

Have you ever heard of a man named Jim Elliot? He was a missionary to the Huaorani people in Ecuador in the 1950s. While studying the same text we're considering today, Jim penned this memorable quote, relating it to verse 9: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

These weren't just empty words for him. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot and four other missionaries were all martyred by a group of the people they had come to evangelize. Jim left behind a wife, Elisabeth, and a 10-month-old daughter, Valerie. Jim had given what he could not keep, but through faith in Christ gained that which he could not lose. He was no fool; rather, he was shrewd. That is what Jesus is commanding to us in the parable we heard today.

In the parable, we heard of a steward, a manager, who sins against his master by wasting his master's possessions. Were they wasted out of greed, out of selfishness, out of laziness? Jesus doesn't tell us. The point is, this steward had wronged his master. As Scripture tells us, "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." Because of this, the man could no longer be the steward. He was to turn in his account, pack up his things, and get ready to be escorted from the premises.

What is he going to do? Interestingly, he doesn't argue, doesn't try to make excuses or justify himself. Clearly, the case against him is pretty open-and-shut. He also observes, "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." He knows that there's no way he can preserve and provide for himself. He has no house to go to nor the means of getting one. He has to figure out a way for himself to be welcomed into someone else's house. But how can he do that?

At this point, he has his "aha!" moment. He begins calling in the people who owe his master, and with the limited time remaining before he's thrown out, uses his authority to write off large portions of their debts. One guy who owes a hundred measures of oil (roughly 875 gallons) gets that cut in half. Another guy who owes a hundred measures of wheat (around 1000 to 1200 bushels) gets twenty percent of his debt written off. Obviously, these debtors are going to be pretty grateful to this soon-to-be former steward, and when the time comes, they'll likely repay him the favor and grant him a room in their own houses.

When the master finds out, what happens? We read, "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness." This is key to understanding this parable. The master didn't commend him for stealing. Nor did he commend him for using ill-gotten gain to buy favors. No, he commended him for shrewdness.

What does this word mean? Shrewdness is sharp or astute judgment, especially in practical matters. The man made an honest assessment of his situation and realized what was truly important, and then made getting that his main goal, sacrificing what was necessary to achieve it. He knew that this authority as manager was going away; there was no way he could keep it. So, in shrewdness, in

wisdom, he used was was sure to be taken from him to secure a good and necessary thing for himself in the future.

That is the point Jesus is making in this parable. He isn't condoning stealing, which is clearly against the Commandments. Nor is Jesus teaching that you can buy your way into heaven – the Bible is clear that it is God's grace and mercy that saves us through faith.

What Jesus is doing through this parable is commending shrewdness to us. He's asking us if we know what is temporary and what is eternal, and to whom everything truly belongs (that would be God), and are we actually living that out?

Like the dishonest steward, you and I and all of mankind have misused the stewardship that God has given to us. In the big picture, all humanity is guilty of this through sin inherited from Adam. He was given dominion over all creation, to be God's official steward and manager over all the earth, and he wasted it, and he and his descendants suffer the penalty.

But it's not as though we're innocent aside from this sin inherited from Adam. Each and every one of us has misused the good gifts with which God has temporarily entrusted us. Our time, our talents, our treasures have often been spent in selfish ways, used to our glory and in contradiction of God's righteous Law.

Therefore, each and every one of us has received the notice from our Master that our time remaining as His stewards on this earth has been cut short. Put simply: you're going to die. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. Period. The case against you and I is even more solid than that against the dishonest steward. And so there's no point arguing it. No one in the entire history of man has ever successfully argued his way out of the grave. You're not going to be the first. Neither am I. And like the steward, you and I cannot earn our way into heaven. We can neither build nor buy mansions in the New Jerusalem. On our own, we're hopeless.

So then, what shall we do? Here's where God the Holy Spirit comes and gives us the glorious "Aha" moment, even if it doesn't strike us like that at the time. Through the word, He tells us that the Son of God has come and has paid the price for all our offenses upon the cross. Not twenty percent. Not half. All our sins. In Holy Baptism, He washes away our sins and comes to dwell in our hearts, clothing us in the righteousness of Christ.

Our Lord lets us know that, even though our time in this life still must be cut short, for in this life we are still sinners, He has come to grant us life that will not end, for in that life we will be purified of all sin. He's gone ahead to prepare a place for us, so that when we depart this life, we may be welcomed into His Father's house.

To relate it to the parable, we now live in that time between when the manager was told he was being fired and when he had to give a final account and be dismissed. We know we're going to die. But we're not dead yet. How then shall we live? What shall we do with what God has still given us use of: our time, our possessions?

We must not think that we can go on living for ourselves, chasing after the pleasures and wants and desires of this life, and taking for granted the incredible price Jesus paid upon the cross so that we have a house to go to when this life fails. That would be as if the manager continued to frivolously waste his master's possessions while adding on to the debts of the others as well.

Instead, we are to be shrewd. That's what our Master, Jesus, commends to us in this parable. All the stuff of this life – the money, the houses, the toys, the careers, the titles, the awards – they are all going away. You can't take them with you. What about the people in this life with whom we are close? Remember, relationships grounded only in the things of this world will not endure. If we love someone, we should above all desire them to walk as followers of Christ, that we might be with them eternally.

Does that mean that we should sell everything, shun everyone, and go live as hermits in the desert? No! These are gifts with which God has entrusted us. But we need to remember that: they are gifts. Not the focus, the main point, the goal of our lives. That must be Christ and Him alone. Consider what St. Paul writes in Philippians: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

And Paul certainly isn't the only example we have. The Bible is full of examples of men and women who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, laid aside the things of this world for the sake of the Lord. The Spirit praises these people so beautifully in Hebrews 11, saying, "If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

And this isn't true of only people in the Bible. God has constantly raised up people who sacrificed greatly as they sought first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, people whose lives we are blessed have record of to give us examples. The martyrs of the early Church. The missionaries of the Middle Ages. The Reformers. Those suffering and dying for the name of Christ in our own day. Jim Elliot and his companions. They are those we sang of in our sermon hymn, a hymn I confess I struggle to make it through without growing a little misty-eyed. "They call to us, 'Your timid footsteps lengthen; throw off sin's weight, your halting weakness strengthen. We kept the faith, we shed our blood, were martyred; our lives we bartered.'"

Those saints now stand in glory around the throne of Jesus, who reaches out His arm to us, not in anger, but in love. He, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the God who gives us every good thing. He gives us everything we need in this life. He guides us in the right paths for His name's sake. And He has already prepared for us a place in indescribable glory.

Our lives as Christians are well summed up by St. Paul, who writes, "Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Press on toward that goal of Christ. Be shrewd. Remember what is truly important. And as you do, keep the words of faithful missionary and martyr Jim Elliot with you: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

In the name of Jesus, amen.