

No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth.

This is the clearest message we get from this parable of Jesus. A good message it is, and one we've heard before. But how Jesus got from point A to point B (from that parable, to this maxim), isn't all that clear to me.

There's a rich man so rich he employs someone else to manage his money. The rich man hears that his money manager was "squandering his property," so he goes to his manager and says, "Give me an accounting of your management or you're fired" (basically).

It's not said explicitly, but the manager's mind turns to worry - what he'll do for a living "once fired." It seems the master was right, he has been dishonest with the accounts. So what does he do? He squanders the rich man's wealth some more - going to those in debt and reducing what they owe, hoping he can turn to them when he needs the help.

I was looking forward to Jesus pronouncing judgment on this manager, saying something about the outer darkness and the gnashing of teeth. But surprise! Typical of Jesus' parables, Jesus puts a twist in the ending: The dishonest manager is "commended" by his master for acting shrewdly. What about all of us HONEST managers, Jesus?! But Jesus makes it clear - "make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

That would be frustrating but fine if Jesus ended there. But he doesn't - no slave can serve two masters. So how does Jesus get from this ending of the parable to "You cannot serve God and wealth"? What is Jesus telling us about wealth? What is Jesus saying to us today?

Last week we heard a parable about a woman who had ten coins, lost one of them, and eventually found it again. This week, we skipped over a story about a son who squandered half his inheritance in “dissolute living” before returning home out of desperation. He finds the joy of his father, who throws a party for him, and a grumpy brother. These are both surprising parables, but also much more palatable than this one. The dishonest manager is not only commended by his master for being shrewd, he presumably gets to keep his job.

I had to read up on this parable because I was getting nowhere with Jesus. One person I read was Audrey West, who wrote this by way of an explanation: “Could it be that Jesus’ intention was to turn understanding on its head and leave people pondering, requiring a return, again and again, to both story and story-teller?” (CC 25th Sun. Ordinary Time. 9.18.2022)

That’s not a bad explanation. If the gospels were clear as a bell would they have remained the building blocks of faith? Reading scripture in general can sometimes leave us with more questions than answers, and that’s not a bad thing. Our questions engage us in relationship with Christ - they open us up to being formed by that relationship. In Luke (8:10) Jesus says, “I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’” That’s the genius of Jesus’ parables - as frustrating as they can be, they often bear life-long reflection, allowing us to return and find something we’d never seen before.

But with our annual stewardship drive coming up, the building loan we’ll be discussing today, and Jesus with a message about money - I think we need a little more from him than bafflement. So we take another look.

Julian DeShazier (CC August 27, 2019) thought Jesus might have been speaking to two different audiences. He was speaking to his disciples certainly, but Luke also refers to those who were “coming near to listen to him” (15:1) - describing them as tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees.

Remember with me why tax collectors were so reviled in the Jewish communities of this time. The Roman Empire had conquered and colonized Judea, and along with all its conquered territories, they sought to gain revenue from it. The best way they found to do that was to hire locals to collect taxes. Tax collectors had a bad habit of taking more taxes than the Empire required and pocketing the difference. So to the Jews, tax collectors were traitors to their people, complicit in their suffering and oppression under Roman occupation.

But here they are coming near to listen to Jesus. I wonder why Jesus interested them. They are by these Pharisees too, who Luke describes (in the very next verse of this chapter) as “lovers of money.” “Sinners” is vague but we can assume some financial impropriety because the rest of the chapter is all about money.

So as one of Jesus’ audiences, you can imagine their shock when he tells them that this manager, “summoning his master’s debtors one by one,” reduced their debts! Did they nod to each other with silent admiration at this manager’s shrewdness, or were they mostly disapproving? Were any of them moved by the master’s response? What was Jesus telling them?

“The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” Jesus says. This caught me because “children of light” isn’t a common description used by Jesus in any of the gospels, but it made its way into one of my favorite hymns. So who are these children of light?

When we talk about money, it’s easy to start talking about the economy, especially right now - with gas prices and inflation causing serious financial difficulty for so many people. This is an economy where those who were getting by are having to work harder, with less room for mistakes and more cause for concern. Not unlike our money manager, anxiety is high, with more people worried about their future. But this is just one kind of economy.

The economy of God is a different sort of system with a different form of currency. In this economy, grace is the currency, and it is given with no attention paid to services rendered, worthiness, or fairness. It’s an economy that doesn’t run a deficit, and the danger of a recession or even a depression in the market is not even a worry. Where one of these economies runs on a system where money begrudgingly changes hands, scarcity is felt by all, and hard work benefits \*un-equally,\* the other provides more-than-enough to everyone: Enough work, enough nourishment, enough mercy, grace and a certain, steady contact with an abiding love and deep belonging. No billionaires in that economy, no exploitation, no need to swindle your master’s resources, because by the Grace of God, we have more than we need.

We are, however, far more faithful to one of these economies. Hearing that this manager has mismanaged his master's money, our judgment comes swift and furious: He's broken the law, he should be thrown in jail. Or at least fired and taken off payroll. Is he at least going to have to pay his master back? Questions like these show us who our master is. But our true master, in this other economy, has a better idea.

Julian DeShazier describes it. In our parable when we hear Jesus say, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth," she hears him say, "If you've been dishonest thus far, use what you've gained to do some good." She explains that Jesus isn't praising the dishonest manager for being dishonest. Rather, that he changed course, that he used what power that remained to him to unburden his neighbors. In other words, he stepped over into the economy of God.

This gets uncomfortable quick though, doesn't it? DeShazier wonders if those who caused the housing bubble and the economic crash 14 years ago, those who were allowed to keep every dishonest dollar they made, might hear this parable with a contrite heart and change, choosing to do some good with it, to unburden the overburdened. Who are the dishonest managers of 2022, who could do enormous good by giving some of what they'd gotten away?

DeShazier sums up the parable's surprise ending this way: "It's a moment in which Jesus offers a coda of care and concern for those who have actively exploited people. As believers, can we offer that same compassion?"

It's hard to see the tax collectors, the Pharisees, the "sinners," being let off the hook so easily, especially as the suffering of the exploited continues. But is not God's grace for them too? The more we are able to see that it is, the more we are able to see that it is for us too, that this economy of grace, mercy and forgiveness is for us too. In the end, that grace and forgiveness is the only thing that finally changes hearts - that transforms us all from exploiters to the unburdeners of neighbors.

On The Power of Forgiveness this week, he writes,

If we don't "get" [understand this] forgiveness, we're missing the ... mystery. We are still living in a world of meritocracy, of quid-pro-quo thinking, of performance and behavior that earns a reward. Forgiveness is the great thawing of all logic, reason, and worthiness. It is a melting into the mystery of God as unearned love, unmerited grace, the humility and powerlessness of a Divine Lover. (Rohr Daily Meditation | The Power of Forgiveness September 16th, 2022)

This forgiveness that is ours in Christ, this grace, transforms us from children of this generation to children of light. So as this season of stewardship begins, when the master comes around and asks, "Give me an accounting of your management," we can answer as children of light at work in the economy of God.

AMEN

And so begins this season of stewardship and the financial management of the church through our giving. It's an interesting thing to consider our pledges standing in the light of God's economy. May the gift we have and the gifts we bring begin to reflect each other...

My worry lessens a little, and my security in giving a little more grows. Leaning into the economy of God, maybe a little like that of the dishonest manager, ...

For by the grace of God, money made and money given can begin to reflect the very grace in which God redeems not only us, but

Grace is certainly the one gift that must always be free, perfectly free, in order for it to work.