

Sermon: Use money well

Luke 16:1-13

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Money is a passport to almost everywhere - but not to heaven.

And it can buy us almost anything - except happiness.

Jesus speaks much about money matters. The Gospel reading today is again about how to handle money.

Christian stewardship of what we possess goes far beyond paying God 10% of our income and then using the rest as we please. He must also control the other 90%.

If we are faithful stewards over all of His resources that he entrusted to us, He will reward us generously and bring glory to His name.

1 What did the bad steward do well?

Jesus tells the story of a bad manager, a bad steward. Money corrupts many people, and Jesus tells us this parable to help us make the right decisions about how we use what we have.

The steward was not doing his job well. The master of the lands has entrusted the financial and other management to this steward, and the master found out that he was wasting his possessions. I assume that he was just lazy, not necessarily stealing money from the boss. In that case he would have been fired on the spot. Instead, the owner tells him he has to turn in the accounts of his management.

The landlord wanted to see the financial books, he wanted to see the audited accounts - and he told the steward that he could no longer work for him. It seems that the steward has been too slow to force those who were indebted to the landlord, to pay their bills. And the landlord had enough of it.

The debtors were rascals, like the manager. No doubt what they owed the landlord was rent for the land they were using. Rent was often paid in kind. It was often an agreed proportion, a percentage of the produce of the part of the estate which had been rented.

But who could check what that proportion was? The harvest is different each year. So the only one to check was a good steward who would keep an eye on it. The landlord, possibly an absentee landlord as was very common in those days, would not know the details.

But as a good businessman, the owner of the land could smell that not enough money was coming in. The weather had been good last year, enough rain, enough sunshine, no grasshoppers destroying the harvest - so the harvest must have been ok. So where was the income!

The steward knew he had lost his job and he also knew he would never get such a nice job again. So he had a brilliant idea. He agreed with the debtors to lower their debts.

Clever trick! The debtors would be grateful to him; and secondly, he had involved the debtors in his own little crime. So he could whenever it suited him, twist their arms as well. He had saved them so much money.

We have read that the master praised the dishonest steward for his shrewd behavior. So he had found out that he was being cheated.

His praise was not for the fact that the steward cheated him, but sometimes you have to admit that a scam is done in a very clever way. Because how could the landlord ever prove that those debtors should have paid more?

So, by his laziness the steward lost his job - but he made sure that he had lots of wealthy friends who might actually hire him - for he helped them with a bit of cheating. He used money in his crooked way, to get forward in life.

Jesus did not praise this manager because he robbed his landlord; Jesus does not encourage cheating. What did he actually say?

He said that we can learn from the sons of this world because they use money in a shrewd way when dealing with the other sons of this world. Or to paraphrase it a bit:

'See how those clever guys use money to get what they want. Within the parameters of this evil world, see how clever people are in using money to reach their goals.'

And Christians must also be clever in how they use money. In this world, people buy friends, they buy respect, they try to buy happiness with money. But what do we do?

Surely, we do not use money as the children of this world do. Because Jesus calls us sons of light. We belong to God. We belong to his Kingdom. Cheating is not allowed for us.

But as children of God, we also must use our money in a shrewd manner. But in accordance with the rules of the Kingdom of God.

The children of this world are experts at seizing opportunities for making money and friends, and getting ahead; God's people should take heed and be just as wise in managing the spiritual affairs of life - by how they use their money.

2 What is the example of the man for us?

Jesus tells us that we must use unrighteous wealth for ensuring access to our eternal home. Money has something intrinsically problematic. It has a tendency to make us slaves. To make us worship wealth.

But that wealth, in as far as we have it, must be used for the purposes of God. Only by doing that, do we take the idolatrous sting out of money, out of our properties, and whatever we possess.

Our Lord wants us to apply at least the same shrewdness and efforts that people put into their worldly affairs, he wants us to put the same effort and energy in serving Him with our possessions.

And what zeal people put into their earthly affairs. We seem to always strive for more.

When you and I put the same zeal into the affairs of our souls, we will have a living and operative faith: and then there will be no obstacle that we cannot overcome in our Christian undertakings.

But in reality, most of us will spend twenty times more the amount of time and money and efforts on our hobbies, our house, our sports, than we spend for the sake of the kingdom of God. And this is a serious problem that needs a turn of heart.

The Rabbis in Jesus' time had a saying, "The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come." It was a Jewish belief that charity given to poor people would stand to a man's credit in the world to come.

A man's true wealth does not consist in what he has and what he has kept kept for himself, but in what he gives away.

Let me repeat that last sentence. A man's true wealth does not consist in what he has and what he has kept kept for himself, but in what he gives away.

Jesus also made clear that how we deal with money, honestly, carefully, for the sake of his kingdom, has great impact on how God deals with us. He says in verse 10-11:

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. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

First, Jesus says that meticulous honesty is demanded of us in dealing with money matters. That is why as a church we have an accountant, and we have an external auditor to check the accounts. We want to be careful and precise.

And the impact of this careful faithfulness in how we use our personal money, opens the floodgates for God to give us true riches. No, that is not more money, but the spiritual blessings of the spiritual kingdom of God.

If a person is faithful and generous and is detached in how he uses his temporal wealth, but instead he uses his possessions generously for the Kingdom of God, then he will, in his life and at the end of his life, receive the rewards of eternal life, which is the greatest treasure of all, and a permanent one.

Not that with our financial behavior we buy heaven. It is not that God gives us eternal life because we help the poor. But our behavior with money and we all we have, is an absolutely precise reflection of whether our heart has received the grace of God.

Epic Christian heroes, saints, are people who in the tapestry of small events, small things in life, make the right choices. If in all the small aspects of life we are faithful, our life is one magnificent tapestry of holiness that points to God.

We must be faithful in the small things - so that all these small things, how you spend your time, raise your children, what you do with your money, how you care for people, for creation, how you spend your time - if we are faithful in all this, our life is one large symphony for God.

3 Choice to make

So Jesus underlines the urgency for faithfulness in small things. In verse 13 he says,

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.

Jesus does not give us much room for maneuvering, for finding a middle way. It is one or the other. You cannot serve God, and Mammon. If we want to serve God, Mammon must be subjected, or he will rule over us.

Mammon was the Aramaic word for money, or possessions, and Jesus really treats that as an idol in opposition to God.

Why is our Lord so concerned about how we manage our money? Because money has a tendency to draw our heart and mind to it, to occupy our heart, to make us focus on it. Money has a tendency to dictate how we live.

Not that the coin, or the banknote, has power in itself. Just as the statue of a god has no power. It is just wood, or silver, or bronze. The problem is in our heart. Our minds become blurry when heaps of banknotes are held before us.

And only by fully serving God can we break the power that our possessions have over us. So Jesus warns us. You cannot have it both ways. He demands a very radical choice.

Now in the next verse, we see how the Pharisees heard all this and ridiculed Jesus. They were lovers of money, Luke adds.

So it is possible to be very religious, to be theologically orthodox - that is how the Pharisees viewed themselves - but to be lovers of money and not of God.

The Lord admonishes us to be wholly devoted to Him and to single-minded. If we choose to serve money, if that is so important for us, we cannot truly serve God. Because we will again and again have the wrong priorities.

If God is our Master, then money will be our servant; and we will use our resources to honor the will of God. But if God is not our Master, then we will become the servants of money; and money is a terrible master. It drives us further and further away from God. And we never have enough.

We know from God's Word and from the words of Jesus perfectly well what we must do with what we have. Some churches preach tithing. Jesus preached at one time that we have to give 50% away - if you have two shirts, and someone is naked, give him your shirt.

Conclusion

Here in the passage of today, he preaches that we can only serve God if he has 100% of us. Of our life. Of our possessions. Of our money. It is his. Of most of that, he will probably say to you - here it is, use it for your own benefit. But he also wants us to be Kingdom Stewards. People who bless others with what we have.

Once we have chosen to serve God, every moment of our time and every atom of our energy belongs to God. Every cent in our bank, is his. We are only stewards. God is the most exclusive of masters. And the question for us is whether we are faithful stewards.

No servant can serve two masters. So make up your mind.

Amen