

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 22, 2019

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In the Church's Sunday lectionary, sandwiched between the most moving and most memorable of Our Lord's parables, is the most *mystifying*. After the parable of the Prodigal Son, and before the story of Dives and Lazarus, the Lord's teaching gives us the *unjust steward*. And "mystifying" probably describes it best. Over the centuries every type of ingenuity has been used in the attempt to discover the meaning of this parable. In 1881 the translators of *The Revised Standard Version* of the Bible actually manipulated the original text! They did not want us to conclude Our Lord had commended the steward's dishonesty and deviousness. So they substituted the word "his" for "the" Lord in verse eight to make clear it was the *steward's* master, and not the Lord Jesus Himself, who was approving this crafty conduct. But is that the case? You can read the Greek text and see what you think.

One of the lessons Our Lord drew from His parable (and also taught in other places) is we are to be faithful in little things in order to prepare us to be faithful in greater. Human pride tends to despise little things, and laziness does too. Fudging on traffic stop lights may not lead to fleeing the scene of a serious highway accident. Being less than completely honest in figuring income tax does not necessarily lead to grand theft auto. But Our Lord warns us there is a link between being unfaithful in small things and being found careless with what belongs to God and has been lent to us in this life for our stewardship.

The desert fathers told the story of a young monk who was remarkably negligent in the observance of the details of the monastic rule. Instead, he spent his time planning the way he would grandly face martyrdom. Well, one day some Muslims found him and so frightened him by their anger and physical abuse the young monk gave in and apostatized. Later, returning to the monastic life, he humbly and penitently sought absolution and reconciliation. Then he knew the way to become faithful in great matters was to begin by giving careful attention to those that once seemed to be of little importance.

The deterioration of devotion does not ordinarily happen overnight. It almost always begins by the lessening of care in some minor way. It may begin with the temptation to skip Sunday Mass on a particularly wet and windy morning. Because

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each of us is managing our affairs using the equipment of fallen, but redeemed, human nature, to yield in spiritual matters almost always means to cause the beginning of a process of disintegration. Long before the Incarnation, the wise man of *Ecclesiastes* said, “He that despiseth small things shall fall little by little.” And restoring a soul from a decline into indifference is very hard. Why? Because all God’s gifts and graces have already been used in that soul, and so there is little new stimulus for correction. Of course with God all things are possible. But with St Paul, we must not allow our lax conduct to presume upon the Lord’s kindness and patience.

That gets us back to the message of the parable. In a backhanded way, the unjust steward was emulating Christian virtues. He was looking at little ways to retrieve his situation. He was doing it with urgency, recognizing that the time of his stewardship was ending. Each of us is in the same position. In telling the parable, Our Lord Jesus was saying, “I don’t approve of the motive, but by golly I like your style.” God’s Own Son says His disciples should be as focused as this man on preparing for the life to come.

You remember in another parable the five wise virgins brought extra oil with their lamps. It was in their best interest to do so. It was like a man who plans a trip and first buys his bus ticket and packs his duffel. There is nothing we would call religious or spiritual about it. It was in his best interest to do so. So too we must be deliberate and careful to conserve those practical examples of devotion and discipline which keep us focused on our Lord. Keep and develop the new beginnings of virtue and resolutions to fight even the little sins. It is in our best interest to do so. For we are promised that all of this, in God’s good time, is preparing us to share with Our Lord Jesus in His power and glory.