

Grace and peace to you from God and the Holy Spirit, and from Jesus Christ, who, together, offer liberation through reorientation. Amen.

Jesus says... we cannot serve both God and wealth. ...and yet, it is as true today as it was then... that both God and wealth, or Mammon, demand to be our top priority.

These words from Jesus are convicting... we cannot serve both God and wealth... they are convicting... because we know in our heart... they are true.

...and Jesus... well... he tends to be right. That's why we're here, yes?

I actually prefer the old translation... instead of wealth, the original Greek uses the Aramaic word, Mammon.

Mammon is a personification for the *acquisition* of wealth... something Martin Luther called in the Large Catechism, the "most common god on earth."

So, it isn't so much wealth or money alone... that demands our dedication...

Jesus doesn't criticize wealthy people just for being wealthy... and money is a tool we all must use.

But it's the *pursuit* of money for the sake of getting richer that Jesus condemns... it's the drive to store up more and more at the expense of others, the persistent need to acquire more and more that takes over our lives.

To build bigger barns while others are starving... and then to rationalize our greed and overabundance... this is the Mammon that Jesus warns us against.

To worship Mammon is to prioritize the accumulation of wealth... while disregarding the suffering and needs of others.

Mammon demands that we look only to our own wants and desires, acquiring only for ourselves alone. Mammon is... isolating.

God... on the other hand... demands that we put God above all else, and then look to our neighbor...

God invites us to look through the lens of God's love... and look to the needs of our neighbor first... so that we may flourish *together... through relationship and in community.*

We cannot serve both God and Mammon.

So... to illustrate this point... Jesus offers a rather strange parable. And all the authors I've read seem to agree that this one is just weird and challenging.

It helps, I think, to dig into the context... and recall the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee in the first century.

Remember... that the Roman Empire exploited the people's resources and labor through crippling taxation, which was often more than the average peasant could pay.

And the rich landlords and rulers were basically loan sharks who got richer by exploiting peasants... offering loans to pay their taxes, but with exorbitant interest rates, something that was in direct violation of biblical covenantal law.

So, when the peasants couldn't pay back the loans, the rich would take ownership of their farm, disinheriting the peasant farmers of their family land...

But they would "graciously" allow the peasants to stay on as tenant farmers... who now had to pay both taxes to the Roman government AND a high percentage of their yield to the rich new landowner.

So... the rich got richer... and the poor got poorer. It was... an unjust system.

Furthermore, the rich tended to live in the south, around Judea... while the peasant farmers lived in the north, around Galilee.

The rich landowners wouldn't go back and forth themselves... that could be dangerous, so they utilized middle managers to collect their spoils.

These managers would also add to the debt that the farmers owed, because that's how they got paid... and the more they added, the more money they made for themselves.

It was the manager's prerogative to squeeze these poor farmers out of as much of their crops... as much of their wheat, wine, and olive oil as possible.

The farmers were, after all, expendable... all that mattered was gaining more wealth. Mammon.

And so now here we are... Jesus' teaching... his words for us today continue on from the gospel from last week.

Last week's scene opened with the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, grumbling because this man, Jesus, welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Jesus put people over and above social order and expectations.

So, he tells the grumbling Pharisees these parables... There was a lost sheep... there was a lost coin... there was a lost son.

And then comes our text for today... "There was a rich man who had a manager..."

"There was a rich man... who had a manager." Does it ring a little differently now?

This manager is about to get fired for squandering his boss' property... he's in trouble for not delivering as much as the rich man thought he should have.

He's about to be tossed out on his butt with nothing... so what does he do?

What does he do? Once the hold of Mammon is broken... he has clarity!

He realizes... that what he needs in his life are people. Mammon... the pursuit of wealth... drives people away. But for true flourishing... we need community.

Money isn't the ultimate measure of things... not in God's economy! Our neighbor... our relationships and our community... this is where true riches are found.

But... this guy... this middle-manager... he's still locked in an unjust system... he's still trapped by it, just as much as the poor farmers are still trapped... but he realizes... he realizes that generosity is the best investment.

He uses that ill-gotten wealth, gained from exploiting others, to ease the debt burden on his neighbors, and gain social capital in the process.

It's very possible that the amounts he reduced each person's debt by was the amount of his portion, and the interest that was added onto it.

Because... after all, the rich man is ultimately impressed. His manager chose to forego wealth... for the riches of relationships.

He used the last remaining shreds of power he had to disrupt the unjust system... and revive the community by reviving biblical, covenantal economic life.

He revives the community and gives them hope... by reorienting *himself* back to God's command to love God above everything else... and to love our neighbor.

He is liberated from Mammon... set free from the addictive nature of chasing after wealth and hoarding resources at the expense of his neighbors' well-being.

And he is transformed... restored into community when he realizes that *people matter so much more than money*.

Because in God's economy... your neighbor's needs are bound up with your own. (x 2)

Our own true flourishing and riches can only be achieved by working for the well-being of others.

We cannot serve both God and Mammon.

And that's that. Jesus leaves some loose ends in this parable... there's no epilogue... no discourse where Jesus fully explains its meaning to his disciples, who never seem to understand anyway.

We are simply left with the wondering... left with the open question of "*how much more...*"

If even this dishonest manager can realize that relationships and people are more important than chasing after money... then... *how much more...* should the children of light realize that "true riches" have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions.

How much more?

You see... Jesus never says that having money is bad... or criticizes wealthy people for being wealthy. What matters for Jesus... is what you do with that wealth.

What Jesus says... is that when we reorient ourselves back to God and God's commandments... when we love God above all else, and love our neighbor as ourselves...

Then it changes our relationships.

Our relationships with our neighbors are transformed when we realize that we are all connected... and every person is valuable to the community, and that every person is loved by God.

And... reorienting ourselves back to God... changes our relationship with money.

Rather than allowing money to become an idol... we understand that money is a tool, and we can use it to help others, so that together, we are blessed.

Here's a beautiful example... in my old church, the men's group met monthly on a Saturday to make homemade bread and have breakfast together.

...No agenda, other than spending time together and making delicious bread.

Then they'd offer that fresh, homemade bread to the congregation and collect a free-will offering... and... I know they always held back a few loaves for the single mom who was getting by on pennies.

Finally, they used the money they raised to fund microloans through a non-profit program called Kiva, which offers very low—or no-interest loans for entrepreneurs in underserved communities worldwide.

As the loans were paid back, which they always were, the men reinvested the funds in other people, giving more and more people the boost they needed to help themselves and their communities.

The more they gave away, the more they found they were richly blessed, and they always seemed to have more to give... more to invest in people.

And so, out of their abundance, they also regularly gave to our youth program, and to our food ministry... and to so many other ministries.

These men were quietly committed to sharing as much as they could, and they delighted in watching how their investments in people always brought returns.

Blessing others and investing their money in helping to heal unjust economic systems... was a true joy for them... and their joy was our joy!

And this gospel today... this challenging piece of good news... is also a source of joy.

Because Jesus came to bring good news to the poor... to set the oppressed free, to restore us to each other... and to liberate us from the bondage of our sin... and Mammon... Mammon is a big one.

But Jesus does not leave us to the destruction of our sin... Jesus calls us back, time and time again... back to God and to the source of our salvation.

Jesus reminds us that we are commanded to serve only one God, who is above all other gods.

A God who loves us and has given us the way of everlasting life... who liberates us... and points us toward the true richness found in relationships and community.

So, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind... and love your neighbor as yourself.

Trust in the good news of Jesus and in God's commands. Do this... and you will be richly blessed.

Amen.

Notes:

www.kiva.org

Commentary on Luke 16:1-13, by Barbara Rossing, on www.WorkingPreacher.org

Commentary on Luke 16:1-13, by Mary Schertz, September 2007 issue of Christian Century