

Mammon¹

Our parable today from Luke quite possibly is the most difficult to understand of any of Jesus' teachings. It's the story of a steward, let's say, the business manager for a wealthy land owner. The steward keeps track of the land owner's money—notably accounts receivable, debts, and so on. For some reason the land owner wants to fire the steward. Maybe he's sloppy or wasteful or maybe is skimming money and has been caught. Whatever the cause, disaster is coming. Now the steward considers his future and doesn't see many employment opportunities, He may be aging and accustomed to a lifestyle of managing things rather than working in the hot sun. In view of these bad prospects, the steward hatches a plan. The steward visits all the people who owe the land owner money—maybe for rent, maybe as debts for services. The steward tells each debtor that they have a discount coming. The man owing a hundred baskets of wheat is reduced to 80 baskets. Of course, the debtors are thrilled. They probably think that the land owner and his steward are great guys.

Now, of course the land owner has been cheated out of much income. And the steward has a whole lot of new best friends. After he is fired he'll have a lot of couches to sleep on. Even the land owner has to admit that the scheme was pretty clever.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on February 8, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

As someone put it—"Isn't this all a trifle odd to find within the Word of God?"

Now, as if this isn't perplexing enough, Jesus gives us some explanation or application of this parable. What we learn in the explanation is that wealth has two dimensions—a dark side and a light side.

The dark side of wealth or "mammon" as the Bible labels it is clearly a dangerous spiritual power. "You can't serve God and unrighteous mammon at the same time. Wealth competes with God to be the center of our lives and affections. I'm guessing that you who are bankers, accounts, attorneys, and financial planners can tell some hair-raising stories of the power wealth has over people. Suze Ormand, the celebrity money advisor, tells about her father, a shop keeper severely burning his hands in an effort to rescue a cash register from a burning building.

So when the Bible talks about unrighteous mammon it is listing wealth as one of those demonic powers that is enslaving and in competition with God.

That wealth has a dark side squares with Jesus' teaching throughout the Gospels. The rich young ruler, whom Jesus calls to be a disciple, can't follow Jesus because he feels encumbered by his great wealth. The prosperous farmer builds barns and bigger barns to store or hoard the harvest only to die abruptly.

Zacchaeus has a big attitude adjustment about money when he meets Jesus. Zacchaeus reverses his money grubbing ways and refunds the overpayment of his neighbors. Jesus invites us to cease worrying about food and clothing. Jesus gives us considerable warrant to believe that there is such a thing as unrighteous mammon, which is wealth that poses a spiritual danger to us.

There is also a light side of money. I believe that the dishonest steward in our parable stumbled into the light side. The light side has to do with using money to create relationship. The unrighteous steward uses the bosses' money to gain friends who will be needed in the future.

You know, the Bible isn't opposed to prosperity. We see many instances of God giving lavishly to people. I'm thinking of the bread and fish multiplying to feed thousands, or the abundant catch of fish, or the 120 gallons of wine that Jesus produces at a wedding in Cana.

What transforms wealth and abundance from its dark to its light nature is when we use wealth to enrich others.

A WISE Jewish rabbi told this story. The old rabbis taught that hell is great banquet. There are piles of fruits and vegetables, meat, desserts. And what makes the banquet a torment is that all the diners around the table have locked

elbows, which don't bend. They can't put anything in their mouths. Heaven is also a great banquet. Heaven's banquet also has piles of fruits and vegetables, meats, and desserts. And the diners at heaven's banquet also have locked elbows and can't put anything in their mouths. But they can and do feed one another.

Now, I realize that this is complicated. So, let me try to state what the Bible intends for us to hear in all of this. We're all stewards and God has entrusted to us in this life a measure of wealth. How we manage it determines whether it will enslave us or be a joy that secures our place in God's eternal habitations—heaven. Wealth is wonderful when we use it for others. That is what Jesus means by piling up treasure in heaven.

Now, our sermons over the last month have been an extended conversation about money, status, and wealth given the economic situation we find ourselves in. Our situation might not be improving. One of the reminders in the fact that there is a world-wide recession is how much yours and my spending on consumer goods affects the whole world. Another powerful in this whole experience is how unstable is the vast indebtedness and debt-driven prosperity.

Now, all of that is under question. Now, American consumers are hunkering down. Now, our leaders are scrambling to prevent a catastrophe. Everyone is wondering how we might live differently in the future.

I would propose that what we're learning today gives us clues to striking a healthier relationship with wealth. We can do this by using it much more for others. As Americans and as prosperous people, God has made you and me stewards of considerable wealth. We live in a wealthy nation in very affluent times—the current crisis notwithstanding. How will we use the Boss's resources?

I recently heard how in 1886 President Garfield commissioned the building of a stately stone structure in Wichita that would be the centerpiece of Garfield University. But Wichita's fortunes declined and by 1897 the grand building was deserted and empty. A wealthy couple, James and Anna Davis saw an opportunity. They purchased the building and simply gave it to the Quakers. That building became the campus of Friends University. Think of the thousands of lives that have been enriched through that Kingdom use of wealth!

Now, most of us are not going to donate a University. But some of us are not all that far from undertaking similar projects. I'm very appreciative of some of your generous

efforts to enrich children, the poor, and the sick in our community. I'm aware of projects for school scholarships and house building. All of us can join them by volunteering and donating. And I'm not even mentioning the mission projects of this congregation.

I would submit that these efforts taken with Jesus' words give us a picture of what a new, life-giving abundance might look like as our nation rebuilds.

Martin Luther said that turning to Jesus entails three conversions—the conversion of the mind; the conversion of the heart, and the conversion of the purse. This is the time to think again about wealth. For we would have nothing compete with Christ as the center of our lives!