And this isn’t the first instance of such a thing. In Luke eleven, a man needs bread. He asks his friend to share some and the friend says, *No! “Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything”* (Luke 11.7). In the end, though, that man gets up and gives his friend some bread, presumably to get rid of him. This is a comparison Jesus uses for our heavenly Father. In Luke eighteen, a judge who neither feared God nor respected men vindicates a widow not because he was good, but to get her off his back. Again, Jesus uses this judge as a comparison to our heavenly Father.

So, in a similar way, this dishonest steward, a sleazy character, is an example in at least some things. What is exemplary about him? He looked ahead, he planned ahead, and he trusted the master’s mercy.

*“And the manager said to himself, What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg”* (Luke 16.3). So, he looked ahead and managed his worldly wealth accordingly.

*“I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses”* (Luke 16.4). So, he planned ahead and made some friends by cutting their debt. In a sense, he created his own severance package.

*“And [the master] called him and said to him, What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager”* (Luke 16.2). But this was a gracious move on the master’s part. He should have fired the manager on the spot, or thrown him in jail, or at least yelled at him. But he is unusually merciful, so the manager risks everything up that mercy. In the end. *“The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness”* (Luke 16.8a). Here, the merciful master commends his manager not for dishonest, but for mercy. He showed mercy, just like his master.

### **The Purpose of Giving**

*“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings”* (Luke 16.9). Jesus is not telling us to buy our way into heaven, pay for our salvation, or bribe God to get saved. Jesus is distinguishing temporal things, *unrighteous wealth*, from eternal things, *eternal dwellings*, and telling us to use temporal things, like money, to advance the eternal things, like a Church where the Gospel is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered.

The eternal things are free gifts from God in Jesus Christ. To a sinful woman, Jesus said, *“Your sins are forgiven”* (Luke 7.48). To the starved and empty, Jesus said, *“Come, for everything is now ready”* (Luke 14.17). To the Roman soldiers who crucified Him, Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”* (Luke 23.34). To each one of us, when the Day comes, Jesus will say *“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise!”* (Luke 23.42). He will welcome us into eternal dwellings.

In the meantime, everything else, including money is secondary, and not only secondary, but designed to be used to further and advance the primary thing, the eternal, Kingdom of God. The shrewd manager was willing to expend wealth in order to gain something more important, namely friendship. His master commended him for his priorities. You and I have friendship with Christ and ought to use what God has given to make more friends for eternity.

### **The Pattern for Living**

*“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much”* (Luke 16.10). The key is not the amount we have or the amount we give. The key is faithfulness to God. Faithfulness is a matter of thinking about and using money as a secondary thing in the service of the primary thing, namely, the kingdom of God.

So, everything we do, including the way we use our money, ought to be done through faith in God and as citizens of His Kingdom. Everything we have is His, given to us to use for a little while not for temporal ends but for eternal ends. As we do so, He promises to provide. *“Seek my kingdom, and these things will be added to you”* (Luke 12.31). A little later He says, *“Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Luke 12.33–34).

### **The Priority of Loving**

*“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money”* (Luke 16.13).

I once read about a church that announced they would draw an envelope at random from the offering and award two times the amount to the giver. On the second Sunday, they awarded five times the amount. On the third Sunday, ten times the amount. On the last Sunday, they awarded 100 times the amount in the envelope. And guess what? The church had the highest attendance ever for one month and they raised their annual budget in just four Sundays!

Sorry to say, we are going to do it the old fashion way. Our stewardship is not motivated by fear or greed nor aimed at the temporal goal of a balanced budget. Instead, our stewardship is motivated by the Good News about Jesus and aimed at the eternal goal of reaching souls for our Merciful Master.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## *The Parable of the Rich Fool*

Luke 12.13–21 for Stewardship Emphasis: Possessions and Parables 1 on October 8, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

You don't have to be rich to set your heart on riches. In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther says, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."<sup>1</sup> Later, Luther speaks more specifically to riches:

There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.<sup>2</sup>

How easy it is to set the heart on riches.

Riches, however, cannot handle the pressure of being anyone's God. Solomon spoke wisdom when he said, "*A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination*" (Proverbs 18.11). Wealth will fail us. In the end, it's imaginary. Jesus said, "*For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God*" (Luke 18.25).

Because of how easy and common it is for people to set their heart on riches, Jesus addresses riches, money, and possessions in His parables. According to Dr. Reed Lessing, 65% of the parables in The Gospel According to Luke deal with money and possessions. One out of every six verses in Luke deal with money and possessions. In Luke, Jesus speaks more about money and possessions than he does heaven and hell. So, Jesus addresses us concerning this most common idol on earth.

### **Context**

*"Someone in the crowd said to him, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. But he said to him, Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you? And he said to them, Take care, and be on your guard against all greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."*

Two brothers wanted Jesus to be a judge between. Jesus became a judge over them. He does not judge their issue over inheritance, but their souls, their lives. He knows their hearts and can see how they have set them on riches. "*Guard against all greed,*" He tells them. Life is more than money.

But how easy it is to set the heart on riches.

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<sup>1</sup> LC, BC 386.

<sup>2</sup> LC, BC 387.

Solomon makes the point that life is more than money in the Old Testament Lesson from Ecclesiastes. *“And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes 2.10–11).

The Apostle Paul points out the people often live exactly the way Solomon described. In these last days, which are still unfolding all around us, people are *“lovers of self, lovers of money, . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”* (2 Timothy 3.2, 4–5). Avoid them and avoid being them.

### **The Contrast: True Poverty**

*“And he told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry”* (Luke 12.16–19).

This man sounds like a good American to me. Rich. Happy. Successful. Living the dream. Who can fault him? Everyone around him can fault him. Instead of letting others use his land or his storehouses full of food, he builds bigger silos at great cost to himself. Everyone around him was empty. He was filled. But rather than fill those empty people with his surplus, he filled new barns to the brim, and sent everyone else away empty.

God, on the other hand, does the opposite. *“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty”* (Luke 1.52–53).

And this rich man was empty. No one was there to celebrate with him. He lived alone, planned alone, built alone, indulged alone, and died alone, mostly notably without God. *“But God said to him, Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”* (Luke 12.20). God had given him all he had, even life itself as a loan, and now repayment was due. *“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his own soul?”* (Luke 9.25)

### **True Wealth**

*“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”* (Luke 12:21)

Many spend their lives in fretting Over trifles and in getting Things that have no solid ground. I shall strive to win a treasure That will bring me lasting pleasure And that now is seldom found.

When with sorrow I am stricken, Hope anew my heart will quicken; All my longing shall be stilled. To His loving-kindness tender Soul and body I surrender, For on God alone I build (LSB 732.3–4).

Where can you find this treasure of lasting pleasure? How do you become rich toward God? Well, what does Jesus say? *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”* (Luke 12.32). Ironically and wonderfully, being rich toward God is a matter of receiving God’s gifts.

The Gospel According to Luke tells the story of exceedingly rich the Father is toward us. *“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2.11). At age twelve Jesus asks his parents, *“Did you not know that I must be about the things of my Father?”* (Luke 2.49). The Father’s will and the Savior’s love compel Him to turn His face to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51) where He would be betrayed, arrested, spat on, beaten, and crucified. He spent the abundance of His life on us. But death could not hold him; the grave could not keep him! Through Christ’s death and resurrection the Father gives to us the kingdom. It is an eternal kingdom. We are exceedingly rich.

Paul says in Ephesians chapter two, *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace [that is, as a gift] you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2.1–7).*

We are rich toward God because He has been rich toward us.

There’s a story of newlywed couple. They get to their hotel on their honeymoon, expecting this huge suite, but their room was about the size of a closet. There was no view, no flowers, a small bathroom, and a foldout couch. They went to the front desk the next morning and the clerk said, “Did you open the door to your room?” They went back, opened a door they thought went to the closet, and found a huge room with a fruit basket, flowers, the view, and everything else.

We do not realize how rich we are. In fact, we don’t think we are rich. Very few in this room would put themselves in that category. But rich toward God? Rich in the way the matters? Yes. Because of Christ, yes. Why do we take that for granted?

Being rich toward God is about receiving God’s gifts. That is why we are here today. He promises to meet us here, with all of His gifts, ready to give to those who are poor and desire to be rich toward Him and for eternity. May we set our hearts on His immeasurable riches toward us in Christ.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

# Offensive Generosity

Matthew 20.1–16 for Pentecost 16A (Proper 20A) on September 24, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The Word of God that will provide a basis for the sermon this morning is Matthew 20.15: *“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”*

## Introduction

Last week, we heard Jesus’ parable about the way things work under God’s reign. A king forgave his servant’s huge debt. That’s God’s gracious rule. But, that servant went out and demanded payment from his fellow servant. That is not the way things ought to be with people under God’s reign. So, God abundantly forgives His people and He calls His people to abundantly forgive one another.

Today, we’ve heard another parable from Jesus about the way things work under God’s reign. A master hires different workers at different times for his vineyard and, though they did not all work the same, they are all paid the same. When the workers compare workload and wages they are offended. So, God rules by offensive generosity and calls His people not to look at one another and compare, but rather to look to Him and give thanks.

With these parables, Christ attacks our sense of justice and calls us to His definition of justice. As Isaiah says, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55.8–9). Thanks be to God.

On the top of the Supreme Court building in Washington D.C. it says, “Equal justice under law.” Not so under the reign of God. Instead, it is “Equal justice under grace.” Christ’s cross, scandalously unjust, is the basis for which the Heavenly Father declares sinners righteous. We’re not all the same with regard to sin or sanctification, but we have all received the same righteousness of Christ. So, with our eyes on an offensively generous God rather than on each other, we give thanks to Him with lives of offensive generosity. As Jesus said, *“Blessed is the one who is not offended by me”* (Matthew 11.6).

## The Parable: God Reigns with Offensive Generosity

In Matthew twenty, Jesus’ disciples are caught up in the comparison game. You know this game. We play it even when we’re not thinking about it. We watch where everyone else is at and place ourselves somewhere on the scale. Maybe we’re looking to justify our actions. “At least I’m not like that.” Maybe we’re looking to comfort ourselves in our suffering. “At least I’m not dealing with that.” Maybe we’re just jealous, not only wanting what someone else has, but believing we deserve it.

This is the game Jesus’ disciples are playing in Matthew twenty. So, Jesus tells them a parable as a warning. Do not compare yourself to others under God’s reign. Do not judge others by your own standards. Do not justify yourself according to where everyone else is at. Do not do those things for two reasons: First, you are not the Lord, and second, though the Father has graciously brought you under His reign by the work of His Son and His Spirit, it is possible for you to fall out of His Kingdom, that is, move yourselves out from under His reign. So, Jesus speaks a warning to us today, as well.

This warning in Matthew twenty comes in response to a conversation the disciples had with Jesus just before this in Matthew nineteen. There was a rich man who wanted to know how to gain eternal life. Jesus had told him to go sell all his possessions and follow Him, which the rich man could not or would not do, so he left disappointed and sad. At that point, Jesus spoke those well-known words, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*

Like today, most people at that time believed that being rich meant being blessed by God. If they cannot gain eternal life, who can? So, the disciples ask, *“Who then can be saved?”* Jesus says, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* In other words, it is only by God’s grace that anyone receives eternal life from God.

But Peter could not leave it there. Feeling pretty good about where he stood in comparison to that poor rich man who really didn’t get it, Peter has the need to say this to Jesus: *“See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”* Peter had sized up the competition and the judgment flew out of his mouth without a second thought.

It doesn’t make sense, though. We’re talking about eternal life. How can you have more of it? You either have it or you don’t. But Peter said that because he wasn’t thinking about God or eternal life. He was thinking about himself and where he stood in comparison to someone else. Jesus simply said to him, *“Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”* Then He told them the parable.

This parable has two parts. The first part has to do with hiring; the second part has to do with paying. This is new worker orientation and payday under God’s reign.

For the first part, let’s look at verse four. The master of the house tells the first group he would pay them a denarius a day. He tells the next group, *“Whatever is right I will give you.”* The word for “right,” there, has the same root as “righteous” or “just.” In other words, this parable deals with justification; God’s justification of people and people’s addiction to self-justification. So, as the master decides what is right and just in his vineyard, so, under God’s reign, God decides what is right and just.

Then comes the second part; payday. The owner of the vineyard lines them up in reverse order, the last hired are the first in line. And then, he gives them a denarius. He has a flare for the dramatic. He lights the match and just watches the fire ignite. If they get a denarius for working an hour or so, imagine what the rest of the workers think they have coming. But they get the same denarius. They throw a flag on the play in verse twelve, *“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”* You can hear the sense of indignation. Their sense of justice has been attacked. “You made us equal to them” and they are not equal to us.

The owner and master is calm and cool. *“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”* Instead of “I am doing you no wrong,” the Greek says, “I am not treating you unjustly.” There’s that word again. How is this just? It’s just according to the terms of agreement and the judgment of the owner. And that’s the bottom line, isn’t it? He can do what He wants because of who He is. “Or do you begrudge me my generosity,” he asks. In Greek, it’s something like, “or do you begrudge me because I am good.”

Then the punch line: *“In this way, the last will be first, and the first last.”* God’s offensive grace makes everyone equal and leaves no room for our comparisons.

### **The Warning: Do Not Make Comparisons**

So, is the parable good news or bad news? It depends, doesn't it? If you want God's ways to be your ways, this is bad news. But if you are afraid that God's ways are your ways, that God will judge you according to what you actually deserve, then this parable is good news.

Either way, this parable is a warning for those who stand under the reign of God. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs offers these words by way of summary. "There is no room for self-promotion, no occasion for competition, no basis on which one disciple can say to another, 'I have no need of you' or 'I am more important than you are'" (991). So, Christ calls you to stop comparing yourself to everyone else and judging yourself and everyone else by your own standards and to start seeing everyone, yourself included, through the generous grace of God. If you want to make a comparison, compare your own rigid standards to the offensive generosity of God. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not our ways.

### **The Promise: You Are Not Judged by Comparison to Others but by God's Generosity**

Just after this parable, Jesus shows just how offensively generous He is. "*And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day'*" (Matthew 20.17–19). This is God's offensive generosity in action, His kingdom, rule, and reign in actions for you and for everyone single person in this world. We all stand equally condemned by God as sinners, but Christ has made us all equal as recipients of the same eternal life He won for us by His death and resurrection.

Luther's explains the Second Article of the Creed like this: I believe that Jesus Christ . . . has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

### **The Challenge: Receive and Rejoice in the Offensive Generosity of God**

So, what is the wage you receive for serving God in His kingdom? Eternal life. When is payday? Well, it's guaranteed to you today, but payday is the Last Day, the Day of Resurrection. What about our attitudes in the meantime? While you spend your life in world that believes you get what you deserve, you are called to demonstrate offensive generosity by virtue of the fact that you are under the reign of God already now. In a world where people use each other to climb up, you see the grace of God moving down, serving, loving, and giving where it has no business doing so. There's the offense. So, you and I might echo the words of Christ, "blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Finally, let there be peace for us in our own souls already now in this life as we rest in the justification we have not by our own blood, sweat, and tears, but by the blood of Christ and let us look forward to the Day when He comes again.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*



# *Living in Light of Christ's Eternal Rule*

Romans 14:1–12 for Pentecost 15A (Proper 19A) on September 17, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Introduction**

Romans fourteen. Some Christians in Rome are eating only vegetables. Other Christians are eating everything. It goes back to Jewish kosher laws. How Jewish should Christians be? But that is not the real issue. Paul is a good soldier and he does not get involved in this civilian dispute (2 Timothy 2.4). Instead, he points both sides to the same Lord that they might not pass judgment on each other, that is, final, Last Day judgment that belongs only to Christ. That is the real issue.

So, some Christians in Rome believed worship should happen on a particular day. Other Christians believed all days were holy to the Lord. Again, how Jewish should Christians be? That issue is not on the table for us. But, again, Paul points both sides to the same Lord that they might not pass judgment on each other. That is an issue on the table for us. It can be an issue *at* the Table, as well.

Paul hits the “pause button” on the problem, which surely infuriated both sides of the controversy, and moved the conversation from the issue at hand to the right hand of God the Father, where Christ is seated as Lord. We will all give an account of our lives to Him and that is the real issue. So, Paul moves from the food on the plate and the date on the calendar to the judgment seat of Christ to make this point: the eternal rule and the imminent return of Christ are not distant from God’s people. The rule and return of Christ pertain to every detail of our daily lives.

## **Living Under the Rule of Christ**

There is a church building in Padua, Italy called the Arena Chapel because it was built next to a Roman arena. There are paintings inside the Arena Chapel depicting scenes from Scripture, especially from Jesus life, a lot like the stained-glass windows in this sanctuary. By the way, there are thirty-three windows in this space, one for each year of Jesus’ earthly life. But, back to the Arena Chapel. The back wall of that chapel is covered with a painting of the Last Day. Christ is at the center, returning in judgment to divide the sheep and the goats. So, as you walk out of the Arena Chapel, you are invited to see the world out there and your entire life, with all of its daily details, in light of Christ’s rule and return. In other words, whatever your plans are for the day, see everything you do under the rule of Christ.

Paul writes, *“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we died to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”* (Romans 14:7–8). That text functions like that painting. You’ve been claimed by God in Baptism. You’ve been joined to Christ. Until He returns, you are His and so is every detail of your life.

## **Forgetting the Rule of Christ**

We forget that, and the artist in Padua anticipated that people forget that. So, in that painting where Christ is returning in glory, there is also a picture of hell. There is a demonic character down in the corner of the painting who is eating everyone he can get his hands on, shoving them in his mouth. It’s the picture of death. Demons are leading people to him. Some fight back, but there is one man who is all alone, who is walking along and talking his sweet time, not realizing that he is being led by demons

straight to death and hell. The painting makes the point quite well: Forgetting the rule and return of Christ leads to death.

Jesus' parable in the Gospel lesson teaches the same thing. In our world, debts have to be paid. If a talent is worth about twenty years of labor, ten thousand talents is worth 200,000 years of labor. So, there is reason for that servant to be afraid of his master. His master could take everything, money, property, family, even his life, and the debt still wouldn't be paid. But the master rules a kingdom not where debts are paid, but where debts are forgiven. And when he forgives, it is not merely a transaction. It's an invitation, a doorway like the one at the chapel, to living in and under a kingdom of mercy, where debts are forgiven. The servant forgets that. He goes back to the old kingdom and demands a debt be paid.

By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our heavenly Father has paid every debt that every person in this world owes to Him. He has paid the debt that you owe to Him. But by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our heavenly Father has also invited us, called us, to live in and under His kingdom not where debts are to be paid, but where debts are forgiven.

My neighbor and I were talking this week. She was telling me about a couple from down our street who recently returned from Belgium where they lived for the last three years. They had their friends live in and take care of their house during that time. But, those so-called friends destroyed that house. They didn't do yardwork, or clean, or even pay the bills. "And they trusted them," my neighbor said. I realize this is one side of the story, and second-hand, but we can all relate to this kind of disappointment, frustration, and anger. People let us down. They take advantage of us. And there's that sense of justice that rises up in us and says, "Oh no. Not today. Not to me." And I ask you: Where does that come from? It comes from our worldly ways, our worldly mind, focused on fairness and justice and even on a Christian sense of what is right and wrong. But you have been brought into Christ's kingdom where debts are incurred, yes, but debts are forgiven. "While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5.8). That's what I said to my neighbor. Yes, people should act the right way, but they don't. We don't. But God has forgiven us in Christ and we stand under His rule as His ambassadors; God making His appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5).

So, how do we live with each other? Do we receive one another as people for whom Christ has died, fellow debtors whose debts have been paid? Do we live in the love of God that has brought us into His kingdom? Do we live as though God is ruling right now over every detail of our lives and will lead us all together to eternal life with Him? Lord, help us not forget that we live under your loving, forgiving, and merciful rule.

### **Living Under the Rule of Christ**

Today, we can begin again with one another because God Himself comes right here among us and forgives us our sins in Jesus Christ. Paul writes, "*For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living*" (Romans 14.9). Think about Christ. He is humble. He looked for the needy. He sought out the sinner. He surrounded Himself with debtors that could not pay: tax collectors who stole from God's people, women who had sold their bodies, people who had wandered far from God and had become enslaved to sin. Jesus surrounded Himself with people like that and died for people like that. He had no debt Himself toward God, but used His perfect and priceless life as payment for the debts of others, even you and your lack of love, even you and your judgmental attitude. Your sins, every single one of them, even the ones hidden in the details of your life, were laid on Jesus. He died to pay for them. But He now lives and reigns so that you might be His own and live under Him in His kingdom.

Joseph foreshadows this kingdom in his love to his brothers. Jesus described this kingdom in a parable to His disciples. Paul proclaims this kingdom in Christ for all people. We have been brought into and live under that kingdom today, where Christ forgives our sins and invites us to live in His love.

### **Conclusion**

Just above the door at the back of that church in Padua, Italy, is the cross. So, worshippers walk out of that church under *that* sign. In other words, living in love until Christ returns is not easy. It is a matter of denying ourselves, taking up that cross, and following Him. But, that cross also means that, one day, Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, to fulfill His promise, and to raise us to live with Him in a new creation.

Until that time, we live by faith in the one who loved us and forgives us, who dies for us while we were still sinners, and we live in love toward those around us. We are under God's loving kingdom and our daily lives, even the smallest details, are claimed by God that He might reveal the forgiving love of Jesus.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

# *Living in Mercy and Faithful Obedience*

Romans 13.1–10 for Pentecost 14A (Proper 18A) on September 10, 2017

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Introduction:**

Caesar Augustus put up a golden milestone in the city of Rome. It was the center of the empire's massive roadway system and it listed all the major cities of the empire and the distances to them. So, standing at that milestone, you could see roads that ran to the Wall of Britain, along the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates, and you would know the power, authority, and extent of Rome.

The Apostle Paul did not point the Roman Christians to a golden milestone that showed them the power, authority, and extent of God's Kingdom. He pointed them to Jesus Christ, the risen and reigning Lord, who had promised to be *"with them always to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28.20). Paul taught that Christ will come again, and, until He does, God calls Christians to live under His kingdom even as they live under the empires of this world. That is the tension Paul addresses in Romans thirteen.

So, you and I are called to do those two things at the same time, as well. We trust God's mercy and we obey His rule through worldly authorities. Only in Christ is this paradox possible.

## **I. God's Mercy in Jesus:**

Under those Roman roads, not far from where that golden milestone had been, there is a catacomb, a system of tombs that stretches for about twelve miles. These are Christian tombs from the time Rome turned its power against Christians and entertained itself by killing them publicly. That was a sport as popular as today's NFL.

Down in that catacomb of martyrs, there is a picture painted on a wall. It's the image of a Roman man. He's wearing a toga, carrying a bucket of water, and holding a lamb around his neck. It's Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It's the parable from Matthew eighteen. He has gone out from the ninety-nine and found the lost one. He has come to the tombs to find His little lambs. He rejoices over them. He picks them up. He carries them forever. Taking them on His shoulders, He will raise them on the Last Day.

There is really no way to tell that this Roman man painted on a wall is Jesus. There are no wounds in His hands or side. There's no halo around His head. The important thing is that these Christians recognized Jesus not by what He looks like but by what He does. He comes to His people and brings them into a new life and a new creation. Jesus may not look like a worldly ruler, but He has unlimited, otherworldly power that comes to us in the form of His promise of life everlasting and His kingdom that has no end.

The United States is not killing Christian for sport, yet, but the crowds do not follow Jesus and our government does not bow to Him. Scholars question Him. People mock you for following Him. But He is the Savior of the world and He comes for you. He came to die under Roman authority. He came to rise on the third day under the authority of God. He comes today by His Word to show you His eternal kingdom. He promises to come again to be your Shepherd and lead you into life eternal.

Until then, God has called us to trust God's mercy and obey His rule through worldly authorities.

## II. God's Rule through Civil Authorities:

In Romans thirteen, Paul teaches something very simple. God rules over everything. That sounds a bit like a Sunday school lesson, doesn't it? God rules over everything. The subtle thing is *how* God does that. On the one hand, through His Son, God rules in mercy. On the other hand, through governments and worldly authorities, God rules in justice. In both cases, God rules.

What does this mean? It means that Christians are called to see God's authority behind worldly authorities. It means Christians are to honor and respect their rulers as servants of God.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Roman Christians, Nero was Emperor of Rome. He had propaganda about the dawn of a golden age. It wasn't. Nero's mother had poisoned her own husband to secure the throne for her son and it was violence and abuse of power behind the scenes while publicly Nero wanted to be seen as a just and faithful ruler.

Our own civil authorities tend to say one thing and do another. So, how do we obey them, let alone honor and respect them?

Some Christians in this country refuse to have anything to do with politics. So, they withdraw from the political world. But, they abdicate their God-given responsibilities that way. Some Christians in this country are more optimistic. So, they seek to transform this country into a Christian nation. But, by aiming for that, they try to legislate what God does through His Church and by means of the gospel.

Paul gives us another way. Paul knows of two kingdoms, two ways in which God is at work in the world. Earlier in the letter, Paul recognized God's gift of the Church. The church is the means through which God proclaims salvation in Jesus, gathering for Himself a people who share His message of salvation with the world. And now, Paul recognizes God's gift of civil authority. That authority functions not for the sake of forgiveness in Jesus, but for ordering God's creation and keeping a lid on it, holding it back from complete destruction, until the Day His Son appears as Judge.

So, Paul believes that Christians are called not only to believe in God but to obey civil authority, not because those civil authorities are good, or just, or smart, or because I like them, but because God is behind them. *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities."* Why? *"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God"* (13.1). Paul points the early Christians from the realm of Rome to the realm of God. Paul points us from the rule of an administration to the rule of God. Governments and rulers are masks of God. God hides behind them, whether they know it or not, and they are God's servants, whether they know it or not.

Some rulers test God's people and drive God's people deeper into faith, so that Christians believe in God and in His authority in the face of a world that doesn't recognize Him. Other rulers actually get it, and they confess God to be God, offer a public witness, and honor God by both their words and their actions. Either way, God rules.

The key for us is that our relationship to government and to rulers is not based on them, their character, or their track record, but on God and His promise to be at work even through them. Through them God establishes order in a chaotic world. He restrains evil. He promotes good. God sets up civil authorities not to save people eternally but to protect them temporally and to provide a space for the Church, for the gospel, and for His merciful rule in and through Christ. That is His primary objective.

### **Christian Education**

That is the objective we celebrate today as we recognize and bless the opportunities for Christian education at Pilgrim. Caesar Augustus set up that golden milestone as a guide. We have Christian teachers. These teachers certainly help students live as good citizens of this nation, but ultimately as citizens of the kingdom of God. Our PCDC, LUMIN, and Sunday school teachers teach Christ. They teach children that Jesus loves them, came for them, that they are His little lambs, and that one Day He will return to take them to be where He is. They teach that God rules over everything.

Thanks be to God that we have the opportunity to recognize, celebrate, and bless you teachers today.

### **Conclusion:**

And, isn't it amazing, that no matter our age, we continue to learn that it is God who rules over everything.

Through the Gospel, God has called you into His eternal kingdom and, even though this world and Satan constantly fight against it, that kingdom will never be taken away. Bad government cannot take it away. Death cannot take it away. Jesus is with you, just like that painting in the catacombs. He is your Shepherd, leading and guiding you. Through Him, you live. In Him, you die. And, by Him, you will be raised to eternal life.

Today, as citizens of that heavenly kingdom, you are called to trust in God who rules over everything. On the one hand there is government and laws and rulers we are to pray for and follow and support because God has established all authority. There is our citizenship in this nation and we are called by God to participate as best we can to promote peace. On the other hand, there is the Church and the gospel and Jesus Christ and we are to trust Him and receive His good gifts and wait for His return. Because, in the end, our citizenship is with Him in His kingdom that has no end. That doesn't answer every question we might have, but it gives us a clear picture of God's rule. For everything else, there is prayer.

So, we pray that God would give us the humility to submit to Him and the ways He is at work in this world, the patience to wait on Him, the energy to serve Him, the willingness to learn from Him, and the faith to trust in Him both now and forever. Amen.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## *Transformed in Christ*

Romans 11.33–12.8 for Pentecost 12A (Proper 16A) on August 27, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Romans chapter 12: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

### **Knowing and Doing**

Knowing and doing are two different things. I know the speed limit on Center Street is 35 miles per hour, but I don't always act like it. That is not good. I know that we have a budget at home, but I don't always follow it. That is not good, either, moneywise or marriage-wise.

Recent racial tensions in this country highlight the difference between knowing and doing. We know that the Lord is the maker of heaven and earth and sees all people as His creation and, yet, we still might find a way to judge entire segments of the population or at least allow race to cloud our judgment of someone. That is not good. God alone is Judge, and He judges not on the basis of race or some other human distinction, but on the basis of faith in Christ with the desire that all would be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth, that is, Jesus as Lord and Savior.

When it comes to our lives as Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, the challenge is bringing together these two things: knowing Christ and living in Christ. Knowing Christ is a matter of divine activity. St. Peter received revelation to see and confess Jesus as the Son of God, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, you have, too. Living in Christ is also a matter of divine activity, but the Spirit does not circumvent our consciousness. He is active, not only working on us, but in us, renewing our minds by God's Word and transforming our lives according to the likeness of Christ.

### **The Turning Point of Romans and the Transformed Mind**

Our text for today from Romans chapters eleven and twelve is a turning point in Paul's letter, and the turn is the transition between believing the message Paul has been preaching for eleven chapters, that God has worked salvation for all creation through Christ, and living as though that message was actually true. So, the letter, in total, addresses both knowing Jesus the Christ and living in Him.

Lest we dive into a motivational speech about living in Christ as if it were a matter all the things you need to stop doing and all the things you need to start doing to make that happen, let's consider the hinge of this letter that moves us from knowing Christ to living in Christ. Romans 12.1 *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God.”* There it is. This letter turns on the *“the mercies of God.”*

After eleven chapters of teaching, Paul summarizes it all with that single phrase. That's saying something. There is some dense doctrine in those eleven chapters. Paul sets out his thesis at the beginning. *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”* (Romans 1.16). He wields the wrath of God against the disobedience of the Gentile world and in the very next breath He wields that same wrath of God against the people of God. *“None is righteous, no, not one”* (Romans 3.10). *“All have sinned and fall short of the*

*glory of God*" (Romans 3.23). But that sentence continues, ". . . and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Romans 3.24–25a). Jesus is the mercy of God. We stand under the wrath of God by nature and by our own actions, and yet God does not give us what we deserve. He has mercy. He sends His Son. Jesus receives God's wrath against us and "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5.8). In other words, Jesus is the turning point of world history.

Jesus is also the turning point in your life and in mine. We do not only know about Him, that He lived, died, and rose again. We believe what He did, He did for us! God hasn't just told you about His mercy, He did it to you through water and the Word. United to Him by Baptism into His death, we not only have the forgiveness of sins, but the promise of resurrection from the dead (Romans 6.5). And now, every day is a turning point, because every day is an opportunity to live in that Baptism. Luther said it well. When you wake up in the morning, make the sign of the cross, and remember your baptism. Remember that you were dead but that you have been made alive in Christ. Remember the mercy of God, because that mercy of God in Christ transforms us; bringing together our knowing and our doing.

So, in our text, the turning point of Romans, Paul not only transitions from knowing Christ to living in Christ, but also begins to describe that transformation. He calls it the "renewal of the mind." This is not a matter of making the same, old mind a little bit better, a little education here and a little therapy there so that it knows a little more and can be little healthier. No. This is a matter of receiving a new mind, formed by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word after the likeness of Jesus Christ. From that renewed mind that knows Christ flows three kinds of doing: confession, compassion, and conformity; confession of Christ, compassion in Christ and conformity to Christ.

### **Confession of Christ**

Jesus asked his disciples what they had been hearing from people: "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" And after they give their answer, Jesus turns the question to them. Peter responded and confessed, that is, he made a statement about where he stood, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" Jesus' response: "*Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*" The Father sent His Spirit and revealed His Son to Peter. "*No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.*" The kind of spiritual transformation that Paul is talking about begins with confession of Christ, an acknowledgment of the mercies of God.

You have been called to give confession, as well. Not only with actions, as though people might pick up on your kindness and connect it to Christ, but with words that proclaim Christ as the Savior who received the wrath of God and who now has the mercy of God for sinners like us.

### **Compassion in Christ**

But Paul goes on, "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*" Before we go too far, I have to tell you that we have a problem with our translation. It says here, "spiritual worship." That phrase in Greek could be translated that way, but what does it mean? It would be better to translate the phrase, "subsequent service." In other words, offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God certainly is an act of spiritual worship, but what Paul is trying to say, here, is that it is the logical response to the sacrifice Christ has made for us. Our subsequent service to Christ for His sacrifice for us, is to sacrifice ourselves, not to earn His favor, but as an act of love for other people. I think we can capture all of that with one word: compassion. Christ's compassion for us that moved Him to self-sacrifice which moves us to have compassion on others and our self-sacrifice for them.



Self-sacrifice sounds heroic until we see it in reality on the cross. Being a living sacrifice is a contradiction in terms. Sacrifices die. That is their whole point. A living sacrifice dies to the self and lives for others. This is the subsequent service. In other words, what else ought we do in response to Jesus' sacrifice?

Paul goes on in verse three through eight of our text to talk about the Body of Christ, that there are many members, but one body, and the point of that is not that you and I each have only one or two special gifts, as if we need to figure out what they are if we are going to be useful in God's kingdom, but that God uniquely positions each one of us at different times and different places, calls upon us to have compassion and serve another in whatever way is needed at the time, and then supplies us with the gifts we need to accomplish the task so that no one may thinking of themselves more highly than they ought but would instead boast in the Lord. This, too, is a matter of being a living sacrifice.

### **Conformity to Christ**

Confessing Christ and living in the compassion of Christ sounds simple, but they will give you enough to do for the rest of your life and it certainly does not get any easier. So, Paul includes this instruction: *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Conformity to the world means living for me. Conformity to Christ means living for others to the glory of God. That sort of doing comes from a certain sort of knowing, a renewal of the mind. Too often, we let our minds control themselves. We take whatever thoughts might enter and we run with them rather than directing our thoughts to some intentional end. It's the easy way, but it gets us stuck, hung up on something that will not let us go. If you're stuck on your own sin and guilt, the Spirit of Christ forgives you. If you're stuck on some sin or insult someone else has committed against you, the Spirit of Christ gives you the power to forgive them. If you're stuck on the pain that life has brought to you, the Spirit of Christ comforts you with the promise of life eternal and moves you to pray, "Not my will, but Thy will be done." If you're stuck on the way you are perceived, your reputation, or the kind of legacy that you have left behind, the Spirit of Christ gives you an identity as a child of God and an heir of eternal life.

With the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we let our minds control themselves. But the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, our minds begin to be controlled by and conformed to Christ. Today, the Spirit again moves us from knowing to living Christ in confession, compassion, and conformity.

The thing about conformity to Christ, however, is that it is hidden to our eyes. It is an article of faith. I do not see myself conformed to Christ. I do not see you conformed to Christ. We see glimmers of hope here and there, perhaps, but not the finished product. That is a good thing, because the Spirit does not transform us in a way we can see or in a way the world thinks is impressive, but into the likeness of Jesus Christ, the God who hid Himself in man, who was crucified and died, yet rose again as the risen Lord who will one day transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body (Philippians 3.21).

If you have traveled to London, you've undoubtedly seen the London Eye, Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Tower Bridge, the crown Jewels in the Tower of London, and so on. But there is another monument in London, in Three Mills Green, hidden behind the big ones. It is a small sculpture of two hands. One hand is reaching out of the ground. The other hand is coming from above and they are join together. The vast majority of visitors miss it completely. Here's the story.

Over a hundred years ago, Thomas Pickett was working in a well. He was overcome by the carbonic acid that gathered in the well. Godfrey Nicholson responded. He went and reached out his hand to help. He

was followed by Frederick Eliot and then Robert Underhill. Each worker, in succession, offered a hand to rescue Thomas. Each worker died in the end. To remember these men and their sacrifice, a workers' memorial was erected. Two hands, joined together, in sacrificial service.

St. Paul writes that our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3.3). Like that monument, our lives are missed by the masses, but they are monuments of God's hand reaching down in compassion and grasping us in Christ. Your conformity to Christ might be undetectable to you, but God sees and uses your offerings, your self-sacrifice, your subsequent service to His glory. You have been joined to the Body of Christ. Made part of His people by the forgiveness of your sins, and now, in view of God's mercies, you are no longer conformed to this world, but transformed for confession, compassion, and conformity to Christ.

So, knowing and doing come together. We know and confess the truth. Jesus is the Christ. The Spirit is leading us to live in that truth. But, at the end of the day and at the end of our days, we return again to one, indispensable thing, and that is the mercies of God. What a gift that they are new every morning (Lamentations 3.23).

*In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

# *People who Live by God's Proclamation*

Romans 11.1–2a, 13–15, 28–32 for Pentecost 11A (Proper 15A) on August 20, 2017  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Introduction:**

Our text for today is bits and pieces of Romans chapter eleven. For some reason, breaking up this chapter made sense to the architects of the lectionary, but it does not make sense to me. Would the apostle Paul have wanted us to read bits and pieces of his letter? This morning, we're going to take some time to make sense of this chapter by considering Paul's vision of God's work for all people, both Jews and Gentiles, in Christ, with the goal that this vision will move us, as it moved Paul, to live as a people united in God's mission for this world.

## **I. A Confusing Vision:**

There is such a thing as losing the forest because of the trees. That is very possible with Romans chapter eleven. There's some really strange language here and a really strange topic; the role of Israel in God's plan of salvation. Sometimes, Paul talks about God hardening the hearts of His people and rejecting His people. Sometimes, Paul talks about the salvation of Israel, that God chose them, and continued to love them because of the promises He made to their forefathers. It would be easy to get caught up in all kinds of specific questions and lose Paul's main point.

By the way, speaking of specific questions, we should define "Israel" before we go any further. Paul uses the term "Israel" as a theological word, not a political word. Paul is not talking about a country, certainly not the modern-day State of Israel, but about a group of people who trust the promises God made to them. This goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God gave Jacob the name "Israel" in Genesis 32. That became the name for the twelve tribes that descended from Jacob's twelve sons. The whole purpose and point of Old Testament Israel was to receive and believe the promises of God, specifically the promise of a Messiah who would be born to Israel and save the world. So, when Paul uses "Israel," he is speaking theologically about a group of people who received and believed the promises of God. That group of people gets somewhat redefined when Jesus shows up because Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises and Israel missed Him. Today, we can define the true "Israel" the same way it has always been defined: the people who receive and believe the promises of God. Today, those promises do not apply to the modern State of Israel, but to Christians, to the church.

Theologically speaking, then, has God rejected Israel or not? The people who should believe in Jesus don't believe in Jesus. What is the problem? What kind of God do we have? He seems unfaithful. He calls a people at one time and rejects them at another time. If that's how He is, what is there to keep Him from rejecting people outside Israel, or rejecting you? Does God keep His promises or not?

## **II. A Clearer Picture:**

I believe Paul is aware of how confusing this is, so he is very clear about the points that he makes. There are two smaller points and then a larger, overall, point. First, Paul wants us to know that God does remain faithful to His promises. God has not rejected Israel, because Paul himself is an Israelite; a descendant of Jacob. So, if God completely rejected Israel, then Paul would be outside salvation. But he's not. God brought Paul to faith in Jesus Christ and used him to preach the Gospel to all nations. So, God remained faithful to His plan.

Second, since the mission of God has gone out to all nations, does that mean God has *forgotten* about Israel? No. The church, made up of all nations, is part of God's mission to Israel. Paul uses himself again as an example. His ministry to the nations is a ministry that also seeks to lead Israel to Christ. And here is where Paul asks us to take a step back and see the larger picture.

For years, God's people had held onto the promise of salvation in a Messiah, a chosen One from a chosen people. Now, in Christ, that promise has become flesh. So God's promises, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, have become real in the flesh and blood of Jesus. That's it.

So, get what Paul is saying here. He is saying that faith in Jesus is the only thing that matters in the eyes of God. All other human distinctions are meaningless. So, just as the Gentiles were once unbelievers and now believe in Jesus for their salvation, Paul sees a day when Israel who once believed but now are unbelieving, would repent and believe in Jesus for their salvation. So, here's the vision Paul wants us to have: God's salvation is gathering people of all kinds into one body, one church, one new Israel, that has one faith in one God and one Lord Jesus Christ who forgives all people of their all sins and saves them from eternal death and hell.

Think of Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke fifteen. The Gentiles are like the younger son, living apart from the father in disobedience. Israel is like the older son, living in the Father's house and obeying the father. When the father is gracious and receives His younger son back, the older son cannot humble himself to accept his brother. When God is gracious enough to send His Son, Jesus, to all people, Israel cannot humble themselves and accept them. There really is no difference between the brothers or the nations. All are sinful. All are called to receive the Father's mercy and live with him as His children.

This is Paul's main point. As he steps back from the confusing details, he sees the bigger picture of God's mercy for all people in Christ. Even though the whole world is disobedient, God remains merciful to all people who believe in Jesus Christ.

Now, we're celebrating the Lord's Supper today and I know what you're thinking. If God's mercy is for everyone who believes in Jesus, why would we ever turn a Christian away from communion? Well, I'm glad you asked! As Missouri Synod Lutherans, we believe that we are saved by grace through faith on account of Christ: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. It's that simple. Not all Christians are as clear on that message of salvation and how it comes to us. For example, some make Baptism something we do rather than something God does. Some deny the real presence of the Lord in His body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Some deny that Scripture is the divinely inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God and our only rule and norm for doctrine and life. I realize these seem to be the trees in the forest, but we believe they all have to do with the pure Gospel – salvation by grace on account of Christ. So, do you get the irony? By practicing closed communion, we are trying to preserve, as much as possible, the Scriptural teaching of God's mercy that is open to all people. Ultimately, at the end of time, all distinctions will be gone, but for now, we believe our doctrinal differences are too big to ignore because those differences go right to the heart of the Gospel and the fact that salvation is all God and salvation is for all people. So, don't lose the forest for the trees. Don't lose sight of a merciful God who is merciful to all people. If you would like more on that topic, please see me later.

### **III. Living by God's Promises in Christ:**

If we go back to Paul's main point that God has mercy on all people in Christ and that God remains merciful to all people who believe in Jesus Christ, we can also ask how this message plays out with respect to closed communion within these four walls, but out there in our culture.

From Charleston to Boston, we are wrestling to fight for, define, and defend that which brings us together. Overall, the larger vision of this culture is that there are many paths, many gods, and many religions that can all help you live well and love people. So, to practice your own faith by being kind toward your neighbor is one thing and our American culture will support that. But to speak about your faith, as if it might matter to someone else is something completely different. You can worship God and speak to God however you want, believing God to be whatever you want. But to speak to others about your God or to act as if your God might have something important to say to someone else, is arrogant, argumentative, and asking for trouble. It might even be considered hate speech. So, while our culture protects your right to worship God as you please, it cautions you to be careful about bringing your God to other people or into your public life with other people.

It is so easy to just go with that. It is so easy to believe the lie that faith is a personal matter. But to be joined to Christ is to be joined to His mission and God chooses to be at work through His people, and that includes you.

God has a greater story for this world. It is not a story of peace by tolerance and inclusion, religious or otherwise. It is story of peace in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, death, and hell. Everyone needs this message because everyone has been disobedient. And yet, God is faithful to His promise to have mercy on everyone.

So, when you come to Jesus, as you are doing today, when you are brought again to faith by the power of God in His Word, you are then sent to people who need Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, neighbors and family, whoever it might be, as God continues to work out His salvation to the ends of the earth.

**Conclusion:**

Paul's main point that God has mercy on all people in Christ is exactly what the Canaanite woman believed and held onto in Matthew fifteen. She believed that God would have mercy on her, regardless of any human distinction. She believed, against all hope, that, though a Canaanite, she belonged to Christ and if Christ, then also the true Israel.

God continues His mission in Christ today. He continues His mission through you. It might be easy, at this point, to lose the trees and hold onto the forest; to understand the bigger vision of God's mission but never do anything about it. What conversation is God calling you to have today? What difficult thing is God calling you to say? Look for it and rely on the God to work through it to His glory.

So, Paul teaches us that we are a people who live by a proclamation: the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. God is here, today, for you, forgiving your sin. God is here, today, for others, seeking to save the lost. He won't stop. He won't be silent. He will continue to work through His people in all kinds of ways. He will work through you to call all nations into one body, the new Israel, in His Son, Jesus Christ.

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*