

# **“Should We Talk About Money?”**

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 21, 2025*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 25:4-10

Luke 16:1-13

Many of us were taught that it is impolite to talk about money, politics, and religion. In the church, we do talk about religion; or, at least, about the faith practices that are prompted by our religious beliefs. We also talk about politics; maybe not pertaining to partisan affiliations but whenever issues such as feeding the poor, welcoming strangers, and practicing restorative justice are raised, that's politics. And money; besides the kingdom of God, Jesus discusses money more frequently than any other topic. So much for politeness.

Today's parable begins, “There was a rich man who had a manager.” Immediately, Jesus brings his hearers into the world of economic systems. In his day – as much as if not even more than today – society was divided between the rich few and the poor many, as well as those who operated somewhere in the middle. This was not a system of equity, but one of prospering and suffering, of getting ahead and falling behind.

This entire economic system was predicated by the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Romans extracted the natural resources of Judea – things like olive oil and wheat – and exploited the labor of its people for their benefit. The Romans – and their colluders – would levy taxes on each of these goods: a portion of whatever was produced was owed to the rich landowners who, in turn, hired managers to collect the taxes from the tenant farmers. In such a system, corruption and exploitation, if not the norm, were common.<sup>1</sup>

This particular steward is accused by the rich man of mismanagement – of squandering his property. The term used here is that same that described the prodigal son – who wastes away his inheritance – in the parable that precedes it. It's unclear what dishonest practices the manager has engaged in, but whatever the details, the wealthy owner acts without delay, firing his steward and demanding he hand over his financial records.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McClaren, “A Sermon for Every Sunday,” 2019

An interior monologue – a feature particular to the parables of Luke – articulates the manager’s dilemma. “What will I do,” he wonders, “now that my master is taking the position away from me?” He understands that he lacks the strength for manual labor and is too proud to beg. Instead, he opts to go back to those who owe him and adjust the amount that they owe, reducing their tax obligation by twenty or even fifty percent.

In effect, the manager has made the choice to switch sides: to give the poor farmers a break from their obligations instead of trying to re-ingratiate himself to his master. Realizing the fragility of his place in the system, he has chosen to befriend those that he had previously been exploiting, looking out for their needs rather than those of his employer.

We are surprised when the master commends his manager for acting shrewdly. We expect that he would have been upset about the lost income. But maybe he already has so much money that a little more won’t be missed. Or, maybe he admires his employee’s courage, given that he is now out of a job. This word “shrewd” – sometimes translated as wise or prudent – gets picked up by Jesus in describing the people of his age. He laments that the people of God don’t seem to be as savvy as others – like this shrewd manager – who are driven by self-interest. What might it mean that the children of light – most likely, the disciples to whom Jesus tells this parable – are told to act in such a way? Are we really, like this manager, supposed to be dishonest? Or, maybe, something else?<sup>2</sup>

In the face of losing his source of income – and realizing he is ill-suited for other ways of supporting himself – this manager still acts as if his world can change; and then he makes moves to change it. Maybe Jesus isn’t endorsing his dishonesty, but is challenging our complacency: if even a corrupt employee can creatively shape a new future, shouldn’t followers of Jesus be even more committed, more creative, and more determined to act for the sake of a future where each and all of God’s children can flourish?<sup>3</sup>

The shady manager reminds us that the future doesn’t just happen to us. We are always, through our actions, investing in one kind of future or another. If we imagined boldly, acted shrewdly, and generously used every resource at our disposal for the

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<sup>2</sup> John T. Carroll from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>3</sup> Teri McDowell Ott, “Looking into the Lectionary” from *Presbyterian Outlook*

sake of love and justice, what kind of future could we help to enact? God only knows; but God provides us with the tools and opportunities to shape a different world.

Jesus follows up his parable by shifting the focus to our relationship with Mammon. That is the Aramaic term used here for ill-gotten riches. Jesus appears to be talking not about the wages we deservedly earn, but dishonest wealth gained in exploitative economic systems. Two more times, in verses 11 and 13, Jesus uses this term to remind us that we cannot serve two masters – God and Mammon – because we will “either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

In other words, money – when it is the most valued thing, so important that we willingly use any means to acquire it – can cause us to improperly value all other things. Slavery to money, making it our idol, means that we look at other resources – both material and relational – and are blinded by the riches we could extract from them.

Jesus is inviting us to lose faith in a system that helps the rich and hurts the poor; and to, instead, create or adopt one that values greater neighborly love. He is telling us that money is not the ultimate measure of all things, but that it can be used in service to our relationships with God and others. In Christ, we can be liberated from our devotion to the idol of Mammon if we love God first and choose to put money in its proper place.

Devotion to God – and, therefore, faithfully stewarding God’s gifts – is always a priority for followers of Jesus. As individuals, as congregations, and as the larger church, we retain and decide how to use a vast array of resources. We own valuable properties with spaces that offer great potential for neglect or use. We are engaged in meaningful relationships with ministries and mission partners that have tremendous impact on and within our communities. And we often pool these assets together to support the vulnerable, address need gaps, and advocate for change. But this is never easy in a world full of negotiation where the idols of wealth and security lay claims on our loyalty. Recognizing this challenge drives us again and again to our need for Christ to reconcile us to God and with one another; and the response of mercy that it at the heart of the gospel.

This parable of the shrewd or dishonest manager stands with others in Luke where Jesus describes a set of characters – each of relatively high social or economic

status – that encounter a crisis. In every instance, their help comes from somewhere below them on the social ladder. The anonymous Jewish traveler on the road to Jericho would seem superior to a Samaritan, but lying half-dead in a ditch, he will accept the help of any neighbor who passes by. The prodigal son finds himself desperate enough to join the hired hands while his older brother cannot stoop to join a party for his scoundrel sibling. And while in this age, the rich man ignores a lowly beggar like Lazarus, in the next life he begs for Lazarus' help. These parables suggest a world where status is fleeting, tenuous, even dangerous. The manager, who once controlled the accounts of his master's debts and debtors, now relies upon their hospitality to survive.<sup>4</sup>

Should we talk about money in church? The fact is, we already do. Not only will we grapple with biblical stories such as this one, seeking how to relevantly translate the words into our own age and context; but we also continually weigh how to manage our gifts and resources. How much of our time and energy do we devote to worship, fellowship, or outreach? Which missions will we support: the preschool operating within these walls, the food bank down the street, disaster relief in another state, or a school half-way across the world in Liberia? What staff will we pay and at what level? How much money should we hold in reserves rather than giving it away? What capital projects require our support and which of them will be done by sweat equity versus hiring outside contractors?

To be sure, we cannot effectively serve both God and wealth. Yet, the parable and the ensuing sayings suggest that we can serve God by being strategic and wise – being faithful – in how we deal with the economic resources at our disposal, recognizing the enormous disparity in wealth that exists between the rich few and the poor many in so many parts of the world. Our discernment only highlights the importance of creating and support systems that are more just and that make more friends among under-resourced persons and communities.

As the words in our weekly bulletin reflect, we take “time to reflect and recognize all contributions of time, talent, and treasure.” And we pause to dedicate with prayer the offerings that are received and the application of all our resources for building up the kingdom that Jesus imagined for the healing of this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*