
THE POWER OF MONEY

LUKE 16:1-13

A sermon preached at Duke Chapel on September 22, 2019, by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Money is powerful. Very powerful. Money builds hospitals and universities. It feeds children and sends them to summer camp. It creates art and music. It empowers people with training and jobs. Money also prompts trade wars and international tensions. It divides families and neighborhoods. It buys votes and exercises undue influence. It is - oh so - easily idolized.

Netflix has a series I have been watching called “Dirty Money.” Each episode describes in detail the ways in which the use of money has gone astray. One story is of a defeat device installed in cars, which allowed the cars to falsely pass emissions tests.¹ Another story told of a payday loan operator who had an extensive network of businesses charging exorbitant interest rates and sheltering much of his operation under a Native American tribe, though he was not part of the tribe.² While these stories sound familiar, I had not heard of the Canadian \$18 million scandal regarding maple syrup.³ A fascinating story, but I won’t say more in case you watch the show.

Perhaps stories of greed, money laundering, or theft do not surprise you because you know the truth of the scripture “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (I Timothy 6:10a). Or you may agree with Martin Luther, who claimed that wealth “is the most common idol on earth.”⁴

If you are not surprised by the way money has been misused, then you may be disturbed by our scripture reading for today. The parable from the gospel of Luke is delightfully difficult. The only consensus among the commentators on this passage is that there is no consensus. Some even claim that Luke himself may not have been sure about the meaning of the parable.⁵

The story is of a rich man, a manager, and renters. The rich man was likely the landowner who rented out his land in exchange for a portion of the crops that were to be grown. The manager was the middle-man who made sure the contracts and agreements were upheld. This was a common economic arrangement in the ancient world. Well it turns out, the manager was “squandering” the owner’s property. The owner confronts him and fires him. So far, this is a straightforward story.

¹Volkswagen Diesels: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34324772> and <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/volkswagen-diesel-scandal/>

² Scott Tucker, <https://www.kansascity.com/news/business/article219141220.html>

³ Maple Syrup Heist, <https://time.com/4760432/maple-syrup-heist-prison-fine/>

⁴ Martin Luther from Large Catechism, Explanation of the First Commandment as quoted in http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2982

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&rp=blog53&post=2746>

Upon news that he was fired, the manager begins an internal dialogue wondering how he will survive. He rules out manual labor and begging, and instead decides on a financial solution. Before any of the renters knew the manager had been fired, he went to each of these people and lowered their bills. His purpose was entirely self-serving. He thought if he did them this favor, then when he was homeless and unemployed they would feel indebted to him and would help him out. It is a clever solution, based on quick thinking. Impressive really.

When the rich man, the owner, finds out what this manager has done behind his back, how did he respond? We would expect the owner to be more outraged by the manager's actions. He has already squandered money and now is giving it away. It would be very logical for the rich man to say "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." He would not want to let it go. In fact, the owner probably could have jailed the manager for the first offense. Perhaps now with the second offense, the owner would make the manager really pay for his dishonesty. It would be a very reasonable plot for this parable.

Instead of a familiar story, we have a dramatic twist. The scripture declares, "his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." (Luke 16:8a) What! Did the Bible just praise dishonestly? And then there is more, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." (Luke 16:9) Now scripture is telling us to use dishonest wealth for eternal purposes? Goodness, what do we do with this?

Some people try to explain away the discomfort of this passage by claiming that the manager was actually acting righteously by excluding the interest that the owner had unjustly levied against the renters. And some claim that the manager was simply reducing the amount of his own commission or cut of the profits.⁶ Ken Bailey, a New Testament scholar who spent many years in the Middle East, sees grace in this story. He compares it to the Prodigal Son story which precedes it. Both parables start with the owner/father, then the manager/son squanders money, the manager/son finds himself in a crisis, has an internal dialogue as to what to do, and finds mercy from the very one he has offended.⁷ For Bailey, the dual dishonesty of the manager makes the commendation by the owner all the more powerful. Instead of jailing him, the owner praises the manager for his shrewdness.

I think Bailey's insight helps in understanding this passage and just as we would not affirm a child demanding an early inheritance only to party it away, so we do not affirm the dishonesty of this manager. And yet, this manager's actions are praised in a way that the prodigal is not.

⁶ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vo. IX, p. 308

⁷ Ken Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 90-105

This parable of the clever steward, as it is sometimes called, continues the themes of poverty and wealth that are frequent in the gospel of Luke.⁸ This gospel addresses these issues in a variety of forms such as in the song of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46ff) and the sermon of John the Baptist (Luke 3:10ff). As the gospel speaks of wealth and poverty in a variety of forms, so it also gives a multidimensional message. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, there are clear blessings for the poor and woes for the rich, and yet there are also stories in which money is put to good use, such as that of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:25ff) The parable of the Good Samaritan only works because someone had sufficient money to pay for the hotel room, medical care, and food and to promise additional funds for future needs. Yet another time, Jesus told a rich ruler, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Luke 18:22) There is a wide variety of instructions about wealth in this gospel; there is not a one-size-fits-all simple rule. Praise of a dishonest manager is not the whole story, but it is a piece of it.

I think part of what this parable teaches is the power of money. Money has power to change lives. The steward's shrewd and quick-thinking actions actually changed lives for the better. Prior to this crisis, the owner, manager, and renters were in a structured relationship that was transactional and hierarchical. With his scheming, the renters owed less for which they were grateful -- probably grateful both to the manager and the owner. The owner looks good because he is charging less. And the manager has a new interdependence with the renters, while also securing his own future. In some odd way, is this a win-win-win situation? Can this parable help us focus on the good that money can do?

This morning we are going to take our annual offering for Habitat for Humanity of Durham and this fall we will partner with students and departments on campus to build a Habitat house for one of our neighbors. It takes a \$75,000 investment to start one new home project⁹ which is followed by hundreds of hours of volunteer labor. Future homeowners, who buy and are not given the home, invest their own volunteer hours as well into the construction of their home. Habitat has demonstrated that the stability of home ownership benefits families in innumerable ways. It is one response to our local issue of affordable housing. Your gifts today are powerful in doing good for others. And if you wish, you may join the Habitat workday this coming Saturday.

Robert Lupton, a minister who has battled poverty for decades and wrote *Charity Detox*, advocates the power of money in creating jobs as an important means of alleviating poverty. He advocates investment in communities to create employment and stimulate long-term economic health. Of course, the values of social entrepreneurship have been around for quite some time. Duke's Social

⁸ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, p. 189

⁹ <http://www.durhamhabitat.org/our-work/funding-model>

Innovation & Entrepreneurship program quotes Mr. Duke's vision as "leadership [involves] harnessing the power of higher learning for the larger social good to meet the world's great needs."¹⁰ Examples might be the Prospector Theater in Connecticut which employs adults with disabilities to show first-run movies¹¹ or LeadGenius which uses technology to empower unemployed and underemployed people worldwide¹²; they claim that 87% of their researchers were previously underemployed.¹³ Social entrepreneurship is far, far from an area of experience for me, which is why I resonate with Lupton's claim that churches might do well to encourage their business men and women to engage in mission.¹⁴ Perhaps those savvy in business are those who can most readily harness the power of money for good.

We know that wealth and money can do both great harm and great good. It influences individual lives, communities, and nations. It is exactly because it is powerful that money must clearly and consistently be placed under the authority of God. Today's reading ends with the admonition: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:13) Money can be a terrible tempter, drawing us away from God, and yet it can also be a force for significant good, changing relationships and giving glory to God. When we remember that our resources already belong to God, then perhaps we are more likely to be faithful stewards of what we have. Our stewardship is faithful when it is consistent with the witness of scripture, a subject of our prayer-life, and can be discussed with trusted people of faith.

It is good news that we cannot serve both God and wealth, for when money is placed in its proper role as a resource we are to steward, then its power over us is broken and its power to do good is released. Maybe then it's even possible to be faithful and clever stewards.

Of course, there are places where money is to have no power. And one of them is at this [communion] table. Here at this table it makes no difference if the wine is served in silver or ceramic. At this table, all people, regardless of their financial predicament, are welcome. At this table we are reminded that the power of God is seen in redeeming love. And that power is always greater than the power of money.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁰ <https://entrepreneurship.duke.edu/social-entrepreneurship/about/>

¹¹ <https://www.prospectorthheater.org/>

¹² <https://www.leadgenius.com/about/>

¹³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2017/12/22/the-forprofit-social-enterprise-is-the-impact-model-of-the-future/#689a98805571>

¹⁴ Robert Lupton, *Charity Detox*, p. 43